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Obama Faces Calls to Open Up to Cuba, Yet Again

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Early in his presidency, when Barack Obama was still promising to shutter the federal prison at Guantanamo Bay, he was also touting a new thaw in U.S. policy toward the rest of Cuba.

Not much has changed since then on either front.

But five years later, the president is coming under renewed pressure from businesses and the diplomatic community to make bigger shifts toward the island nation, particularly on the trade and diplomatic front.

For the first time in 15 years, U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donohue flew to Cuba this week for a round of meetings with Cuban entrepreneurs and government officials, part of a longstanding drive by U.S. business to wedge open trade and investment with Cuba. The delegation includes Alticor Corp. chairman Steve Van Andel and Cargill Corp. Finance Chief Marcel Smits.

Chamber officials, hardly eager to stir political ire in Washington, have kept the mission as low-key as possible. In a release, Mr. Donohue said he was hoping the visit would provide “a first-hand look at changes in Cuba’s economic policies and whether or not they are affecting the ability to do business there.”

Any specific policy prescriptions, says a spokesman, will come after the trip.

Last week, an unusual roster of big-name former officials and business leaders urged Mr. Obama to take a series of distinct steps to broaden outreach to the island, particularly by making travel easier and by ramping up support for local nongovernment groups.

Signatories to the open letter included former top U.S. diplomats Thomas Pickering and Strobe Talbott, along with prominent Cuban American businessmen such as Florida sugar baron Andres Fanjul.

The group acknowledges that Congress isn't likely to support any larger shift toward Cuba, such as a pulling back of the longstanding trade embargo, so it advises a series of administrative moves within the powers of the White House.

"Timing matters and this window of opportunity may not remain open indefinitely," the letter says.

Administration officials familiar with Cuba policy say there is a desire to advance new policies toward the island. But the room to maneuver, they say, is limited by the Cuban government's human-rights policies and the 2009 arrest of Alan Gross, a U.S. government contractor now serving time in a Cuban prison.

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, blasted Mr. Donohue in a letter last week, calling the trip "misguided and fraught with peril of becoming a propaganda coup for the Castro regime."

But it's clear that the political calculus surrounding the island isn't what it used to be. One big piece of evidence: Former Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, who is trying to win back the office this November, now says he favors lifting the Cuba trade restrictions and may even travel to Cuba this summer, a once unimaginable proposal for a Florida politician.

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