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OPINION: US misses out on trade chances because of embargo against Cuba

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Rosa Grillo arrived at the Christopher Columbus Cemetery clutching three small bouquets of flowers and the jagged bottoms of three water bottles she had turned into vases. The flowers were for the Cuban grandmother, and namesake, she never met.

Grillo, the operator of a small public relations firm in Silver Spring, Md., had come to this sprawling burial ground in the Vedado section of Cuba's capital, the final resting place for more than 2.5 million people, to honor the wishes of her mother, who died in 2003.

In the years since a Fidel Castro-led revolution installed a communist government here, access to this place for Americans has been held hostage to the ups and downs of U.S. policy toward this forbidden land. Nothing symbolizes the madness of the longstanding rift between the United States and Cuba more than the constantly changing rules that govern the ability of Americans to travel to this island, which at its closest point is just 90 miles from the southern tip of Florida.

"My mother cried for years for home," Grillo, who has two brothers, told me. "She wanted to bring us here, but she either couldn't get money to come or the clearance from one government or the other."

Recently, travel between the USA and Cuba has gotten easier. Shortly after taking office, President Obama loosened the travel ban. Obama removed all restrictions of travel by Cuban Americans to this island and expanded opportunities for other Americans to come here. Last year, Cuba stopped requiring its citizens to get an exit visa to leave the country.

But Grillo, 59, worries that these positive changes will be rolled back before she can afford to return with her daughter, who has yet to visit their ancestral homeland. And she has good reason to worry.

Since 1977, when President Carter ended the first travel ban, the freedom of Americans to travel to Cuba has been

a political roller coaster ride — with the restrictions loosening and tightening nearly every time the Oval Office changed hands. During this time, Cuba was slow to lift the limitations on foreign travel by its citizens.

"I think both governments have done stupid things. But they need to stop this squabbling and respect each other — and the U.S. needs to end the embargo," Grillo said. While she now can visit Cuba as often as she wants, Grillo doesn't understand why other Americans don't have the same freedom to travel to Cuba.

And neither do I.

The U.S. travel restrictions and embargo against Cuba have morphed into a blockade against U.S. businesses that ought to be this island's leading economic partners. Instead, Spanish companies are building many of the hotels that are a part of Cuba's surging tourism industry. Most of the new cars on the streets of Havana are being built in China, not Detroit. Last year, a British company signed a contract to build a golf course resort in Cuba, complete with condos and a hotel. Firms from Canada, Spain and China are competing for a chance to build some of the 15 other golf resortsthat Cuban tourism officials envision across the island.

All this might explain why a U.S. Chamber of Commerce delegation will visit Cuba this week.

The strong argument against pumping money into Cuba's economy disappeared when Cuban Americans were allowed to travel to the Caribbean island as often as they want and take an unlimited amount of money there.

Now it's time for a sensible policy, one that will make Rosa Grillo happy.

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