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Knock down U.S. barriers to Cuba

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President Barack Obama vowed in his State of the Union address this week to use his executive power to work around congressional gridlock on several issues, from jobs to pensions to clean energy. He should add another topic: relations with Cuba.

The 54-year-old trade embargo has been an utter failure, and it's beyond time Congress repealed five decades of sanctions that have served only to separate Cuban-American families and diminish U.S. influence in the region. Short of Congress having an epiphany, the president has wide latitude under his executive authority to at least curb the embargo's senseless reach. Obama took this approach in 2009 and 2011 by reversing Bush-era travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans to the island and by relaxing the barriers for U.S. citizens seeking to visit.

Florida and Tampa Bay in particular benefitted from the president's moves. Opening up direct flights to Cuba from a host of American gateways, including Tampa, has brought the two countries closer together than they have been for generations. Families have found it easier and cheaper to reunite, and ordinary Cubans have been exposed to the American ideal of democracy. Since the flights took off in 2011, Tampa International Airport has become the second-busiest gateway to Cuba, behind only Miami. Jose R. Cabanas, who heads the Cuban Interests Section in Washington and is that nation's top diplomat in the United States, said during a visit to the bay area Thursday that the strength of ties is remarkable. Cabanas' schedule included meetings with the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce and representatives from the airport, the port and cultural groups.

The American public is clearly ahead of most of its political leadership in recognizing that normalizing relations with Cuba makes sense. Toward that end, the administration can take several helpful steps to put Cuban-American relations on sounder footing. The president should loosen the restrictions for open travel to Cuba; Americans have a right to move freely here and abroad. He should expand U.S. diplomatic ties with Cuba and seek closer cooperation on a range of issues, from hurricane preparation and disease control to safe management of offshore

oil facilities. The United States should also continue working to help Cuba find a new banking institution to process accounts for Cuba's U.S. operations. Its current bank has announced it will withdraw this spring, which could effectively shut down Cuba's consular services in this country. Obama has every reason to improve relations with a nation closer to the mainland than the state of Hawaii. And he has the power to do it, with or without help from Congress.

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