Obama’s Visit to Cuba
By Abraham F. Lowenthal
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President Barack Obama’s historic visit to Cuba and its timing should not be understood in terms of US domestic politics, as has been the case so often with regard to Washington’s policies toward Cuba.

The ongoing thaw in US-Cuban relations has been little discussed in the raucous discourse of US politics. Except for Marco Rubio, now eliminated from the competition, none of the Republican pre-candidates have made much fuss about the growing opening to Cuba, and Donald Trump has endorsed it. At a time when American voters are concerned about trade, immigration, slowed growth, inequality, access to quality education and health care, global terrorism, China’s rise, Middle East volatility, European gridlock, Iranian ambitions and North Korean intentions, not to mention climate change, cybersecurity, disappearing jobs, and fragmenting political institutions, most Americans, even a majority of Cuban-Americans, think that improving US-Cuban relations is a good idea, if they think about it at all.

Obama’s trip is driven rather by his overall global vision and legacy concerns. Importantly, also, the Cuba trip is something Obama can do in his final year without being constrained by Congress, and with the eager cooperation of the media. Obama’s efforts to help establish mutually respectful relations with Cuba—in many ways for the first time ever—required political imagination and the will to escape from long-encrusted mindsets. But the underlying conditions—in the United States, Cuba, and the wider world—that made this change possible had been building for many years. It took Obama’s leadership qualities and those of Raúl Castro to recognize the trends, understand their implications, and move to unfreeze US-Cuba relations, but the circumstances that made this possible preceded them and will persist after they are gone.

For many decades, US policies toward Cuba were based on 19th and early 20th century realities and concepts, reinforced by the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. US hegemony in the Americas and elsewhere has long since passed, the Cold War has ended, and the Soviet Union no longer exists, but old policies carried on for many years. In the case of Cuba, this largely reflected the hostility of the Cuban American community to the Castros and its weight in deciding close elections.

The Cuban American community’s veto of rapprochement has been undermined by generational and demographic shifts, and by the growth of other Latin American diaspora groups that are not focused on Cuba. Recognition has also grown in Washington and Havana that both countries share many interests: mitigating the impact of climate change, managing
threats to public health and safety, responding to natural disasters, regulating migration, and stabilizing the circum-Caribbean region, including ending the FARC insurgency in Colombia. US exporters of goods and services have come to see Cuba as an attractive market, while Cuban authorities and the country’s incipient private sector regard the United States as an eventual source of customers, tourists, expertise and investment as Cuba integrates into the global economy.

All these realities, and his general preference for dialogue and relationship-building in world affairs, account for Obama’s openness, expressed early in his presidency, to a “new era in US-Cuba relations,” and his decision to overcome resistance to do so. A similar calculus no doubt helps explain President Castro’s reciprocal aim to achieve mutually respectful relations with the United States, as he tries to reform the Cuban economy in the shadow of the United States. Raúl Castro has no doubt also had to overcome ideological and inertial resistance to send his clear signal that Cuba’s future is linked to a positive relationship with the United States.

The opening of US-Cuba relations, reinforced by Obama’s visit, Castro’s welcome and the Cuban people’s reaction, will survive Obama’s presidency. Weaving new patterns of exchange and intimacy across the Florida straits will not happen overnight, but a new tapestry is beginning to take shape.

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