

With the Castros gone, restart the opening to Cuba

With a new generation in charge, it's time for a relationship reset.

The last remaining Castro brother, Raul, officially retired as head of Cuba's Communist Party earlier this month at age 89.

Fidel died in 2016. The revolution he led was more than six decades ago.

And yet US policy toward the island nation 90 miles off the Florida Keys remains in a time warp of old grudges and petty politics.

It's time to lift the decades-old US embargo — for real this time — or at the very least rescind the Trump-era restrictions that have worsened an already battered Cuban economy and allowed its leaders year after year to blame all of their economic woes on their neighbor to the north. Doing so would foster the kind of exchange among nations that has the potential to create real political change, and eventually, even usher in democracy.

Perhaps because of its proximity to the US, perhaps because so many of those who fled during the revolution came to these shores, the US-Cuba relationship has been like no other.

It is, of course, a nation that has been ruled over by the Brothers Castro for all of those years — until now. Its human rights record has been abysmal, its jails still filled with political prisoners. But the United States does a good deal of business with other nations whose records on human rights are far worse. And we have obligations to Cuba that stem from its proximity, our cultural ties, and the effects of the embargo on its economy.

It wasn't until the Obama administration that diplomatic ties were resumed for the first time since the revolution. In 2017, Barack Obama became the first sitting president to visit Cuba in almost 90 years, even as he moved toward expanding tourism and trade with the island.

Enter Donald Trump, whose political fortunes were tied in 2016 to the anti-Castro Cuban exiles who are a force to be reckoned with in Florida. By June of 2017 Trump had rolled back virtually all of the Obama-era overtures to Cuba, and suspended all activities at the embassy. On his way out the Oval Office door, last January Trump designated Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism — without offering any evidence for doing so.

That latter point has not been lost on at least 75 members of Congress who last month urged President Biden to sign an executive order “without delay” to end travel restrictions and once again permit families to send remittances to Cuban relatives, noting that well over half of Cubans depend on them.

“With the stroke of a pen, you can assist struggling Cuban families and promote a more constructive approach,” they said in that letter. Among those members of the Massachusetts delegation signing on were Representatives Jake Auchincloss, Ayanna Pressley, and Jim McGovern, the latter a long-time supporter of better relations with Cuba.

“The last two years of the Obama administration saw an explosion of positive change in Cuba,” McGovern said during a speech on the House floor. “The fledgling Cuban private sector flourished, innovation, the internet, communications, and political space expanded, and exchanges between our two peoples multiplied. ... Dialogues began on tough topics like economic reform and human rights.”

He, too, argued against making “the mistake of moving slowly and incrementally.”

As a candidate, Joe Biden promised to reverse the Trump era policies. But in early March White House press secretary Jen Psaki said, “A Cuba policy shift is not currently among President Biden’s top priorities.”

OK, not everything can be a “top priority.” But this is a moment that surely the administration knows is filled with possibilities. Castro’s successor as party leader is Miguel Diaz-Canel — born a year after the revolution and open to at least economic — if not political — change. And, yes, the man even has a Twitter account, which recently took note of street demonstrations to protest the US economic embargo.

What he doesn’t have is a way to revive his nation’s flagging economy or reverse the COVID-related collapse of tourism (although Cuban researchers are reportedly at work on their own vaccines) without help.

The Biden administration should seize this opportunity to reach out to a new generation of Cubans — and to a new generation of Cuban Americans — many of whom are eager to put the old ways and the old grudges aside. In foreign policy, moments come and go quickly. President Biden must not let this one pass.

Editorials represent the views of the Boston Globe Editorial Board. Follow us on Twitter at @GlobeOpinion.