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THEDIALOGUE

FEATURED Q&A

What Did Obama Accomplish on His Trip to Havana?

U.S. President Barack Obama's trip to Havana included a one-on-one meeting with Cuban President Raúl Castro. // Photo: Granma.

Q This week, Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president in 88 years to visit Cuba. Obama had a one-on-one meeting with President Raúl Castro, and the two held a historic joint news conference. Obama also delivered a televised speech from Havana's Gran Teatro on the importance of democracy and human rights, and later met with dissidents in the U.S. Embassy. Was Obama's trip to Cuba a success? Did Cuban officials display a willingness to improve relations and advance reforms? What did Obama and Castro accomplish during the visit? Will businesses that want to work with Cuba find it easier moving ahead? Will Obama's visit win over more congressional support for ending the embargo?

A **Jorge Domínguez, professor of government at Harvard University:** "President Obama's visit to Cuba had several effects. At the broadest level, his address to the people of Cuba sketched his vision for U.S. policy toward Cuba and for relations between the two countries. He lifted the 'embargo' on the exchange of ideas, citizens, businesses, religious communities and more. Hitherto U.S. policy had cooperated with Cuban State Security, albeit inadvertently, in blockading access to such sources of information. A politically more open Cuba needs such access. At the more tactical level, Obama modeled, subtly but clearly, a way to be the president of a country. He handled himself nimbly and skillfully at a press conference that his Cuban host bungled. Obama had edged Raúl Castro to a press conference stage, to which he is most unaccustomed. Obama reminded Cubans, by his looks and words, that the United States has an African-American president,

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Obama Declares New Era of Partnership With Argentina

U.S. President Barack Obama and Argentine President Mauricio Macri met in Buenos Aires and pledged to cooperate on a range of issues.

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BUSINESS

Odebrecht to Work With Prosecutors in Petrobras Case

Construction company Odebrecht said its former CEO, Marcelo Odebrecht, will cooperate with prosecutors in the Petrobras case.

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POLITICAL

Colombian Gov't, FARC Miss Deadline for Peace Accords

Six months ago, the two sides had set a March 23 deadline for reaching a peace agreement. The Colombian government's lead negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, said some differences may never be fully resolved.

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de la Calle // File Photo: Colombian Government.

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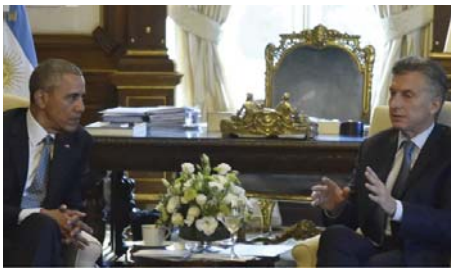
POLITICAL NEWS

Obama Declares New Era of Partnership With Argentina

U.S. President Barack Obama on Wednesday in Buenos Aires said the United States and Argentina had entered a new era in bilateral ties, The New York Times reported. "Under President Macri, Argentina is reassuming its traditional leadership role in the region and around the world," Obama said in a joint news conference with President Mauricio Macri, who took office in December. "On a range of areas, we



Obama and Macri met Wednesday at the Casa Rosada // Photo: Argentine Government.

discussed the way in which the United States and Argentina can be strong global partners to promote the universal values and interests that we share." Obama and Macri addressed reporters after they met for about an hour at the Casa Rosada presidential palace. The meeting came on Obama's first full day in Argentina, where he traveled after visiting Cuba, becoming the first sitting U.S. president in 88 years to do so. In their meeting, Obama and Macri discussed a range of issues including defense, security, energy and climate change. Macri also expressed a willingness for cooperation. "This is the beginning of a new phase of mature, intelligent, constructive relations in which the only concern for us both is to improve the quality of life of our people," said Macri, The New York Times reported. The Argentine president also called Obama an "inspiring" leader who demonstrated that challenging the status quo can lead to major change. During the news conference, Obama said the United States will declassify U.S. military and intelligence documents relating to Argentina's Dirty War. Obama's visit coincides with today's 40th anniversary of the coup in Argentina that intensified the period of state terrorism and repression. Macri declined to speculate on what the documents would show, but he said Argentines have a right to see them. "We all need and we are entitled to know what the truth is," said Macri. Today, Obama is scheduled to visit a riverside park that stands as a memorial to the thousands of people who were kidnapped and murdered during Argentina's 1976-1983 dictatorship. The visit is seen as a gesture to human rights activists who were infuriated at the timing of Obama's trip.

Colombian Gov't, FARC Miss Deadline for Peace Accords

Colombian peace negotiators on Wednesday officially missed the deadline to sign a final accord, but peace talks will continue in Havana between the Colombian government and the FARC rebel group, representatives from both sides said, Reuters reported. Six months ago, the government and the leftist rebels had set a

> **"We are going to make every effort to reach a final agreement."**
>
> **— Humberto de la Calle**

March 23 deadline to reach a peace agreement. Latin America's longest war has resulted in the deaths of some 220,000 people and the displacement of millions of others since 1964. A news conference on Wednesday was held hours behind schedule as the two groups grappled with agreeing upon a joint statement, ultimately issuing their own separately. "We are going to make every effort to reach a final agreement. But this requires quick decisions," Humberto de la Calle, the government's lead

NEWS BRIEFS

Panama Expects Canal Expansion to Be Operational by June

The $5.3 billion project to expand the Panama Canal will be complete and ready for operation by June 26, Canal Authority Administrator Jorge Quijano said Wednesday, Bloomberg News reported. The project's completion is two years behind schedule and has been plagued by contractor disputes and cost overruns.

Three Former PDVSA Officials Plead Guilty in U.S. to Graft Charges

Three former officials from Venezuelan state-run oil company PDVSA have pleaded guilty to U.S. charges resulting from a corruption probe, Reuters reported Wednesday. The defendants entered the guilty pleas to charges related to conspiracy to commit money laundering in December. The pleas were unsealed by a federal judge in Houston on Tuesday. The ex-officials are José Luis Ramos Castillo, Christián Javier Maldonado Barillas and Alfonzo Eliezer Gravina Muñoz. The case is related to charges against two Venezuelan businessmen, Roberto Rincón and Abraham José Sheira Bastidas, who were charged in December with violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Sheira pleaded guilty on Tuesday.

Joint Venture Fails to Find Viable Oil, Gas in Bolivia Well

A joint venture of Bolivian state-owned energy firm YPFB and Venezuelan state-run oil company PDVSA has been unsuccessful in its search for crude and natural gas by drilling at the Lliquimuni block, EFE reported Wednesday. YPFB CEO Guillermo Acha said Tuesday that the Lliquimuni C X-1 well at the Lliquimuni block in the western province of La Paz had not yielded commercially viable quantities of hydrocarbons.

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while Cuba does not, and that even two Cuban-Americans have been leading U.S. presidential candidates. And he showed that it is fine for a president to display a sense of humor, through his interview with Cuba's leading television comedian, contrasting a humorless Cuban leadership. The president's visit shed light on human rights abuses in Cuba. The Cuban government every Sunday has arrested members of the Ladies in White, who march out of Santa Rita Church. Thanks to the president's visit, that routine arrest this past Sunday could be filmed by international television cameras. An opening between the United States and Cuba opens the prospect for international public shaming of such abuses. There were also new agreements provoked by the visit. These ranged from Starwood Hotels' agreement on a joint venture for hotel management to the accord between the two agriculture ministries on health inspections for traded products. Ultimately, the success of the trip will be visible only in the future, most likely after Raúl Castro steps down as president in 2018. But, during this Holy Week visit to Havana, the president of the United States seems to have become Saint Obama, even in the words of Cubans whose words were printed by Granma, the communist party newspaper."

Otto Reich, president of Otto Reich Associates LLC and former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs under President George W. Bush: "Any recent U.S. president could have taken such a trip, but only if he had been willing to grant the Castros the large number of unilateral concessions that preceded Obama's visit. That U.S. president, however, would have also had to: grant political legitimacy to the hemisphere's last military dictatorship with nothing but promises in return; pretend to be the equal of the unelected 'President' Castro, the head of a one-party state; pretend to believe Castro when he states, at a joint press conference, that there are 'no political prisoners in Cuba'; and pretend that there is a genuine 'private sector' in Cuba. Many if not most of the 'cuenta-propistas' who met with Obama at the much-touted seminar were government agents, not real entrepreneurs, as illustrated by their inability to answer Obama's repeated request to 'tell me what you need,' 'tell me what I can do to help you.' However, I believe President Obama's visit was actually helpful. Why? Because now Obama knows what Cubans have long known: the Castro government is inherently and irretrievably dishonest and untrustworthy. From the visit's beginning diplomatic snub at the airport (the U.S. head of state received by a cabinet official); to the violent arrests of peaceful demonstrators before, during and after the visit; to the distortion of Obama's words by the government-controlled media, the Castro dictatorship has once again shown that it does not deserve the goodwill of the international community, much less of the world's most vibrant democracy. As for the U.S. business community that believes there is profit to be made there, I say let them go, but at no cost to the U.S. taxpayer—no credits, subsidies or government guarantees. If they are so callous as to exploit Cuban workers who receive eight cents of every dollar paid to the Castros for a worker's labor, they will reap their just rewards. Just ask the Canadian, Spanish, Chilean and other businessmen who preceded them and who languished in jail after their properties were confiscated. As a capitalist myself, I know there have always been capitalists that give capitalism a bad name."

Vicki Huddleston, retired U.S. ambassador and former chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana: "The visit was an unqualified success. It showed the United States—in the person of its president—rising above current differences and looking to the future. President Barack Obama

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negotiator, told reporters, adding that there would still be some fundamental differences between the two groups that likely would never be fully resolved. The FARC's lead negotiator Iván Marquéz said, "We are acting with the idea of building a good agreement, to make 2016 the year of peace, the year of the end of war in Colombia." Talks are set to resume on April 4. Any final deal struck between the two groups would be put to a vote for all of Colombia.

BUSINESS NEWS

Odebrecht to Work With Prosecutors in Petrobras Case

Jailed former construction CEO Marcelo Odebrecht has agreed to cooperate with prosecutors in connection with the massive corruption scandal at Brazilian state-run oil company Petrobras, The Wall Street Journal reported. The former chief executive's namesake company, Odebrecht, confirmed Wednesday that its former leader and other company employees

Odebrecht // File Photo: Odebrecht.

are prepared to reveal to prosecutors what they know about the scandal. According to prosecutors, the construction company was so deeply and systematically involved in the scandal that it had a separate department set up for tracking bribes. On Wednesday, local media in Brazil published a list of some 200 politicians alleged to have accepted bribes from Odebrecht in connection with the scandal. The former chief executive officer earlier this month was sentenced to 19 years in prison for his role in the case.

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mentioned his daughters in his statement to the media after his meeting with President Raúl Castro; I suspect he did so to underline that this process is for future generations. Raúl demonstrated that he is a pragmatic and thoughtful leader who is not adverse to change and reform in Cuba. But in typical Cuban government fashion, they were careful to ensure that they were seen as equals and treated with respect at every step of the way. Raúl's statement to the media (for no apparent reason), that implied that the United States might be meddling in Venezuela, and also the little debate with Obama about human rights, demonstrated a prickly approach. Raúl did, however, attend Obama's speech, despite knowing the issue of the dissidents would be raised. By taking along members of Congress, business people, and Cuban-Americans, Obama built a powerful constituency for Cuba, looking forward. Each of these groups has work to do: Congress must modify or repeal laws that govern U.S. policy on Cuba; Cuban-Americans are still a powerful force, and their support for reconciliation and normalization is critical; and U.S. businesses can sway Congress. There is every reason to anticipate—given our history before the Revolution and geography—that Cuba will be an excellent investment for U.S. businesses in tourism, services and transshipment. The trip served to introduce the U.S. business sector to Cuba so that it will be more comfortable with establishing connections on the island, though there will be many challenges to normalizing relations on this front as well. Hopefully, the 40 members of Congress in the delegation will advocate for continuing and broadening the process of normalization. They are key to making the next half century one of friendship between our two governments. The Cuban hosts certainly indicated a willingness to improve relations. But as both presidents said, the development of our new relationship is a long and complex process."

> **"Cuban-Americans are still a powerful force, and their support for reconciliation and normalization is critical."**
>
> **— Vicki Huddleston**

Carlos A. Saladrigas, chairman of the Cuba Study Group and Regis HR Group: "The visit was indeed historic and a resounding success. Obama connected with the Cuban people on a very personal level. The contrast was enormous. Obama was jovial, accessible and greatly at ease. By his side was an aging, stiff leader uneasy about contact with the press and far from accessible. Obama drew from his personal story to show all Cubans that change is a good and constructive force, not to be feared. A young African-American became the leader of the most powerful nation in the world, precisely because his country changed. Cubans saw a leader honest about his nation's own shortcomings, and who readily acknowledged his nation's policy failure. Cubans have never heard their leaders accept any faults of their own, other than to try to perfect things that never worked, and never will. With an easy, relaxed demeanor, Obama obsoleted the Cuban narrative of almost six decades; the United States is no longer the enemy, but rather a constructive partner. America will not midwife a democracy for Cuba; it will be up to the Cuban people to do so, in full respect for their national integrity and sovereignty. Obama praised Cubans for their creativity, industriousness and entrepreneurial spirit. He told them to look into a mirror and see their future. The United States will no longer force Cuba to change—it can't. But Obama openly reminded Cuban leaders to unleash the potential within their people—ironically, the critical strategic asset that is, to a great measure, the Cuban Revolution's best success story."

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