The United States Has a Key Partner in the Dominican Republic

By Daniel Runde and Isaac Parham

The United States and the Dominican Republic share a long history spanning governance, trade, and familiar post-colonial roots. With 2.2 million people, the Dominican diaspora is the fifth-largest Hispanic population in the United States, with a significant cultural presence throughout the arts, music, sports, and politics. Conversely, the Dominican Republic is the United States’ fourth-largest trading partner in Latin America and the Caribbean and is the sixth-most popular destination in the world for U.S. tourists.

In the past, however, the United States has overlooked this important bilateral relationship. As a result, the Dominican Republic has turned to other partners—particularly mainland China—in search of more fruitful partnerships. In just the past three years, the Dominican Republic has severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan and has signed dozens of new economic and cultural agreements with Beijing.

Fortunately, the current Dominican president, Luis Abinader, is overtly pro-United States, with personal ties dating back to his time as a graduate student in Massachusetts. Furthermore, he has taken a harder stance on China than previous administrations. There is a window of opportunity for the Biden administration to reengage with the Dominican Republic along the following five shared priorities.

The Caribbean

The Dominican Republic is a keystone in the Caribbean due to its strategic location, relatively powerful economy, and good relations with both CARICOM and Central American countries. It stands as both an important ally and as a model of progress. For instance, while in 1990 the Dominican Republic’s GDP per capita was $991, comparable at the time to that of Honduras ($993), El Salvador ($914), and Guatemala ($845), today the comparison is not even close, as GDP per capita in the Dominican Republic has risen to $8,282.

The Dominican Republic’s phenomenal growth means it provides both lessons and opportunities for other countries in the region. Other Caribbean Basin countries can learn from the effective implementation of Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement, which contributed to a tripling of trade with the United States since the agreement was signed in 2004.

The Biden and Abinader administrations both have a stake in Caribbean security and prosperity and should make this central to their bilateral engagement. As the secretary general of the Organization of American States noted in testimony to the Senate, the Caribbean is the United States’ third border and should be treated accordingly as a priority.

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