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## Scramble for GOP healthcare votes suddenly puts Cuba policy in play



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The showdown in Congress over House Republicans' healthcare bill might have nothing to do with Raúl Castro — if it weren't for Miami.

Thursday's planned vote on the American Health Care Act is so razor tight that House GOP leaders and the White House are leaning hard on every single shaky Republican for their support. One of them: Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart of Miami, whose foremost want is to overturn the Obama administration's Cuba opening — and who has recently taken it upon himself to outline a possible Cuba policy for the Trump administration.

Perhaps Diaz-Balart and the White House would engage in a little old-fashioned horse trading — a “Yes” vote on healthcare for swift action on Cuba?

The New York Times reported Wednesday that Diaz-Balart wanted assurances from White House officials that President Donald Trump would keep his campaign promise to take a harder Cuba line. There was no explicit discussion about trading a healthcare vote for a Cuba promise, The Times said after initially reporting otherwise.

“I wish that they would've given me a commitment on something, but that is just made up,” Diaz-Balart told McClatchy, the Miami Herald's parent company, on Wednesday.

He added that he's still undecided on the healthcare bill, mostly based on concerns about insurance coverage and premium costs for older Americans.

“I am very concerned that particularly that population is not being dealt with yet in a way that is giving me a lot of comfort,” he said.

Politically, he noted, it's better not to be a hard “Yes” or “No”: “Once I do that, then I'm out of the loop.”

But there's no denying that Diaz-Balart has brought up Cuba every time he's had a chance to speak to the White House, where he's closest to Vice President Mike Pence. And the Trump administration has spent two days openly wooing Republicans who, like Diaz-Balart, are on the fence about healthcare. (The Washington Post reported Wednesday that the bill lacks the votes to pass the House on Thursday.) Diaz-Balart was the tie-breaking vote approving the bill in the Budget Committee last week but has said he nevertheless leans against it.

Diaz-Balart said Wednesday he hasn't talked to Trump — but wouldn't say if he's spoken with Pence.

The suggestion that Diaz-Balart or the White House might even consider cutting a deal on Cuba to pass healthcare prompted immediate criticism from advocates of U.S.-Cuba engagement and from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which said the AHCA would “cost tens of thousands of his own constituents access to healthcare, blow the roof off of others’ premiums, and slap an age tax on older South Floridians.”

“Mr. Diaz-Balart is playing politics with his constituents’ healthcare in order to settle a family feud,” said James Williams, president of Engage Cuba, a group that advocates for closer U.S.-Cuba ties. “Our U.S.-Cuba policy should be guided by what’s in the best interests of the American and Cuban people, not one congressman’s personal agenda.”

The White House has yet to make any commitments on Cuba, a congressional source told the Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald on Wednesday — in part because Trump has yet to appoint No. 2s at the State Department and National Security Council to handle Western Hemisphere affairs.

In the absence of any high-level policy officials, Diaz-Balart has recently circulated a two-page memo to other Cuban Americans in Congress outlining a possible Trump approach to Cuba. The memo, titled “A Good Deal that Upholds the Law and Protects National Security,” has also been passed around the White House.

The memo lists no author, and Diaz-Balart’s office would not confirm Wednesday that he wrote it. Diaz-Balart, however, rattled off the same proposals — practically verbatim — in a November interview with el Nuevo Herald. Another congressional source confirmed Wednesday that the memo had come from Diaz-Balart.

The memo doesn’t go as far as calling for a return to restrictive Bush-era Cuba policy. Instead, it seeks to undo former President Barack Obama’s actions from December 2014, when he announced the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the island’s Communist regime.

Cuba would get 90 days to meet criteria set by Congress in the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, including schedule free, multiparty elections, respecting political and civil rights, and making “demonstrable progress” on returning property confiscated from Americans or compensating them for it. Failure to do so would result in returning Cuba to the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, allowing lawsuits against confiscated Cuban property, and eliminating the October 2016 Obama guidance to federal agencies on normalizing U.S.-Cuba relations.

“The top priority is that sanctions must be tightened at least to those that were in place prior to President Obama’s changes announced in December 2014,” the memo says, in a line that is bold and underlined. “In addition to that fundamental change, President Trump has other opportunities listed here which together will generate a better deal for the American and Cuban people that furthers U.S. law and vital national security interests.”

*McClatchy Washington correspondent Lesley Clark contributed to this report.*