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## Diplomacy with a Caribbean Touch: Interview with Ambassador Torres Rivera

**A**mbassador Lianys Torres Rivera is Cuba’s *Charge d’Affaires* to the United States since 2021. She is the first woman to head Cuba’s mission in Washington. Ambassador Torres Rivera has been a diplomat since 1994. Her previous positions include Ambassador to Vietnam and member of the Cuban delegation involved in re-establishing diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

Ambassador Torres Rivera spoke with Kim Montgomery, director of International Affairs and Science Diplomacy and Executive Editor of *Science & Diplomacy*, on Cuba and science diplomacy. This is the second interview of the Ambassador Interview Series launched by the AAAS Center for Science Diplomacy in April 2021.

**Kim Montgomery (Interviewer):** *Ambassador Torres Rivera, thank you for agreeing to this interview. You arrived in Washington, DC in early 2021 at a transition moment as the Biden Administration was starting and the U.S. was ramping up its COVID-19 vaccination efforts. How do these circumstances relate to your priorities as you lead Cuba’s Embassy in the U.S.?*

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**Ambassador Lianys Torres Rivera:** We believe our mission as diplomats is to build bridges between our countries so that our peoples may enjoy a long-lasting mutually beneficial relation. The U.S. President has instructed government agencies to revise sanctions that may hinder the U.S. global response to the pandemic. We think this context should offer opportunities for the new Administration to lift sanctions against Cuba, ramped up during this difficult time.

It is worth mentioning that several U.S. cities have passed resolutions urging the U.S. Government to cease the so-called embargo out of humanitarian concerns and retake the path of engagement with Cuba, including bilateral collaborations focused on pandemic.

Cuba's prestigious biotechnology industry has been able to create five vaccine candidates against COVID-19, of which two are among only 27 approved for stage III clinical trials worldwide. The Cuban population, according to our plans, is expected to be fully vaccinated by the end of this year.

In a world where COVID-19 vaccines are still widely unavailable, there is no good reason why our countries are not exchanging critical information to collaborate in this sensitive issue.

**Montgomery:** *You have had a prolific diplomatic career, including as an attaché posted in Washington, being part of the U.S. Division at the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs during reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S., and serving as Ambassador of Cuba in Vietnam. From this experience, how have you seen the intersection of science and diplomacy evolve over time and be applied in the international diplomatic sphere and in your country in particular?*

**Torres Rivera:** Definitely, there is an intersection between science and diplomacy. Science, as one of many human activities, is a vehicle for human interaction. The best scientific results are always produced by collective efforts. In an increasingly interconnected world, crisis like the one generated by the pandemic have shown the need for all countries to work together. As I see it, there is no bad science, but diplomacy poorly oriented. Science have always been a source of solutions to problems, but too often diplomacy has not risen to the occasion, and scientific results have been used to inflict damage to other countries or to perpetuate subordination and inequality across societies.

**Montgomery:** *In 2010, AAAS and the Royal Society of London developed a framework with three dimensions to better understand science diplomacy. One of these dimensions is science for diplomacy. From this perspective, can you tell us how international scientific engagements have helped to advance Cuba's diplomatic objectives, including using science's soft power to improve relations between countries?*

**Torres Rivera:** I think that the concept of “soft power” insufficiently encompasses Cuba’s approach to international relations. Cuba’s conduct globally is guided by principles as solidarity and cooperation when possible, as well as respect among nations and non-interference in countries’ domestic affairs. Power, even if labeled as soft, refers to the capacity of one country to impose its will over others, which has been the cause of many conflicts historically. There is a need to change this power-focused paradigm and actively pursue a new order centered around human beings for which accessible science is critical.

Cuba has actively worked with other countries bilaterally and through the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO), to promote open science, and more inclusive and collaborative scientific practices, improving access to scientific information and the exchange of knowledge. This approach supports the UN General Assembly’s Sustainable Development Goals for countries to end poverty and hunger in 2030, through economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.

**Montgomery:** *Another dimension of the AAAS-Royal Society framework on science diplomacy is how scientific knowledge and expertise helps to inform diplomatic objectives and policymaking. I wonder if you could speak to some examples from Cuba on this dimension of science diplomacy.*

**Torres Rivera:** I guess U.S.-Cuba relations offer a good example for this dimension. Between 2015 and 2017, Cuba and the U.S. signed 22 Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) in areas ranging from law enforcement; plant and animal health; conservation of protected areas; geodesy, cartography, and nautical charts; and hydrology and meteorology, among others.

Most of these instruments of cooperation were possible due to strong links previously established between the respective scientific communities. Those ties were intended to be expanded in a favorable environment to advance both diplomatic and professional goals across both nations. Notwithstanding political differences, I believe that the U.S. and Cuban governments have the duty to facilitate a vibrant scientific collaboration for the benefit of our peoples.

This type of bilateral exchanges paved the way for the formation of Innovative Immunotherapy Alliance S.A., which is the first-ever biotech venture between the U.S. and Cuba, through Buffalo-based Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center and Cuba's Center for Molecular Immunology. In this regard, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said at the time this alliance was launched: "This historic venture with Cuba will provide Roswell Park access to innovative cancer-fighting drugs that could revolutionize treatments and put us one step closer to eliminating the threat of cancer once and for all." There is no doubt there could be more collaborations like this ahead if the conditions were facilitated. Cuba is ready to do that.

**Montgomery:** *The last dimension of the AAAS-Royal Society framework is diplomacy for science. Hoping you could speak to a diplomatic initiative where Cuba is involved in helping to foster international scientific collaboration and/or strengthen domestic and worldwide scientific capabilities?*

**Torres Rivera:** It can be said the Cuba is very involved with the international scientific community. Cuban international actions on education are developed under the protection of 2,500 inter-university and ministerial agreements signed with institutions from more than 100 countries. More than 200 academic and scientific projects and 50 international cooperation projects are executed annually, decisively contributing to the development of Cuban Higher Education Institutions (HEI), the local communities and the country.

The Cuban Academy of Sciences (ACC in Spanish) has signed collaboration agreements with the Real Society of Edinburgh, the Hungarian Academy of Science, the Royal Society of London, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).<sup>1</sup> Cuban scholars are members of other Academies, like the Caribbean Academy of Sciences (CAS), the Latin American Academy of Sciences (ACAL) and The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS). Since 2015, the ACC is also an affiliate of the Chinese Academy of Science.

Likewise, I'm proud to mention Cuba has trained about 60,000 foreign students from 127 countries since 1959, thus supporting the formation of those countries' scientific workforce. Nearly 10 million people in 30 nations have benefited from the Cuban literacy method "Yes, I can (Yo, sí puedo)," which received the UNESCO's King Sejong Literacy Prize in 2006. This is a modest contribution for a planet where about 773 million young people and adults still cannot read or write, and some 250 million children lack basic calculation and literacy skills, according to UNESCO.

**Montgomery:** *With global challenges spanning borders and science and technology being the drivers of solutions, there is an increasing role for science diplomacy. What skills would you consider helpful for someone coming from the scientific side to gain if they are interested in pursuing a career in science diplomacy?*

**Torres Rivera:** Empathy and the ability to listen. One of the definitions of diplomacy is “the art of dealing with people in a sensitive and effective way.” In order to carry out an effective science diplomacy, one needs to understand countries’ histories, their struggles, their traditions and culture, and the social, economic, and political conditions in which diplomacy will be conducted. Putting yourself in another’s position helps to comprehend their challenges. You may realize that solutions to the biggest problems affecting humanity might not be associated with lack of high-end technologies, but rather, with unmet basic necessities in a disproportionately unequal, unfair international order.

**Montgomery:** *Cuba is known for its beautiful beaches and lively population. Since we have this opportunity to talk with you, we would be remised if we did not ask you for some destination highlights, including some natural attractions in Cuba that people should visit when travel is possible?*

**Torres Rivera:** You are right. Just recently two Cuban beaches, Cayo Santamaria (2nd) and Varadero (12th) were ranked among Top 25 worldwide by TripAdvisor. I know them and they are indeed wonderful. Spain’s International Tourism Fair has regarded Cuba as one of the safest destinations for many years and several hotels have won the Trip Advisor’s Traveler’s Choice. The Cuban cigars, drinks and gastronomy are also well known.

Beyond our capital, eight sites have been considered by UNESCO as World Heritage, including Viñales, Santiago de Cuba Castle, historical downtowns in Cienfuegos and Camagüey, a coffee plantation in Santiago de Cuba and Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills), in Trinidad.

I would like to highlight the National Park Alejandro de Humboldt, which is also included in this list. It is one of 32 National Protected Areas in Cuba where travelers can perform activities like trekking, diving, bird watching, and sport hunting. One of the most-recognized natural beauties is the Gardens of the Queen, an archipelago in the Southeastern part of Cuba, which is considered one of the largest and most intact marine protected areas in the Caribbean.

You are all welcome to visit Cuba! **SD**

## **Disclaimer**

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

## **Endnotes**

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