Jorge Camacho, Nazca, 1986.

Socialism Under Siege

Lourdes Regueiro, Claudia Marín

The US closes in on Cuba

In January 2026, the Trump administration imposed a total blockade of oil shipments to Cuba, plunging its oil-dependent electricity grid into chaos. The administration's economic war marks the latest in a long line of attempts to strangle the country and topple its revolutionary government. In addition to using tariffs to disrupt the island's energy system, Washington has tried to deepen Cuba's international isolation by placing it on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, designating it an extraordinary threat to US security, attacking its robust medical aid programs, and targeting its tourist industry. The island is now facing prolonged, nation-wide power outages and blackouts. Deteriorating public services and shortages in food and medical supplies have dramatically worsened living conditions, making even basic daily tasks a struggle for survival.

The blockade aims to undermine the example of anti-imperial resistance and internationalism that Cuba has cultivated for more than six decades. Though in some sense a continuation of US aggression toward Cuba since the early Cold War, it also reflects a new and more intense form of intervention. This in turn reflects a changing global context. Since the early 2000s, the gradual decline of the unipolar order has created a more favorable environment for Cuba's global integration, opening up opportunities for collaboration with countries attempting to carve out autonomy from the global hegemon. However, this same process has positioned Cuba at the heart of the strategic dispute between the US and its systemic rivals. Drastic as they are, the current set of sanctions may be just the beginning of a more radical effort by the US to reclaim its regional dominance.

Though new alliance partners have emerged, they have yet to consolidate into an organized bloc capable of effectively resisting US aggression. In contrast to the Cold War period, Cuba is considerably weakened in its capacity to withstand imperial pressure. The result is a complex and contradictory juncture: significant challenges to US power have appeared for the first time in decades, but their survival remains uncertain.

Age of internationalism

A defining feature of Cuba's revolutionary project has been its unique relationship to a changing world order. Over the course of six decades, the Cuban government has withstood the transition from Cold War bipolarity through the unipolarity of the 1990s to the contemporary period of multipolar contestation. US attempts to undermine the government have been consistent throughout. Since 1962, Washington has constructed a complex architecture of economic, financial, and commercial sanctions to suffocate the Cuban economy. The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 codified this system by prohibiting financial investment, limiting use of the dollar, restricting the import of goods containing more than 10 percent US content, and banning ships transporting goods to Cuba from calling at US ports for 180 days.

These and other measures have increased transaction costs and discouraged third parties from investing in, trading with, or lending to Cuba. Its most recent designation as a state sponsor of terrorism—first applied in 1982, temporarily lifted in 2015, and reimposed in 2021—has triggered even more severe financial restrictions, including transaction monitoring and expanded prohibitions on the receipt of economic assistance. Throughout this period, banks and private entities have had to avoid ties with Cuba for fear of sanctions, fines, or loss of access to the US financial system.

Cuba's capacity to resist these attacks has fluctuated with the changing international balance of power. During the Cold War, any attack on Cuba was perceived as a threat to the entire socialist camp, eliciting a response from allied governments led by the USSR. The collapse of the Soviet bloc put an end to this, sending Cuba into a deep economic crisis that became known as the Special Period. Having lost its primary supplier of fuel, and facing a 37 percent contraction in GDP, the Cuban government launched a deep and wide-ranging program of economic restructuring, placing tourism and scientific development at the center of its new growth model.

The result was a complete transformation of the country's social fabric. Most Cubans—with the exception of farmers, cooperative members, and a limited number of self-employed workers—had previously been employed by the state. The predominant form of income in the economy was therefore wages, and the ratio between the lowest and highest levels on the wage scale was 1:4. However, in 1990, the economy was partially opened to foreign investment and the possession of foreign currency was decriminalized. Income inequality grew as a consequence: some people received remittances from abroad, while others were employed by foreign companies. Those employed locally, without relatives abroad, had less access to freely convertible currencies, which soon gave rise to significant contrasts in wealth and consumption.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a wave of left-leaning governments across Latin America came to power on the combined promise of domestic redistribution and greater autonomy from Washington. In place of the Soviet Union, Cuba thus found new stabilizing alliances with Pink Tide governments; regional networks like the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) welcomed Cuba into their midst. Energy cooperation was critical. Caribbean nations, Cuba among them, managed high energy costs with the assistance of PetroCaribe, a program that provided financial assistance for the purchase of oil from Venezuela. By ensuring a relatively stable supply of fuel on concessionary terms, the program freed up financing for energy infrastructure. Relations between Cuba and Venezuela were rooted in this solidaristic framework. The Comprehensive Cuba–Venezuela Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2000 during the first year of Hugo Chávez's presidential term, created a mechanism that allowed fuel to be exchanged for services, thus enabling more ambitious social policies in Venezuela while guaranteeing stable oil supplies for Cuba.

Such regional cooperation was not exclusively commercial. Hundreds of thousands of Cuban professionals provided health, education, and technical assistance services in Venezuela as part of social missions like Barrio Adentro, Sucre, Milagro, Robinson, Ribas, and Vuelvan Caras. As well as providing medical care to millions of Venezuelans, these programs enabled the government to establish thousands of diagnostic centers and rehabilitation facilities. Literacy campaigns based on the Cuban pedagogical method *Yo sí puedo* were developed, benefiting more than a million people, while Cuban training programs allowed thousands of Venezuelans to qualify as doctors and community health workers. By the end of 2024, in the field of health alone, more than 255,000 Cuban medical personnel had conducted over a billion medical consultations. Cuba played a crucial role in treating Ebola patients in Africa and Covid-19 patients across several countries. These mutually beneficial exchanges were part of a cooperative system that helped the Cuban government fend off US pressures throughout this period.

New order

It was in the mid-2010s that such ties of solidarity began to fray. In 2014, the oil prices sustaining the PetroCaribe project collapsed, with devastating implications for the concessionary financing regime. Venezuela's state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), had been undergoing a prolonged process of decapitalization. Coupled with devastating US sanctions against the Venezuelan economy, this led to declining regional fuel shipments. The PDVSA had served as the financial backbone of the Bolivarian social project, using its vast revenues to redress the country's historical inequalities while bearing the costs of the government's redistributive measures. In trying to sabotage oil production, the US was deliberately taking aim at the revenues that sustained Venezuela's social policies, as well as the energy cooperation between countries in the region. The Caribbean Energy Security Initiative (CESI), launched by the Obama administration and sustained under Trump, was an attempt to further undermine Venezuela's regional energy cooperation program by seeking to attract private investment into the energy sector. Political pressure was ratcheted up in 2019 with the US recognition of Juan Guaidó as president, as well as its promotion of other dissidents like María Corina Machado and Edmundo González.

The assault on the *Chavista* regional project came with coercive measures, including freezing or confiscating assets belonging to companies that trade with Cuba, and targeting funds and operations related to oil shipments. The aim was to limit foreign-exchange earnings, to diplomatically isolate Pink Tide countries on the regional and international stage, and to lay the groundwork for future military interventions. The impact of these measures was compounded by the regional context in which they took place. With the end of the commodities boom that had enabled the Pink Tide reforms, US sanctions deepened instability among the region's progressive governments, contributing to a growing sentiment against incumbency. As their bases of support began to fracture, a series of hard-right electoral movements gained ground, from Bolsonarismo in Brazil to Uribismo in Colombia. Their rise eroded most of the regional forums that had acted as counterweights to US influence and shifted the continent toward greater alignment with Washington. The long tradition of unanimous Latin American and Caribbean support for lifting the blockade on Cuba was finally broken, with Argentina and Paraguay now backing US policy at the United Nations, and Ecuador and Costa Rica abstaining.

Both the Trump and Biden administrations intensely pressured countries to end their collaborative programs with Cuba, threatening those who participated in them with visa restrictions. Across Central America and the Caribbean, shared education, health, and disaster-management programs came to an end as governments weighed the value of these programs against US threats to security, migration, and financing. Some countries have chosen not to renew their medical cooperation agreements with Cuba, potentially jeopardizing their domestic health systems in order to avoid confrontation with the White House.

The fracturing of regional solidarity has coincided with the wider crisis of the liberal unipolar order. The US retreat from multilateral institutions might have, in principle, expanded the space for Cuba to collaborate with other developing countries and with China. But this same behavior is what has prompted Washington to violently reassert its control over the Western

Hemisphere by way of its updated Monroe Doctrine. The breakdown of the regional project that characterized the Chávez period—and the dismantling of Venezuela–Cuba cooperation—means that Havana cannot fall back on a robust set of alliances to resist this assault. Because the decline of the US-led order has not been offset by the rise of an alternative one, Cuba has few defenses against unchecked American might.

Progressivism has not been eradicated from the region, however. It persists in countries with significant economic and political weight—Mexico, Brazil, Colombia—which have made admirable efforts to oppose the blockade. Claudia Sheinbaum is committed to pursuing diplomatic channels for delivering oil to Cuba, and providing humanitarian aid in the form of foodstuffs and essential supplies. Lula has denounced the embargo as an act of criminal coercion. Beyond Cuba's neighbors, Chile, Russia, Vietnam, Spain, and Canada have all expressed willingness to send, or have begun sending, humanitarian aid. But sympathetic governments grapple with a set of overlapping problems—from domestic electoral complexities to US pressure—which make it difficult for them to single-handedly revive the internationalism of the Pink Tide era. Their actions have so far been limited to political declarations and attempts to alleviate some of the worst effects of the crisis. They have not addressed the underlying issue of Latin America's constrained sovereignty and continued vulnerability to aggression from its northern neighbor.

Regime change?

Looming beyond domestic and regional interests are wider geopolitical tensions. Over the past decade, China has become the cornerstone of Latin America's renewable-energy sector. As Cuba's domestic crisis has intensified since 2024, Chinese solar panels have become essential to the functioning of the country's public institutions. The prospect of yuan-denominated oil sales from Venezuela to China and the long-anticipated plan to relaunch PetroCaribe were particularly alarming to Washington. In kidnapping

President Nicolás Maduro on January 3, the Trump administration dealt a forceful blow to Chinese regional influence, warning against further challenges to its regional power.

It came at a critical time when fuel shortages were already causing continual power outages. Venezuela's share of fuel supplies to Cuba had been in slow decline over the course of the preceding six years, with a significant drop in the last three. Although there was a modest uptick in Venezuelan oil production starting in 2023—primarily because of Chevron's extraction activities facilitated by a partial easing of US sanctions—these increases did not translate into a recovery of previous export levels to Cuba, which continued to hover between 30 and 35 percent of the island's crude oil demand. Imports from Russia also decreased following the conflict in Ukraine, making Mexico the island's main supplier. The raid on Caracas was, then, useful for Washington in two respects. It both asserted US dominance over China in a region where Beijing had been gaining a serious foothold, and it constituted a major step toward regime change in Cuba, insofar as Maduro could no longer be relied upon as an ally for Havana. Just as the Soviet Union served as a guarantor of Cuban sovereignty during the Cold War, Venezuela had enabled the country to resist US pressure in the twenty-first century.

The disruption to fuel supplies has been disastrous. Electricity generation, transportation, and logistics chains are all suffering, and the effects are seen throughout daily life. The aviation fuel shortages, which have driven up prices and in some cases caused airlines to suspend services to Cuba, have been disastrous for tourism. Some countries have warned their citizens against traveling to Cuba, and third-country nationals who have traveled there now face stricter immigration restrictions for entry to the US.

Since energy is a necessary input for production and service provision, the fuel shortage has sparked significant inflation; the fiscal deficit has risen, the supply of basic goods has dropped, and the black-market exchange rate has further depreciated. Under these conditions, the provision of healthcare, education, and cultural activities has come under enormous strain. The government has responded by trying to ramp up renewable-energy supplies—accelerating the construction of photovoltaic parks and other such projects—aided by its economic relations with China and Vietnam. Generation from renewable sources, primarily solar, has now reached record heights, though it still falls significantly short of national demand.

Project and process

Though mired in crisis, Cuban society, and the gains of its revolution, so far endure. Over the course of the last sixty-seven years, Cuba's revolutionary leadership has stayed the course while menaced by economic sabotage and military threats. In fact, these have often prompted creative adaptations, such as the Special Period's pivot to tourism as well as the emergence of computing, biotechnology, and medicine as areas of specialization. When the country is threatened, new development models tend to emerge.

Compared to the 1990s, Cuba is a far more heterogeneous society today—economically, socially, and politically. The notion of a free-market transition remains unpopular among most Cubans, but there are increasing numbers of pro-American voices to contend with domestically—increasingly so as the economy falters. Notwithstanding criticisms of the government's management, there is still mass support for the Revolution. Even among those more hostile to the regime's ideology, foreign interference is strongly opposed. Contemporary political discourse in Cuba is focused on the question of the private sector's role in the economy, social tolerance, legitimate forms of dissent, and the feasibility of implementing reforms under conditions of maximum pressure—preserving the social gains of the Revolution while modernizing the socioeconomic model. Much of the debate centers on the need to reconcile the defense of national sovereignty with transformation and renewal, acknowledging that these two imperatives are not mutually exclusive. Many would favor a constructive, mutually respectful relationship with the US, though there is deep skepticism about whether that is possible, and whether any hypothetical agreement with Washington could hold.

Reflecting on conditions in her country, the Cuban public intellectual Esther Pérez drew a distinction between the project of socialism—a commitment to universal emancipation and wellbeing—and the process of achieving it. If the first is a set of fixed principles, or a "straight path clearly running toward the horizon," the second is a long and winding road on which we will inevitably experience setbacks and diversions. This spring, as Cuba suffered under sanctions, the Nuestra América convoy—made up of around 600 travelers from the US, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean—arrived on its shores carrying food, medicine, and solar panels. The goods were funded by donations from people around the world who continue to support the cause of the Revolution. For them, the Cuban project remains a beacon of hope, even if it is increasingly in peril.