

Cuba: The End of an Era?

written by Lisbeth Moya González | August 4, 2026



When I was a child, I learned how to shoot. There were shooting ranges in my school and on street corners where, for a few coins, you could unload your problems onto a target. For Cubans of my generation, we watched wars from afar. Although the discourse of preparing to defend the homeland against a possible military invasion shaped our lives, military drills were just another subject in the school curriculum. Sure, Cubans fought in Angola and Ethiopia, but since the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, we have not experienced a large-scale armed conflict on our own territory.

Yet Cuba today looks like a country emerging from war, a war that has been economically and psychologically exhausting. The Cubans whom the government now calls upon to defend the country from a possible U.S. invasion are survivors of hunger, precarity, and the authoritarianism of the island's own government.

After the latest U.S. sanctions, the Cuban government now finds itself forced to negotiate with Washington. But there is one negotiation it postponed indefinitely: negotiation with the Cuban people themselves, with civil society on the island, which has spent years protesting for political rights and, above all, against hunger. The government also delayed urgent economic reforms that could have allowed Cubans some agency to revitalize the economy. It divorced itself from its people, and today the widespread feeling is that there is nothing left to defend.

"What would you do if the United States invaded Cuba tomorrow?" I have asked this question repeatedly over the past few days to friends, acquaintances, and relatives on the island. The answer is always the same: "Stay home and let them figure it out, because nobody has ever counted on us for anything."

The Cuban crisis—seemingly endless since the "Special Period" of the 1990s—is now experiencing its most critical moment. According to data from ECLAC's *2025 Statistical Yearbook*, Cuba ended 2025 with the lowest GDP per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Cuban economy also registered two consecutive years of contraction while the rest of Latin America grew by an average of 4.7 percent. The island's total GDP reached just \$12.1 billion, barely 0.2 percent of the regional economy, placing it even below Haiti in current value terms.

Cuba's structural deterioration includes prolonged blackouts, fuel shortages, paralysis of public transportation, rising violence and insecurity in the streets, a growing use of high-risk drugs, collapsing infrastructure, falling external revenues, sustained migration, and increasing social unrest expressed through protests and subsequent criminalization by the State.

At the same time, following Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency in 2025, economic and diplomatic sanctions have intensified. However, Cuba's situation cannot be understood solely as an economic crisis. Today, Cuba has once again become a key point in regional geopolitical disputes

and in the broader U.S. strategy toward Latin America.

The Trump administration has promoted the narrative that overthrowing the Cuban government is a matter of national security due to Cuba's relationship with China, Russia, and Iran, as well as the growing migration flow of Cubans toward the United States.

The Hammer in Havana

The main promoter of the current negotiations is U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The speech Rubio delivered on May 20 marked a significant shift in Washington's official narrative toward Cuba. Rubio constructed a message based on separating the Cuban State from the "Cuban people." He described the political system as a structure controlled by a military and economic elite organized around the military conglomerate GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial S.A)—the target of future sanctions. Rubio insisted that sanctions were not aimed at ordinary people but at the military business elite, presenting the United States as an ally of Cuban citizens. The speech also outlined a future Cuba rebuilt economically through Cuban-American investment.

The choice of May 20 as the date of the speech carried strong symbolic meaning. The date commemorates the establishment of the Republic of Cuba in 1902—in other words, the beginning of Cuba's neocolonial era, when the island passed from Spanish domination into U.S. hands. Rubio revived the republican narrative to frame the current Cuban crisis as a direct consequence of the political model established after 1959, rather than as a result of the U.S. embargo. He also insisted that the current crisis stems from military control of the economy and state corruption, while downplaying the role of U.S. pressure.

But Rubio's speech is merely the continuation of a policy that emerges in subtler forms. Since his arrival on the island in November 2024, Mike Hammer—appointed chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Havana—has increased public contact with dissidents, independent journalists, civil organizations, and relatives of political prisoners, in a dynamic denounced by the Cuban government as "interventionist." From that moment on, U.S. diplomacy began combining external economic pressure with a more active political presence inside Cuba's internal landscape.

Sanctioning to "Liberate"?

One of the main pillars of U.S. strategy has been to put pressure on Cuba's energy supply. Cuba depends heavily on fuel imports to sustain electricity generation, transportation, industry, and much of its internal supply system. Throughout 2025 and 2026, Washington increased threats of sanctions against companies, shipping firms, and countries involved in supplying oil to the island.

While Rubio insists that sanctions are not intended to affect ordinary Cubans but rather the military elite, deterioration is visible in everyday life. Five epidemics are spreading simultaneously due to lack of fuel to collect garbage from the streets, people are living for days without electricity or water and surviving on barely enough not to starve—this is hardly a context that speaks of "surgical intervention" or sanctions designed to liberate the Cuban people.

Another element normalized within this crisis—one that nobody, not even independent media, talks about—is the business of poverty. While Cubans lack electricity and food, proposals from Miami arrive offering shipments of food, electric generators, and basic goods to the island. Shipments paid for by the diaspora for their relatives in Cuba.

Some of the best-known companies in this circuit are remittance and shipping agencies such as Cubamax, VaCuba, Katapulka, Alawao, and Supermarket23, though many smaller operators also exist. Most of these companies are owned by Cuban-Americans, but the phenomenon also involves

the Cuban State itself, since many hard-currency stores, import platforms, and internal commercial circuits are linked to state or military structures such as GAESA, the business conglomerate controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces.

At the same time, the Trump administration hardened sanctions against GAESA. GAESA manages strategic sectors of the Cuban economy, including tourism, hotels, ports, banks, foreign trade, and infrastructure. There is very little institutional transparency surrounding GAESA. Cuba's former comptroller general, Gladys Bejerano, even admitted that the conglomerate cannot be audited.

In May 2026, Washington expanded sanctions against companies linked to the Cuban military apparatus and against foreign actors that maintain commercial relations with those entities. Marco Rubio publicly described GAESA as "the economic heart" of the Cuban system. The measures have included financial restrictions, asset freezes, and tighter controls on international operations involving companies connected to the conglomerate.

Within this scenario, the case of Sherritt International gained relevance. The Canadian company had for decades been one of Cuba's main foreign economic partners. Sherritt operates in strategic sectors such as nickel and cobalt mining, oil, and electricity generation. The company mainly works in Moa, eastern Cuba, through joint ventures with the Cuban State.

Sherritt's importance lies in the fact that Cuba possesses significant nickel and cobalt reserves—minerals essential for electric batteries, industrial technology, and military applications. The company consolidated its position during the 1990s, when Cuba sought foreign investment after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict emerged when Washington began extending pressure not only onto the Cuban government but also onto foreign companies linked to strategic sectors of the island's economy.

Nevertheless, in recent days, despite rumors of negotiations between the U.S. government and the Castro family, U.S. pressure acquired a more aggressive political and symbolic dimension. During Trump's first administration, personal sanctions had been imposed on Raúl Castro and other high-ranking Cuban officials. In 2026, Trump once again placed the historic leadership of the Cuban Revolution at the center of the confrontation.

The U.S. government even pushed forward a legal accusation against Raúl Castro related to the 1996 shutdown of the Brothers to the Rescue planes, a move that triggered pro-government mobilizations in Havana and renewed diplomatic tensions between the two countries.

Simultaneously, in May 2026, CIA director John Ratcliffe made an official visit to Cuba and held meetings with officials from the Ministry of the Interior and representatives of the Cuban intelligence apparatus. Ratcliffe discussed issues related to regional security, intelligence cooperation, economic stability, and bilateral relations amid Cuba's ongoing energy crisis.

American Imperialism and Cuba

The U.S. offensive against Cuba cannot be understood solely as an ideological conflict inherited from the Cold War or as a policy exclusively aimed at the island's "democratization." Relations between Washington and Havana are shaped by geopolitical, economic, electoral, and regional security factors that explain why Cuba continues to occupy a central place in U.S. foreign policy more than six decades after the 1959 Revolution. For example, during the Cold War, Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union turned the island into one of the world's greatest flashpoints, especially after the 1962 Missile Crisis.

One of the central elements is the weight of the Cuban-American lobby based mainly in Miami. Since

the 1960s, sectors of the Cuban exile community have built a political, business, and media structure with enormous influence inside the U.S. political system, especially within the Republican Party. Organizations such as the Cuban American National Foundation have played a key role in consolidating the economic embargo and in passing laws like the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which legally reinforced sanctions against Cuba.

Over time, this influence has also become a strategic electoral force. Florida has turned into one of the decisive states in U.S. politics, and the Cuban-American vote has acquired significant weight in presidential and legislative elections. Republican figures such as Marco Rubio and María Elvira Salazar have built much of their political careers around a hardline stance toward the Cuban government. In this context, policy toward Cuba also functions as domestic U.S. politics: hardening sanctions and maintaining anti-Castro rhetoric strengthens electoral alliances within Florida and consolidates support among conservative exile sectors.

However, Cuba's centrality for Washington goes beyond electoral calculations. The island occupies a strategic geographic position in the Caribbean, barely 150 kilometers from Florida and along one of the Western Hemisphere's main maritime routes. Since the nineteenth century, the United States has considered Cuba a key piece for controlling the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and trade corridors toward Latin America. That logic has never disappeared.

In the current scenario, these concerns have reemerged under new geopolitical coordinates. Sectors of the U.S. government argue that Cuba functions as a projection point for Chinese and Russian interests in Latin America. Washington has expressed concern over technological agreements, telecommunications cooperation, diplomatic presence, and military or intelligence links between Havana and both countries. In this narrative, Cuba ceases to be merely a regional ideological adversary and becomes part of the global strategic competition between the United States and its principal international rivals.

Although the Cuban economy is small on a global scale, the island possesses important strategic resources. Cuba has reserves of nickel and cobalt, minerals fundamental for electric batteries, technological industries, electronic devices, and military equipment. In a context marked by the energy transition and global competition over critical minerals, these resources have acquired growing geopolitical importance.

The case of Sherritt International demonstrates precisely that strategic dimension. The Canadian company, associated for decades with the Cuban State in mining and energy projects, became exposed to new U.S. sanctions because of its links to sectors Washington considers strategic. Pressure against Sherritt showed that U.S. policy no longer aims solely at Cuba's diplomatic isolation but also at obstructing any international economic structure capable of financially sustaining the Cuban State.

This is compounded by the island's historic economic potential. Before the 1959 Revolution, much of Cuba's economy—tourism, sugar, infrastructure, banking, and services—was linked to U.S. capital. Various business sectors still regard Cuba as a potentially important market for investments in tourism, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, and construction, especially given its geographic proximity to the United States and its strategic Caribbean location.

The confrontation with Cuba also possesses a strong symbolic component. For conservative U.S. sectors and parts of the Cuban exile community, the Cuban government continues to represent one of the principal historical symbols of anti-American resistance in Latin America. Therefore, an eventual political transformation on the island would be presented not merely as a regime change but as a regional ideological victory over the Latin American left and over political projects

historically associated with the legacy of the Cuban Revolution.

In this context, Washington's current strategy combines economic pressure, financial sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and internal political division. More than a traditional military invasion, the objective appears aimed at generating conditions that accelerate fractures within the Cuban state apparatus that facilitate a political transition favorable to U.S. interests.

And the Cuban people?

Recently, independent Cuban media launched a digital survey to measure the island's political climate. The poll gathered more than 42,000 valid responses from residents in Cuba and members of the diaspora. One of the most widely discussed findings was that a large majority of participants identified the lack of civil and political liberties as one of the country's principal problems. According to results published by elTOQUE, more than 80 percent of respondents identified this issue among the nation's main concerns, while a much smaller proportion pointed to the U.S. embargo as the principal cause of the crisis.

The survey also showed very high levels of support for structural changes within Cuba's political and economic system. José Jasán Nieves, director of elTOQUE, stated that participants "overwhelmingly" demanded systemic change in Cuba.

Nevertheless, the results generated intense debate over methodology and representativeness. Due to political and technological restrictions inside Cuba, the survey was conducted digitally and openly, implying significant statistical limitations: it was not a traditional probabilistic national sample, and participation depended on internet access, social networks, and VPNs, especially after the Cuban government blocked access to the website from the island shortly after its launch. Beyond the statistical validity of the survey, the results still offer insights into the opinions of an important sector of Cubans.

"The situation in Cuba is critical: blackouts lasting more than 22 hours, lack of water, gas, and food, extreme stress, and generalized mental deterioration. Life is reduced to day-to-day survival, leaving no space for thought or activism. The Cuban government bears the main responsibility, but U.S. policy also worsens the crisis in a cruel and incomprehensible way. The social fabric is so damaged that neither a change of government nor immediate external aid would resolve the profound social, psychological, and cultural deterioration," says Cuban historian Alexander Hall from Havana.

The Cuban people survive today detached from politics. They learn about possible invasions days after the threats are made, and probably are not even fully aware of the constant stream of news arriving amid this psychological and economic war of attrition. People in Cuba live on the razor's edge and want change because right now their lives themselves are at stake—and when life becomes impossible, neither homeland nor dignity remain possible. Ordinary Cubans are the great losers in this war of exhaustion.

Meanwhile, evangelical influencers emerge on social media calling for a libertarian Cuba "like Milei's, but for Christ"; activists travel to the European Union asking for more sanctions that will ultimately deepen the poverty of the Cuban people; anti-Castro figures in Miami describe transitional governments where the most reactionary right should take power and restore the 1940 Constitution; and Romantic leftists make their final tourist pilgrimage to the fading lighthouse of dignity, while defenders of the Revolution attack Cubans who speak openly about Cuba, calling them *gusanos* ("worms") and demanding sacrifice.

Religious fundamentalism grows among the ruins of what was once an attempt at socialist

revolution. History returns as farce—and it is cruel.