



PRIMER: Cuba—A Threat Close to Home

May 6, 2026

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

- For nearly 70 years, Cuba’s communist dictatorship has been a [threat](#) to the United States in our own backyard, supporting terrorism and providing a base of operations for other American adversaries, including China and Russia, to threaten the U.S. homeland.
- The success of Operation Absolute Resolve in Venezuela—combined with years of pressure against the current Cuban regime and its own internal dysfunction—has pushed Cuba to its weakest position in decades, presenting the best opportunity in recent years to force the current regime to collapse and create space for a more friendly Cuban government.
- The United States’s immediate goal should be to force the current Cuban regime to end support for terrorism and cooperation with China and Russia, institute free market economic reforms, and stop repressing the Cuban people, creating the long-term conditions needed for the Cuban people to ultimately achieve a full transition to democracy.

A THREAT IN AMERICA’S BACKYARD

Lying less than 100 miles from the U.S. coast, Cuba has posed a [direct threat](#) to U.S. national security since the communist regime took power in 1959. For many years, Cuban intelligence operatives have aggressively [infiltrated](#) the United States government and provided a safe haven for terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Colombia’s ELN, along with a number of [fugitives](#) fleeing American justice, including multiple murderers wanted for killing U.S. law enforcement officers. Cuba was first designated as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1982, and President Trump has twice redesignated Cuba, rightly reversing the misguided decisions of both President Obama and President Biden to remove Cuba from the list.

At the same time, as President Trump’s National Security Strategy makes clear, kicking Russia, China, and Iran out of the hemisphere is a key strategic priority. Cuba has provided a base of operations for America’s most dangerous adversaries for decades, starting with the [Soviet Union](#) in the Cold War and continuing with China, Russia, and Iran today. In 2023, U.S. officials [confirmed](#) that China was operating [multiple spy bases](#) in Cuba, including a signals intelligence base for which China reportedly paid Cuba billions of dollars to build. In 2018, Cuba joined China’s Belt and Road Initiative, with China helping to [prop up](#) their fellow communist regime’s transportation, port infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy sectors in return for a strategic foothold in America’s backyard.

Additionally, Cuba [hosts](#) Russia’s largest overseas signals intelligence facility and sent up to [5,000 mercenaries](#) to fight for Russia against Ukraine. In 2016, a number of U.S. diplomats in Havana became victims of severe, unexplained medical issues, known as “[Havana Syndrome](#),” which recent [reports](#) have tied to a Russian electromagnetic weapon. Cuba also [provided](#) training and intelligence support to Venezuela’s security services, enabling the Maduro narcoterrorist regime to retain power and facilitating the brutal repression of the Venezuelan people. During the successful operation to capture Maduro, U.S. special forces [killed](#) 32 Cuban soldiers assigned to protect the Venezuelan dictator.

A BRUTAL REGIME

In addition to the threat Cuba poses to the United States, its communist regime continues to brutally [repress](#) the Cuban people, which has resulted in multiple [mass migration crises](#) since the communists seized power in 1959. On May 1, 2026, the Trump administration [imposed](#) new sanctions on the Cuban regime in response to the

regime's continued significant violations of the unalienable rights of Cuban citizens, citing the communist dictatorship's persecution and torture of its political opponents and the significant suppression of free speech inside Cuba. In its [2026 Annual Report](#), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended Cuba continue to be designated as a "country of particular concern" for violations of religious freedom, noting the regime persecuted religious leaders and worshippers. After thousands of Cubans took to the streets in 2021 to protest the dictatorship's repression, the communist regime worked to [crush](#) dissent, including jailing an estimated 700 demonstrators, some of whom remain imprisoned to this day. In addition to committing atrocities against its own people, the Cuban regime promotes communist propaganda throughout the Western Hemisphere, seeking to undermine freedom and liberty more broadly.

THE CURRENT SITUATION: A WEAKENED REGIME

The success of Operation Absolute Resolve in Venezuela—combined with years of pressure against the Cuban regime—has pushed the Cuban regime to its weakest position in decades. Cuba had been relying on Venezuela and Mexico for nearly [75 percent](#) of its oil, but following Maduro's arrest, the United States now controls Venezuelan oil exports and has halted all oil shipments to Cuba. President Trump also has [threatened](#) Mexico with harsh trade consequences should they provide Cuba with oil. As a result, Cuba is facing an energy crisis, experiencing [three nationwide blackouts](#) in March 2026. The regime's [mismanagement](#) of Cuba's economy has resulted in dysfunctional, dire situation and growing humanitarian crisis. While the United States does allow economic engagement with Cuba's private sector, the communist regime only allows an incredibly small private sector, refusing to allow any free market growth even to alleviate the suffering of the Cuban people. In response, Cuban citizens again have begun expressing [discontent](#), including through nightly banging pots and pans and even ransacking a communist party headquarters.

U.S. GOALS TOWARD CUBA

For decades, U.S. policy towards Cuba, enshrined in U.S. law by the [Cuban Democracy Act \(CDA\) of 1992](#) and the [Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity \(LIBERTAD\) Act of 1996](#), has been to facilitate a peaceful transition to democracy, economic reform and growth, and respect for human rights. While Presidents Obama and Biden attempted to take a softer approach to dealing with the communist regime, widely seen as a failure that made no progress in ending the Cuban regime's hostility towards the United States or its repression of the Cuban people, President Trump has made important strides to correct these misguided efforts and treat the Cuban regime as the adversary it is. On January 29, 2026, President Trump issued an [executive order](#) stating "the policies, practices, and actions of the Government of Cuba constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat" to U.S. national security and foreign policy and took steps to prevent other countries from propping up the communist regime through "directly or indirectly" supplying oil to the Cuban government.

While a transition to democracy by the Cuban people is the long-term goal, in the short term, the United States must prioritize ending the national security threat Cuba poses to the United States. This includes forcing the Cuban regime to stop allowing non-hemispheric adversaries like China and Russia from using the island as a base and ending Cuba's longtime support for terrorist organizations. It also includes getting a clear answer on what precisely affected American diplomats injured by Havana Syndrome. The United States also should use its current economic leverage to force the Cuban government to implement free market economic reforms, including allowing a larger Cuban private sector, and allow basic human rights for the Cuban people, including free speech, freedom of religion, and a free press. To do this, the United States needs to continue imposing maximum pressure on the Cuban regime, including robustly enforcing U.S. sanctions and preventing the Cuban government from gaining access to oil, as well as providing maximum support for the Cuban people so they are able to organize and defend their freedoms.

