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BLACKOUT IN CUBA: WHAT ARE TRUMP AND RUBIO UP TO?

Interview with David Recondo (Sciences Po, Centre de recherches internationales (CERI), CNRS, Paris, France), by Charles Corval

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Pressure exerted by the Trump administration to tighten the long-standing embargo against Cuba is plunging the island into constant blackouts and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Driven by the hawks in Washington and the exile lobby, what is this strategy of suffocation actually seeking to achieve? [David Recondo](#), a researcher at CERI-Sciences Po, sheds light on this Caribbean crisis by providing an essential historical perspective and deciphering the survival manoeuvres that the Castro regime is orchestrating behind the scenes.

Recent US sanctions, exacerbating a blockade that has been in effect since 1962, are imposing drastic energy deprivation on Cuba, causing severe blackouts and humanitarian collapse. How would you analyse this radicalisation of Washington's blockade strategy?

David Recondo (DR): This dynamic primarily stems from the political influence of the Cuban exile lobby in the United States. This lobby comprises individuals with strong ties to exile networks who are vehemently opposed to the Castro regime. Although the formal decision to impose further sanctions was made by the Trump administration, it was heavily influenced by this lobby. It can also be explained by Trump's anti-Communist beliefs and, above all, his desire to establish exclusive US control over Latin America and the Caribbean.

This project of continental expansion marks a significant departure from his predecessors' foreign policy, which was primarily focused on the Near and Middle East. Previous administrations applied a doctrine

known as "benign neglect" toward Latin America. Admittedly, Cuba remained a thorn in Washington's side, and Venezuela maintained staunchly anti-American rhetoric. Nevertheless, trade continued, notably the export of Venezuelan crude oil to the United States. Therefore, the tensions were mainly a matter of rhetorical posturing.

So what has changed under Donald Trump's second term?

DR: With Donald Trump, we are witnessing a shift that, at least on the surface, revives the Cold War playbook. While the anti-Communist argument is consistently presented, it primarily serves as ideological window dressing and justification. The underlying structural strategy responds to a crucial geopolitical imperative for the US president: to counter China's growing influence in Latin America. The primary driver of this policy remains economic, although national security imperatives are also invoked, the Caribbean being a veritable hub for drug trafficking bound for the United States and Europe, making it a hotbed for criminal gangs.

In this context, Cuba is affected by the situation in ways that differ from Venezuela, even though the two countries are part of the same logical sequence. The historical solidarity between Caracas and Havana, demonstrated through Venezuela's oil exports to the island and various mutual aid programmes, complicates matters.

For Washington, Cuba retains a unique symbolic significance. It embodies a regime that has resisted the United States and still claims to uphold the Communist revolution. This regime was established to the detriment of American interests and the local elites of the time, and it established itself as an outpost of the Soviet bloc in the region.

Today, this symbolic dimension is being revived by the Cuban exile lobby, which has considerable economic influence through its numerous business leaders, as well as direct political influence. One of the most significant figures in this movement is Marco Rubio, now the second most powerful figure at the State Department, who takes an uncompromising and vehement stance against the regime in Havana.

What are the fundamental objectives of this strategic reorientation?

DR: The blockade strategy does not necessarily aim for an immediate change of political regime, but rather a change within the regime. The idea is to encourage the emergence of interlocutors with whom the United States could do business and to facilitate a transition to a market economy open to American investment.

Although a political shift remains desirable for Washington, it is not the top priority. As with his policy toward Venezuela, Donald Trump has never prioritised democratisation. At the start of his term, he explicitly stated that the issue of elections was not urgent. This stance can be explained by the President's commitment to his electorate not to engage the United States in long-term overseas operations, such as missions to support political transitions or governance tasks in third-party territories.

Although actions such as the intervention regarding Iran sometimes suggest increased interventionism, the underlying logic remains the same: to push incumbent leaders toward downfall in order to allow the emergence of leaders more willing to engage in dialogue and economic cooperation with Washington. References to democracy remain peripheral.

The issue of human rights also arises in a highly targeted manner. One example is the mission carried out by US government officials on 10 April to negotiate the release of political prisoners. This move was in response to pressure from influential groups in the United States who were demanding the release of relatives or activists who had been targeted by government repression.

The government's repressive policies intensified in 2021 during the large-scale protests that shook the capital and several provinces of the island. These protests led to mass arrests, and it is precisely these prisoners who are now the subject of negotiations between the two states.

Does the recent indictment of Raúl Castro by the US justice system in a case dating back to 1996, combined with the deployment of an aircraft carrier in the Caribbean, pave the way for military intervention?

DR: While definitive predictions are difficult, the available evidence suggests a cautious interpretation: direct military intervention remains unlikely. The main strategy is one of psychological and political pressure. Donald Trump's repeated statements that he will treat the Cuban issue in the same way as the Venezuelan issue primarily serve as a deterrent.

However, it should be noted that the US administration is not a monolithic bloc. Figures such as Marco Rubio and the Cuban exile networks openly back the military option, and certain government sectors share this inclination. Nevertheless, Donald Trump does not appear to be moving in this direction. He favours sending official delegations, as demonstrated by the discreet visit of the CIA director last May. Although officially presented as a discussion of economic and geopolitical security issues, this meeting with representatives of the Cuban government shows that channels for bilateral negotiation are still open.

The lack of rapid results or a return on investment following the intervention in Iran has led to criticism of Donald Trump from his electoral base, which is hostile to foreign interventions. Therefore, a military intervention in Cuba would be difficult to justify, even if some hawks might see it as a consolation prize.

Furthermore, the US President cannot act entirely unilaterally due to strict legal constraints. Beyond the historical embargo imposed in 1962, the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 legally binds the executive. This legislation explicitly stipulates that sanctions can only be lifted if a genuine democratic transition is initiated and a democratically elected government is established in Cuba. This considerably limits Trump's room for manoeuvre.

Consequently, negotiation remains the preferred option. In the context of a potential transition, one individual has repeatedly engaged in

discreet dialogue with US envoys and attended the recent CARICOM (Caribbean Community) summit, which took place from 24 to 27 February: Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro.

Aged 42, Raúl Castro's grandson has become the official representative of the inner circle of the regime. Although he was long seen merely as his grandfather's bodyguard, he is in fact being dispatched by the regime to lay the groundwork for direct negotiations with Washington.

While we can see that political responses are being organised from above, how are the reactions of the Cuban population taking shape from below, particularly in the face of the economic stranglehold caused by the intensification of the blockade?

Analysing Cuban civil society faces significant methodological constraints due to restrictions on freedom of expression on the island. Despite increased access to the internet in recent years, public opinion is still partly gauged through accounts from dissidents within the country and exile networks.

The population is undeniably experiencing a dramatic deterioration in living conditions. Recurring blackouts plunge entire regions into darkness for several days at a time, while the blockade and interruption of Venezuelan fuel supplies are paralysing transportation. This humanitarian crisis is fuelling growing anger and social criticism of the leadership.

This rupture became particularly visible during the COVID-19 crisis, culminating in the mass protests of 2021. These demonstrations were organised not by long-standing dissidents, but by various sectors of society, particularly young people, who had never mobilised before. This popular discontent took the form of anti-establishment sentiment, which was part of a broader dynamic observed in Latin America and around the world between 2020 and 2023. During this period, people took to the streets to demand the departure of elites deemed corrupt and incompetent.

Historically, the blockade was the main means of legitimising the regime; the idea that the country was being economically suffocated by

US imperialism fostered a sense of patriotism and ensured the survival of the regime. Today, however, this argument is no longer sufficient. The population now argues that, if the blockade is indeed the source of the island's problems, then it is the responsibility of the leaders to negotiate. Their inability or refusal to do so, people claim, justifies a change of regime.

To understand how this criticism has crystallised, it is necessary to distinguish between two structures within the Cuban state apparatus:

- the formal regime, embodied by President Miguel Díaz-Canel, the government, and the National Assembly of People's Power; and
- the informal regime, structured around the Castro family, a circle of technocrats loyal to Raúl Castro, and a section of the armed forces.

The latter elite operates on a nepotistic and clientelist basis and controls the reality of the island's public and economic affairs. Popular protests are explicitly directed against this second group, who are perceived as a privileged, predatory caste siphoning off state resources whilst contradicting the official egalitarian ideology. This perception of a corrupt elite is definitively shattering the national unity and chauvinism that once protected the regime.

Against this backdrop of growing discontent, what is the Cuban opposition's view of the rhetoric of Donald Trump and Marco Rubio, who primarily blame the island's elites for the blockade? Are Cuban citizens receptive to this discourse from Washington, or have they instead developed their own sense of mistrust independently?

DR: The opposition's inability to capitalise on this popular discontent stems from its extreme fragmentation. Dissident groups are deeply divided both within Cuba and among the exile community in the United States, with significant fault lines separating activists inside the country from those outside.

Although certain coalition platforms legally exist on the island—the regime tolerates an identified opposition under constant surveillance—their ideological positions are diverse. There are conservative factions close to Christian democracy, as well as critical voices speaking from a left-wing perspective.

The main point of divergence concerns the transition strategy. While a reformist/gradualist faction advocates working for change from within by negotiating with the regime, the radical faction (which forms the majority outside the island) rejects any compromise and calls for direct US intervention. The latter frequently accuse internal opponents of treason or collusion, making it impossible to agree on a common programme.

In light of the drying up of Venezuelan aid and emergency support from Russia or Mexico, how is this crisis reshaping regional and global geopolitical alliances?

DR: On the international stage, the drying up of Venezuelan aid is the most damaging factor for Havana. Latin America appears polarised, with governments either aligned with Washington or seeking to preserve their autonomy. Brazil consistently expresses diplomatic solidarity by firmly opposing any military option. Mexico, led by Claudia Sheinbaum, continues to provide traditional humanitarian aid in a show of historical loyalty to the 1959 revolution. However, its ability to act is limited by the challenging renegotiation of the free trade agreement (NAFTA/USMCA) and security pressures from the Trump administration.

Apart from these supporters, Cuba is no longer a priority for the major powers. While the island aligns itself diplomatically with an anti-American axis alongside Russia, Iran, and China, its structural weakness remains economic.

Cuba lacks major strategic resources, such as oil and minerals, and its tourism sector is in crisis. For international investors, including American companies, the Cuban market holds little short-term interest since a return on investment would only be possible in the very long

term.

What political scenarios are emerging for Cuba in the face of this isolation?

DR: Political succession is already taking shape at the heart of the informal regime centred on the Castro family and the military apparatus. Three key figures embody these scenarios. First is Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro, the grandson, who is omnipresent on the international stage and tipped to be the presentable face (or even the figurehead) of a dynastic transition.

Behind the scenes, real power could fall to his father, Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl's eldest son and the regime's éminence grise. Finally, General Ramón Romero Curbelo, head of the intelligence services, is expected to play a central role in any change within the regime as he controls the surveillance network centred on the G2 (the intelligence directorate). Its agents infiltrate all opposition organisations and the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, which are present at the local level throughout the island.

This configuration serves as a reminder that the military-security apparatus remains the regime's mainstay. Any strategic negotiations with Washington will require the support of this group. Therefore, it seems that Cuba is moving toward renewing its domestic political leadership rather than immediately changing the nature of the regime itself.

This interview by Charles Corval was originally published in French in [Conference](#).