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Cuba under intensified U.S. sanctions confronts its greatest challenge: The continuity of Obama-Trump-Biden policy

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“The majority of Cubans support Castro ... every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba...to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.”

Lester D. Mallory, [U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State](#), 1960.

Despite draconian coercive measures by the U.S. – overwhelmingly [condemned](#) every year by the UN General Assembly, with the next vote slated for October 29-30 – the Cuban Revolution has had extraordinary successes. This small, impoverished, formerly colonized island nation has achieved levels of education, medical services, and performance in many other fields, including [sports](#), that rival the first world,

through the application of socialist principles.

Cuba has rightly become a model of internationalism and an exemplar of socialism. As a consequence, every U.S. administration for over six decades has targeted this “threat of a good example.” Back in its early days, the Cuban Revolution was bolstered by socialist solidarity, particularly from the Soviet Union.

The contemporary geopolitical situation is very different. Most notably the socialist bloc is defunct. Meanwhile, Cuba continues to be confronted by a still hegemonic U.S.. In turn, the Yankee empire is now challenged by the hope of an emergent multipolar order. Cuba has expressed [interest](#) in joining the BRICS trade alliance of emerging economies and will attend their meeting in Russia, October 22-24.

Successes turned into liabilities

Today, Cuba is confronting perhaps its [greatest challenge](#). The ever [intensified](#) U.S. blockade is designed to perversely turn the successes of the revolution into liabilities.

For example, the revolution achieved one hundred percent literacy, created farming collectives and cooperatives, and mechanized cultivation, thus freeing the *campesinos* from the drudgery of peasant subsistence agriculture.

But now, most tractors are idle, in need of scarce fuel and embargoed spare parts. Agricultural production has subsequently contracted. In May, I was on a bus that traveled the length of the island. Mile upon mile of once productive agricultural fields lay fallow.

Historical yields of key crops are down nearly 40% due to lack of fertilizers and pesticides, [according](#) to a Cuban government statement. The daily bread ration has been slashed, *Reuters* [reports](#).

In order to feed the nation, the state has had to use precious hard currency to import food; currency which otherwise could be used to repair a crumbling infrastructure. Broken pipes have caused widespread [shortages](#) of drinking water.

Under siege, some 10% percent of the population, over a million Cubans, [have left](#) between 2022 and 2023. This has, in turn, led to a drain of skilled labor and a decrease in productivity, contributing to a vicious cycle driving out-migration.

Le Monde diplomatique [cautions](#): “Cuba is facing a moment that is extraordinarily precarious. While numerous factors have led to this...U.S. sanctions have, at every juncture, triggered or worsened every aspect of the current crisis.”

The Obama engagement

Of the some 40 sovereign states [sanctioned](#) and slated for regime-change by Washington, Cuba is somewhat unique. Until recently, the island did not have the domestic social classes from which a counter-revolutionary base could be recruited.

In Cuba, most bourgeoisie under the Batista dictatorship left the country shortly after the revolution. The large U.S. corporations that they had operated were expropriated. Similarly, when the government nationalized many small businesses in the 1960s, others fled to U.S. shores.

By 2014, then-U.S. President Obama [lamented](#) that Washington’s Cuba policy had “failed to advance our interests.” Obama’s new strategy was to engage Cuba in the hope of fostering a counter-revolutionary class opposition.

Obama reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba after a hiatus dating to 1961. Travel and some trade restrictions were lifted. And more remittances from relatives living in the U.S. could be sent to Cuba.

In his famous March 2016 speech in Havana, Obama [proclaimed](#) to rousing applause: “I’ve called on our Congress to lift the embargo.” This was an outright lie. The U.S. president had only remarked that the so-called embargo (really a blockade, because the U.S. enforces it on third countries) was “outdated.”

Obama lauded the *cuentapropistas*, small entrepreneurs in Cuba, and pledged to help promote that stratum. He promised a new U.S. policy focus of encouraging small businesses in Cuba. “There’s no limitation from the United States on the ability of Cuba to take these steps” to create what in effect would be a potentially counter-revolutionary class, Obama promised.

Obama warned the Cubans, “over time, the youth will lose hope” if prosperity were not achieved by creating a new small business class.

While normalizing relations with Cuba, Obama took a more adversarial stance toward Venezuela. He [declared](#) the oil-rich South American nation an “unusual and extraordinary threat” and imposed “targeted sanctions” on March 2015. The successes of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution in promoting regional integration were challenging U.S. influence in Latin America, prompting Washington to adopt a “dual-track diplomacy” of engagement with Cuba and containment with Venezuela.

Obama spoke of the “failed” U.S. policy on Cuba, which had not achieved “its intended goals.” Often left unsaid was that the “goal” has been to reverse the Cuban revolution. Obama’s intent was not to terminate the U.S. regime-change policy, but to achieve it more effectively.

His engagement tactic should not be confused for accord. Obama still championed the three belligerent core elements of the U.S. policy: a punishing blockade, occupation of the port of Guantanamo, and covert actions to undermine and destabilize Cuba.

Trump undoes and outdoes Obama

Donald Trump assumed office at a time when the leftist [Pink Tide](#) was ebbing. Taking advantage of the changed geopolitical context, the new president intensified Obama's offensive against Cuba's closest regional supporter Venezuela, while reversing his predecessor's engagement with Havana. His "maximum pressure" campaign against Venezuela devastated their oil sector, thereby reducing Cuba's petroleum subsidies from its ally.

Trump enacted 243 coercive measures against Cuba. He ended individual "people-to-people" educational travel, banned U.S. business with military-linked Cuban entities, and imposed caps on remittances. In the closing days of his administration, he relisted Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, which further cut the island off from international finance.

Biden continues and extends Trump's policies

Joe Biden, while campaigning for the presidency, played to liberal sentiment with vague inferences that he would restore a policy of engagement and undo Trump's sanctions on Cuba.

By the time Biden assumed the U.S. presidency, Cuba had been heavily impacted by the Covid pandemic. Temporary lockdowns reduced domestic productivity. Travel restrictions dried up tourist dollars, a major source of foreign currency. Once in office and Cuba ever more vulnerable, Biden continued and extended Trump's policies, including retaining it on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list.

At the height of the Covid pandemic, *Belly of the Beast* [reported](#) how scarcities in Cuba fueled anti-government demonstrations on July 11, 2021. Eleven days later, Biden imposed yet more sanctions to further exacerbate the scarcities.

As an article in the *LA Progressive* [explained](#), “Cuba’s humanitarian crisis – fueled by the sanctions maintained by Biden – seems to have only encouraged his administration to keep tightening the screws,” concluding “his policy remains largely indistinguishable from that of Trump.”

Biden, however, continued the Obama policy of empowering the Cuban private sector. He allowed more remittances, disproportionately benefiting Cubans with relatives in the U.S. (who tend to be better off financially). He also facilitated international fund transfers involving private Cuban businesses. Amendments to the Cuban Assets Control Regulations enhanced internet access to encourage development of private telecommunications infrastructures for “independent entrepreneurs.”

What about Democratic Party presidential hopeful Kamala Harris?

“When evaluating the impact of a possible Kamala Harris electoral victory on the United States’ Cuba policy,” *On Cuba News* [admits](#), “the first thing that should be recognized is the lack of evidence or antecedents to form a well-founded forecast.” Likewise, the *Miami Herald* [finds](#) Harris’s current Latin American policies a mystery with “few clues and a lot of uncertainty.”

Going back to when she was on the vice-presidential campaign trail in 2020, Harris [commented](#) about the possibility of easing the blockade on what she called the “dictatorship.” She said that won’t happen anytime soon and would have to be predicated on a new Washington-approved government in Cuba.

Alternative for Cuba

If Cubans want to see what an alternative future might be like under Yankee beneficence, they need only look 48 miles to the east at the [deliberately failed](#) state of Haiti.

In the U.S., the [National Network on Cuba](#), [ACERE](#), and [Pastors for Peace](#) are among the organizations working to end the blockade and get Cuba off the State Sponsors of Terrorism list.

As the U.S. Peace Council [admonished](#): “No matter how heroic a people may be, socialism must provide for their material needs. The U.S. blockade of Cuba is designed precisely to thwart that and to discredit socialism in Cuba and anywhere else where oppressed people try to better their lot. ... The intensified U.S. interference in Cuba is a wakeup call for greater efforts at solidarity.”

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Source: [Resumen Latinoamericano - U.S.](#)

