Is Cuba next? - Peter Kornbluh

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On Sunday, January 11, Donald Trump woke up thinking about Cuba. Before most of the country had even had their morning coffee, at 7:23 a.m. he began tweeting threats against the Cuban government. “NO MORE OIL OR MONEY FOR CUBA, ZERO,” Trump posted on his Truth Social account with his characteristic emphasis. “I strongly urge you to make a deal, BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE,” he continued. “Thank you for your attention to this matter.”

Empowered, emboldened, and clearly feeling entitled to it after the brazen success of “Operation Absolute Resolve” in Caracas, Trump’s approach to Cuba is entirely predictable. From the outset, regime change in Venezuela has appeared to be a stepping stone to regime change in Cuba. There is no doubt that the president and his hardline Cuban-American secretary of state, Marco Rubio, see Cuba as the ultimate post-Cold War trophy; the perfect target for a dramatic and symbolic demonstration of the new “Donroe Doctrine.” “The Cuban regime has outlasted every president since Eisenhower,” tweeted Marc Theissen, a conservative Trump ally, grabbing the president’s attention. “Wouldn’t it be incredible if that streak ended with Donald Trump?”

Cuba has survived the last 13 presidents and all the acts of aggression they have unleashed: paramilitary invasions, assassination attempts, a long-standing economic blockade, among other punitive measures. Like David against Goliath, the island nation has faced the colossus to the

north for more than 67 years. “Cuba is a free, independent, and sovereign nation,” responded defiantly the leader of the Communist Party, Miguel Díaz-Canel, to Trump’s threats. “No one dictates what we have to do.”

But with its blatant attack on Venezuela, the United States is attempting to reassert its imperial hegemony across the hemisphere, and Havana is clearly in its sights. Amid the worst economic crisis Cuba has ever experienced, the regime is now more vulnerable than at any time since the 1959 revolution. And, despite its dramatic history of rebellion and survival, Cuba has never faced a US president as dangerous as Donald Trump. Nor, for that matter, has the rest of the world.

The costs for Cuba

More than any other nation, Cuba has suffered the greatest losses from the US-led overthrow of the Maduro regime in Caracas. The success of Operation Absolute Resolve has cost Havana its closest global ally, as well as the resources that flowed from that long and close alliance. Most tragically, however, the US attack has claimed the lives of 32 Cuban security personnel and left dozens wounded by US bombs and bullets.

Most, if not all, of the Cuban victims were security and intelligence agents assigned to protect the Venezuelan head of state; they were killed when elite Delta Force troops infiltrated the fortified compound where Maduro and his wife lived. Their deaths mark the first time since the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada that Cubans have died in direct combat with the U.S. military. When their remains were repatriated to their homeland, Cuban authorities reminded the world that their fallen comrades were “a father, a son, a husband, a brother.” In an unusual public statement, Cuban Interior Minister General Lázaro Álvarez Casas said that Cuba felt “deep pride” in the sacrifice of its soldiers in defense of the sovereignty of “a sister nation.”

The loss of Venezuela's sovereignty, now effectively in the hostile hands of Donald Trump—"the interim president of Venezuela," as he has proclaimed himself—is already impacting Cuba's moribund economy. Until January 3, Venezuela supplied Cuba with between 30,000 and 35,000 barrels of oil per day, roughly a quarter of Cuba's total energy needs. Cuba paid for this oil with human services—security guards, medical brigades, technicians—rather than with cash, which it lacks. In fact, despite widespread electricity shortages, Cuba has routinely resold some of its Venezuelan oil imports to China in a desperate effort to obtain capital to import other basic goods, such as food and medicine.

But now that the Trump administration has taken control of Venezuela's entire oil industry, Cuba has suffered the loss of its main oil supply, however small, without a clear alternative. Since the US attack, according to the maritime intelligence agency Kpler, no tankers have left Venezuela for Cuba.

“Experts estimate that Cuba’s current oil demand is slightly above 100,000 barrels per day,” explains Ricardo Torres, one of Cuba’s leading economists, now living abroad, in an essay titled “Only Cubans Can Build a New Cuba” published in Time magazine. “If between a quarter and a

third of that demand depends on Venezuela, a major disruption could push the country into subsistence mode, especially since Cuba cannot easily replace that volume through cash purchases." "The situation is very dangerous, to put it bluntly," Torres said in an interview with The Nation. "Cuba is vulnerable."

Like sharks in the water, the hardline Cuban-American exile community and its Florida politicians smell blood and are pressuring the White House to invoke the Donroe Doctrine against Cuba. "Make no mistake, after our work in Venezuela, Cuba is next!" declared Cuban-American Representative Carlos Giménez last week. "It's going to be the end of the Díaz-Canel regime, the Castro regime, it's going to happen," proclaimed Florida Senator Rick Scott, a close ally of Secretary Rubio. "We are in the process of making that happen now."

Marco Rubio, of course, doesn't need convincing; besides aspiring to be president, ending the Cuban revolution has been Rubio's top priority throughout his political career. As secretary of state and the president's national security advisor, he holds the main levers of power in foreign policy, and Trump listens to him. "I think it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Secretary Rubio to finally try to end the communist government in Cuba," Tim Rieser, who worked tirelessly as a foreign policy advisor to former Senator Patrick Leahy to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba, told The Nation. Matthew Kroenig, Rubio's former Senate aide and political advisor when he ran for president, shares that view. "Cuba could be next," he said on FP Live, Foreign Policy's podcast. "I think there's an interest in bringing the Venezuelan model to Havana."

The Venezuelan model: imperialism by remote control

How would the "Venezuelan model" be applied to Cuba? It would be difficult (but certainly not impossible) for Delta Force to storm Havana and kidnap the entire Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party. The country also lacks vast natural resources, such as Venezuelan oil, that the United States could simply seize to control Cuba's economic future. And on what basis would they do so?

If Trump has proven anything, it is that he can shamelessly concoct justifications for his capricious imperial impulses. Exactly one year ago, on the first day of his return to the White House, Trump falsely designated Cuba a "state sponsor" of international terrorism, without a shred of evidence to support the claim. Including Cuba on the State Department's official list of "State Sponsors of Terrorism"—along with North Korea, Iran, and Syria—has allowed the administration to impose crippling financial sanctions on the island. But it also provides a ready-made public relations justification for escalating regime-change operations against the Cuban government led by the Communist Party.

Furthermore, the United States has a long history, predating the revolution, of treating Cuba as a protectorate rather than a sovereign state. Following Cuba's war of independence in the early 20th century, Cubans were forced to exchange one colonial power—Spain—for a much closer, emerging neocolonial power. U.S. Marines occupied the country, and under military coercion,

Cuban authorities were compelled to sign the “Platt Amendment,” which granted the United States “the right to intervene to preserve the independence of Cuba [and] maintain a government adequate for the protection of individual life, property, and liberty.” For decades, U.S. dominance over virtually every aspect of Cuban society fostered the widespread resentment and nationalist fervor that would ultimately make the Castro-led revolution possible.

So far in Caracas, the “Venezuelan model” has been a mix of swift military action, naval quarantines, and open threats and demands for surrender—a form of remote intervention that Trump and Rubio are using to manipulate what remains of the Maduro regime into complying with Washington’s orders from afar. This remote “coercive diplomacy” reflects the painful and costly lessons learned from the U.S. experience in Iraq: the Pottery Barn rule of “if you break it, you pay for it.” As a real estate mogul, Trump wants to own properties, or at least be able to put his name on them and pretend they are his. But as the leader of the “America First” MAGA movement, he doesn’t want to destroy them and then pay a heavy price in American lives and wasted resources to rebuild them, especially if he can achieve his goals through grandstanding, blockades, and a few targeted bombings.

Trump has repeatedly suggested that Cuba will collapse on its own, especially now that the United States is cutting off its main oil supply. "Cuba is going to fall of its own accord," he told reporters who asked if Cuba was next. "Cuba is ready to fall," he has declared more than once.

But even the regime-change Trump team seems to understand that the “failed state” scenario in Cuba and what the CIA has termed “regime-threatening instability” constitute the real threats to U.S. national security. During Cuba’s previous economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CIA drafted a secret National Intelligence Agency (NIA) report that could easily have been written today. “The impact on the population has already been devastating,” the NIA reported in August 1993, citing shortages of basic goods and 10- to 16-hour daily power outages across the country. “Food shortages and distribution problems have led to malnutrition and disease, and the struggle to survive will intensify.” The arrival of "serious instability in Cuba [would] have an immediate impact on the United States," the intelligence community concluded, citing a massive influx of uncontrolled migration, unrest in Miami's exile community, and increased "pressure for U.S. or international military intervention"—all critical possibilities in the current situation.

There are clear indications that the Trump administration wants to avoid this worst-case scenario. “We are not interested in a destabilized Cuba,” Secretary Rubio told oil executives Trump convened at the White House on January 9. Last week, Rubio authorized a token amount of humanitarian aid for hurricane-ravaged eastern Cuba, a move intended to curry favor with the Cuban people. And Energy Secretary Chris Wright unexpectedly revealed that the United States would not block the minimal amount of oil Mexico continues to send to Cuba, telling CBS News that the Trump administration is not trying to bring about Cuba’s collapse by blocking all oil supplies, but simply wants Cuba to “abandon its communist system.”

Most importantly, Trump himself told reporters that "we are talking with Cuba and very soon you will know [more]." Although Cuban leaders have denied that such talks are taking place, the question remains: is there any room for understanding between these "bitter enemies"?

A US-Cuba agreement?

Since the 1959 revolution, relations between the United States and Cuba have been dominated by infamous acts of aggression: the Bay of Pigs, Operation Mongoose, CIA assassination plots, the trade embargo. But history is also replete with lesser-known episodes of secret dialogue to resolve crises, address mutual interests, and even attempt to normalize relations. As William LeoGrande and I wrote in our book, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, “the history of dialogue between Cuba and the United States since 1959 demonstrates that not only is it possible to replace sterile hostility with reconciliation, but it is preferable to the national and international interests of both nations.” This fact is especially relevant today.

In the past, delicate talks between Washington and Havana have relied on the support of international interlocutors. The successful negotiations between Obama and Raúl Castro, for example, were aided by Canada, Mexico, and the Vatican. In recent months, the Vatican played a significant role in the ongoing dialogue between Trump and Maduro, before the Delta Force special operations team carried out its “capture and rescue” operation in Caracas. And Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, who speaks directly with Trump, has recently offered her good offices as an intermediary between Havana and Washington. Trump has demanded that Cuba “make a deal,” so, in some way, somewhere, he is laying out his coercive conditions for an agreement.

Trump’s imperial demands for such an agreement will be onerous for the Cuban leadership: capitulate to U.S. control or we will bomb your headquarters, quarantine your ports, cut off all your oil, and starve your people. But given that democracy does not appear to be a priority for Trump, and that the administration wishes to avoid the dangers of “instability that threatens the regime,” the Cuban leaders might find room for negotiation around Washington’s central objective: eliminating the Communist Party’s and the military’s control over Cuba’s dysfunctional economy and lifting restrictions on private sector development and foreign investment.

During the first secret talks between Washington and Havana after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Che Guevara told White House advisor Richard Goodwin that Cuba “could not discuss any formula that meant giving up the kind of society to which they had dedicated themselves.” But Cuba was willing to discuss virtually any other U.S. concern, including compensation for expropriated properties and its foreign policy in Latin America.

And Cuba still seems willing to address those concerns, if a formula for diplomatic talks can be found in which Trump doesn't simply demand that the Cuban government "kneel" and swear allegiance to the continent's king. "Cuba doesn't have to make any political concessions, and that

will never be on the negotiating table," Díaz-Canel told thousands of Cubans gathered outside the U.S. embassy last week to protest U.S. intervention in Venezuela. "We will always be open to dialogue and improving relations between our two countries, but only on equal terms and on the basis of mutual respect." In Donald Trump's megalomaniacal world, the concepts of equality and "mutual respect" don't exist. But dialogue between Washington and Havana remains possible—and preferable—to promote the best interests of both countries.

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