

Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign on Cuba

Mery Zhong Wang

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Introduction

Since returning to the office in January 2025, the Trump Administration has pursued one of the most active foreign policies towards Cuba in recent decades. The strategy, under the banner of ‘Maximum Pressure’, combines economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and legal designations aimed at forcing political change on the Island.¹ This review examines the specific measures that constitute this policy, the objectives declared by this administration and whether the evidence available suggests these tools are achieving their intended goals. It also considers whether they generate unintended consequences that complicate the broader U.S. foreign policy agenda in the Western Hemisphere.

The Policy: Instruments and Legal Basis

Within hours of taking office on January 20, 2025, President Trump signed an executive order revoking 78 executive actions by the previous administration.² Prior to this agenda, there were key instruments deployed towards Cuba, such as the redesignation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism (SSOT), a rescission reversed on day 1. Secretary of State Marco Rubio reinstated the Cuba restricted List on January 31, 2025, which targets Cuban military-controlled entities. The June 30, 2025, Executive Order also reimposed strict travel restrictions, restricted financial transactions with Cuban military entities, and strengthened the embargo.³ On January 29th, 2026, an Executive Order using the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (1977) (IEEPA) declared Cuba an “unusual and extraordinary threat,” imposing tariffs on third-party oil suppliers to Cuba.⁴

1.1 Declared Objectives

The Trump administration has been explicit about what it hopes to achieve with its Cuba policy. Officially framed around promoting a “stable, prosperous, and free Cuba” and holding the Cuban regime

¹ Diana Roy, “Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ Campaign on Cuba, Explained,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 31, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/trumps-maximum-pressure-campaign-on-cuba-explained>.

² Andres Fernandez et al., “Trump Administration Rescinds Certain Actions by the Previous Administration to Ease Cuba Sanctions | Insights | Holland & Knight,” n.d., <https://www.hklaw.com/en/insights/publications/2025/01/trump-administration-rescinds-certain-actions-by-the-previous-admin>.

³ Jacqueline Kotkiewicz, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Strengthens the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba,” The White House, June 30, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/06/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-strengthens-the-policy-of-the-united-states-toward-cuba/>.

⁴ Jacqueline Kotkiewicz, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Addresses Threats to the United States by the Government of Cuba,” The White House, January 29, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2026/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-addresses-threats-to-the-united-states-by-the-government-of-cuba/>.

accountable, the policy sits squarely within the administration's broader America First doctrine which prioritizes U.S. nationals and interests over any engagement that could benefit the regime in Havana. Beyond these stated aims, senior officials have signaled a more ambitious end goal: the removal of President Miguel Díaz-Canel and a full political and economic liberalization of the island.⁵ Underpinning the entire strategy is the objective of countering what the administration describes as Cuba's malign influence in the Western Hemisphere, a framing that positions Havana not merely as an authoritarian outlier, but as an active threat to regional stability.

Analysis: Are Objectives being met?

The central question any policy review must address is whether the instruments deployed are achieving their stated objectives, or whether they are producing consequences that undermine the administration's broader agenda. The evidence on both counts is revealing.

The economic pressure is measurable and severe. In the first 9 months of 2025 alone, Cuba's GDP contracted by 4%, accompanied by nationwide blackouts and what experts describe as the largest migratory exodus in the island's modern history, with over one million people leaving between 2021 and 2025.⁶ Yet attributing this collapse exclusively to Trump's policy would be analytically incomplete. Cuba's GDP had already declined by 10.1% between 2018 and 2023, well before the current administration took office.⁷ Academic consensus points to deep structural causes, state control over production, and chronic reformist inertia as equally decisive factors in the island's deterioration.⁸ That said, the evidence is clear that the Trump administration has significantly worsened an already fragile situation: the combination of SSOT designation, oil tariffs, and the Cuba Restricted List has accelerated a decline that predates it, deepening the crisis beyond what structural factors alone can explain.¹

More critically, the economic deterioration of the Island has not translated into political change. The one-party system, which was established in 1959, still remains absent and intact. As Cuba's constitution

⁵ Will Gottsegen, "What Trump Wants From Cuba," *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/2026/04/trump-comes-for-cuba/686692/>.

⁶ Yery M. García, "In Cuba, Government Mismanagement and US Oil Moves Tell in Human Suffering," *The New Humanitarian*, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2026/03/03/cuba-relentless-us-pressure-human-suffering>.

⁷ Leo Obregon, "The Cuban Economic Crisis: Impact of Government Mismanagement and International Sanctions on a Developing Country – Michigan Journal of Economics," *Michigan Journal of Economics*, January 9, 2026, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2026/01/09/the-cuban-economic-crisis-impact-of-government-mismanagement-and-international-sanctions-on-a-developing-country/>.

⁸ "The Economic Crisis in Cuba, Its Causes, and Migration. | Cuba Capacity Building Project," May 5, 2026, <https://horizontecubano.law.columbia.edu/news/economic-crisis-cuba-its-causes-and-migration>.

enshrines the Communist Party of Cuba as a supreme authority of both society and state.⁹ This points to a fundamental tension at the heart of the policy: pressure accelerates economic collapse, but economic collapse does not produce democratic transition, and six decades of external coercion have yet to dislodge the institutional architecture that sustains the Cuban government.

There is a second risk over the Island: the humanitarian deterioration and migration surge undercut the Trump administration's own border control agenda. Taking into account this, the humanitarian deterioration and migration surge driven by the crisis directly contradicts one of the Trump administration's own stated domestic priorities: border control, creating a self-undermining dynamic that the policy has yet to reconcile.¹⁰ By intensifying economic pressure while eliminating legal pathways for Cubans to enter the United States, the administration has created the very crisis it claims to be managing. Economic desperation pushes migrants toward irregular crossings, straining the enforcement infrastructure Washington has expanded at high political cost. Maximum pressure and border control are not complementary priorities; they are policies working directly against each other.

Implications for US foreign policy

Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' campaign carries significant implications that extend well beyond the bilateral U.S.-Cuba relationship, generating tensions that cut across trade, diplomacy, and the administration's own domestic agenda. The most immediate friction has emerged with Mexico. Following the January 2026 executive order imposing tariffs on countries supplying oil to Cuba, Washington found itself in direct confrontation with its top goods trading partner, a dynamic that places the Cuba policy in open tension with the administration's broader economic interests in the region.¹¹ This is not a side effect; it is a contradiction rooted in the policy design itself. At the multilateral level, the United States finds itself increasingly isolated in international organizations. The United Nations General Assembly has once again condemned the embargo, continuing a pattern of near-unanimous international opposition that weakens Washington's ability to build coalitions around the Cuba issue and undermines its standing in broader hemispheric forums.

Perhaps the most consequential implication, however, concerns the administration's own internal contradictions. The intensification of economic pressure has accelerated Cuban migration toward the U.S.

⁹ "Cuba 2019 Constitution - Constitute," n.d., https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Cuba_2019.

¹⁰ Catherine Osborn, "The Human Toll of Trump's Cuba Policy," *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/02/13/us-cuba-trump-oil-blockade-energy-fuel-crisis/>.

¹¹ Joshua Klein, "U.S. Policy toward Cuba: Recent Developments and Congressional Considerations | Congress.Gov | Library of Congress," *Congress.gov*, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12650>.

border, directly contradicting one of the Trump administration's defining domestic priorities. A government that frames border control as a national emergency cannot comfortably ignore the role its own foreign policy plays in driving the very flows it seeks to stop. This tension is not merely rhetorical. Whether Cubans arrive through legal channels or attempt irregular crossings, the result is the same: a continued flow of migrants that strains the enforcement apparatus. Washington has mobilized mass deportation operations to manage it. A foreign policy that generates the migration it simultaneously criminalizes is not a coherent strategy; it is a self-defeating cycle that the administration has yet to acknowledge, let alone resolve.

Finally, the broader signal sent to Latin America deserves attention. A coercive, sanctions-heavy posture toward Cuba, combined with the Venezuela intervention earlier in 2026, marks a clear return to an interventionist hemispheric doctrine. Many governments in the region view this shift with deep suspicion, raising questions about whether the United States risks trading long-term diplomatic influence for short-term pressure tactics. The administration's credibility to criticize authoritarian governance elsewhere is further weakened when its primary tool is economic coercion that falls disproportionately on civilian populations.

Policy Suggestions

While this policy review does not advocate for the complete abandonment of the US 'Maximum Pressure' campaign on Cuba, the evidence provided suggests that pressure alone without a defined diplomatic framework risks producing costs that outweigh the strategic benefits. A refinement worth considering is the introduction of a conditional pressure, a model in which sanctions and designations remain in place, but are explicitly tied to measurable democratic benchmarks that offer the Cuban government a credible pathway toward their removal.

This approach would preserve the coercive structure of the current policy while addressing its two most damaging reputational weaknesses. First, it would reframe U.S. policy from open-ended economic punishment to structured diplomatic engagement, a distinction that matters significantly in multilateral forums where Washington is increasingly isolated on the Cuba issue. Second, by defining what the Cuban government would need to do to earn sanctions relief, whether through the release of political prisoners, the legalization of opposition parties, or the opening of independent media, the United States would shift the burden of inaction onto Havana rather than absorbing it itself.

This model is not without precedent. The European Union's Common Position on Cuba, maintained between 1996 and 2016, explicitly linked engagement to progress on human rights and political freedoms. While its results were mixed, it allowed Brussels to maintain a critical posture toward the Cuban government without incurring the reputational costs associated with unilateral coercive pressure. For Washington, adopting a similar framework would not require abandoning its core objectives; it would require articulating them with enough precision that the international community, and the Cuban people, can evaluate whether they are being pursued in good faith.

The goal is not to soften the pressure but to make it legitimate, legible, and sustainable in a strategic way.

Conclusion

Trump's Maximum Pressure campaign on Cuba is coherent in its design and unambiguous in its ambitions. Its instruments, the SSOT designation, the Cuba Restricted List, and the January 2026 oil tariffs are real, consequential, and deliberately constructed to isolate the Cuban government from the economic lifelines it depends on. On those terms, the policy is working. Yet the evidence suggests: economic pain is occurring; political change is not. A policy without an exit ramp is not a strategy; its legacy will depend on whether maximum pressure ever translates into the transition Washington seeks.

Yet a policy review must go further than measuring implementation. The central question is not whether pressure is being applied, but whether it is achieving what it sets out to do. On that front, the evidence is more troubling. Economic pain is measurable and severe; political change remains absent. The one-party system that has governed Cuba since 1959 has survived six decades of embargoes, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation and shows no structural signs of collapse under the current escalation. Coercion, it appears, is a necessary but insufficient condition for the democratic transition Washington seeks.

What makes this particularly consequential is the set of costs the policy generates along the way. Strained relations, especially with Mexico, growing multilateral isolation, and a migration surge contradicting the administration's own border priorities are not acceptable trade-offs for a policy that is delivering results; they are the collateral damage of a policy that is not. A strategy that accelerates economic collapse without a credible pathway to political transition is not maximum pressure; it is maximum cost with uncertain return.

The legacy of this campaign will ultimately depend on a question the administration has yet to answer: what comes after the pressure? Without a defined end-state, a negotiating framework, or a theory of change that connects economic suffering to democratic reform, maximum pressure risks becoming an end in itself, a posture mistaken for a strategy.

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