



Embargo Against Cuba

The United Nations has strongly opposed U.S. sanctions on Cuba, stating that such actions “hinder market access, investments and freedom of transit and the well-being of the populations of affected countries.”^{1, 2, 3} For the past 27 years, the U.N. General Assembly has annually passed a near-unanimous resolution condemning the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba. Resolutions adopted by the 193-member world body are unenforceable, but they reflect world opinion, demonstrating the isolation of the U.S. on the embargo.⁴

Political History

The U.S. imposed its first trade sanctions on Cuba in 1958 during the reign of U.S.-backed military dictator Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar. As the president of Cuba, Batista heavily controlled the press, elections, and Congress, embezzled huge sums, and tortured and jailed any dissidents. One famous dissident was Cuban lawyer Fidel Castro, who led the resistance. During conflicts between the rebels led by Fidel and the Batista regime, the U.S. imposed sanctions to try to halt the flow of arms into the country. In spite of U.S. meddling, Fidel declared victory in Havana in 1959, and Batista fled to Florida.

Since the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba has insisted on the repeal of the treaty that ceded control of Guantánamo Bay to the U.S. For nearly 60 years, Cuba has not recognized the agreement, and has

rejected cashing in the United States’ annual check for \$4,085 in payment. But the U.S. has refused to end its illegal occupation of Cuban lands, insisting on the original terms that both countries must agree on until the treaty’s termination.^{5, 6, 7, 8} Lacking cooperation from the U.S., Cuba turned to trade and support from the Soviet Union, fueling U.S. fears of communism. Thus Cuba became the first communist state in the Western Hemisphere.^{9, 10}



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Timeline

- **1962:** U.S. President John F. Kennedy leveraged the Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibits assistance to communist countries, to enact a total embargo of all trade between the U.S. and Cuba. This remains in place today.¹¹
- **1992:** The George H.W. Bush administration approved the Cuban Democracy Act, which authorizes U.S. presidents to impose sanctions against countries that provide assistance to Cuba.¹²
- **1996:** The Bill Clinton administration approved the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton Act), which seeks international sanctions against Cuba.¹³ In 2019, U.S. President Trump activated Title III of the Act, allowing U.S. citizens whose property was nationalized by the Cuban government to sue for compensation. This impacts the Cuban government and other countries, like Canada, that operate companies in Cuba.¹⁴
- **2000:** U.S. President Bill Clinton approved the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act, which allows the sale of agricultural goods and medicine to Cuba for humanitarian reasons.¹⁵
- **2014:** Under U.S. President Barack Obama, travel and trade restrictions were eased, the U.S. designation of Cuba as a sponsor of terrorism was removed, and the two countries opened their embassies in both countries.
- **2016:** Obama visited Havana, the first U.S. president to do so since 1928. After more than fifty years, direct airline service between the U.S. and Cuba began.¹⁶
- **2017:** U.S. President Donald Trump issued a National Security Presidential Memorandum on Strengthening the Policy of the United States toward Cuba. Using whitewashed language about the so-called “humanitarian need” for regime change, the Trump administration condoned the economic embargo against Cuba.¹⁷ U.S.-Cuba relations deteriorated further after unexplained health incidents were reported by U.S. intelligence officers, diplomats and their relatives based in Havana between November 2016 and August 2017. This triggered the removal of U.S. diplomats from Cuba, the expulsion of 15 Cuban diplomats from the U.S., and a travel advisory warning U.S. citizens not to visit Cuba. Without evidence, the Trump administration accused Cuba of sonic weapon attacks. A Canadian clinical study has since suggested that the ailments, which impacted both U.S. and Canadian diplomats, were the result of exposure to neurotoxins in pesticides that are regularly sprayed in Cuba to kill insects.^{18, 19}
- **2019:** Under the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR), U.S. citizens must now obtain a license to travel to, from, and within Cuba. Tourist travel, including by cruise ship, is not licensable.²⁰

Impact of the Embargo

For nearly six decades, the Cuban people have been subject to an embargo that affects every person in the country. Cuba estimates that the embargo has caused over \$130 billion in losses.²¹

The embargo not only stops exports and imports of essential food, medical supplies, pharmaceuticals, technology, and equipment, but it also impacts Cuba's tourism economy, restrains foreign investments, and blocks foreign exchange transfers. Politically, it denies Cuba's right to self-determination and sovereignty as a nation and its right to development. The Europe-Third World Centre (CETIM) calls the embargo "tantamount to a U.S. undeclared war against Cuba," and a "crime against humanity."^{22, 23, 24}

The United States is impacted by its own embargo. For example, the U.S. lacks access to prominent medical advances made in Cuba, such as a diabetes treatment that saves people from amputations.²⁵ Further, in spite of the embargo, a steady flow of cash is leaving the U.S. bound for Cuba, to the tune of \$3 billion annually, as Cuban expats send money home to relatives impoverished by U.S. policies. The U.S. is already seeing an increase in Cuban refugees, fleeing the impact of the embargo. The United States is making itself vulnerable to

unknown future difficulties by enforcing the embargo.^{26, 27}

Canada, Venezuela, Bolivia, Russia, and Belgium, to name only a few countries outside of the direct embargo, are all impacted by the embargo and particularly Title III of the Helms-Burton Act. Canada, for instance, has long allowed free trade and unrestricted travel to Cuba in contrast to the U.S. There are 85 Canadian companies and subsidiaries operating in Cuba in the mining, tourism and financial sectors. The implementation of Title III has prompted a rare public rebuke of U.S. policy by Canada.^{28, 29}



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Resilience & Defiance

At the height of the Cold War, in 1960, a deputy assistant in the U.S. State Department wrote a memorandum stating that the goal of the embargo should be the decline and fall of Fidel Castro.

Considering that Fidel's government was popular with the people, "it follows that every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba...a line of action which, while as adroit and inconspicuous as possible, makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government." The Secretary of State agreed.³⁰ And Trump's 2017 Presidential Memorandum states the same goal about a "humanitarian need" to bring about regime change.³¹

The U.S. is not shy about its goal of toppling Cuba's communist government. But there seems to be a further, unstated, goal: to punish the Cuban people for their resistance to U.S. dominance. The Trump administration's tightening of the embargo and travel restrictions is punishment for the perceived collaboration between Cuba and Venezuela, another target of U.S. efforts at regime change.

These unilateral coercive measures have been ineffective in achieving the U.S. government's political goals. Daniel Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, observed: "The embargo has been a failure by every measure. It has not changed the course or nature of the Cuban government...In fact, the embargo

has made the Cuban people a bit more impoverished...At the same time, it has deprived Americans of their freedom to travel and has cost U.S. farmers and other producers billions of dollars of potential exports."³²



Photo Credit: David Williams

The people of Cuba have indeed suffered from the economic embargo, the longest-lasting in history. The country has reacted by reducing its dependence on foreign goods. And in fact, although the embargo has hurt their economy and restricted access to necessities, Cubans have better health outcomes than people in the United States due to their well-designed universal health care system.³³

In a June 2019 speech, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez quoted Raul Castro, Fidel's successor: "Despite its immense power, imperialism does not possess the capacity to break the dignity of a united people, proud of its history and of the freedom conquered with so much sacrifice."³⁴

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