

2026

Is Cuba next?



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15-03-2026

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cuba is holding talks with the United States. This is not the very first time in history that both countries have approached, sometimes in overt conversations but many other times in covert mode.

The December 17, 2014, announcement by Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro signalled a seismic shift in the geopolitical landscape, catching the world off guard. After decades of Cold War-era isolation, the sudden move to restore full diplomatic relations felt like a historical anomaly. However, this breakthrough was not a sudden pivot born of a single moment, but rather the culmination of a deeply layered, often hidden process aimed at ending one of the longest-running diplomatic stalemates in modern history.

For over half a century, the conventional narrative of U.S.-Cuban relations was defined by perpetual conflict, aggressive rhetoric, and ideological rigidity. Since the 1959 revolution, the public image of the two nations was one of "perpetual enemies" locked in a zero-sum game. Yet beneath this surface of hostility, a surprising and largely untold history of bilateral efforts toward **rapprochement and reconciliation** was constantly in motion, operating in the shadows of official policy.

This hidden history reveals that every presidential administration, from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Barack Obama, engaged in some form of **secret, back-channel diplomacy** with Havana. Far from the intense political clamour of Washington and the public scrutiny of the Florida electorate, negotiators and intermediaries worked quietly to bridge the divide. Even during the most precarious moments of the Cold War—such as John F. Kennedy's attempt to extend an olive branch following the Missile Crisis—the desire for dialogue persisted.

Throughout the decades, these furtive exchanges involved a diverse cast of characters, from top-tier diplomats like Henry Kissinger, who embarked on a top-secret quest for normalization, to figures like Jimmy Carter, who sought a more principled engagement. Declassified documents and personal accounts from policy makers and intermediaries show a fifty-year record of dialogue that was both open and clandestine. These interactions provided the essential, albeit invisible, framework that eventually allowed for the 2014 breakthrough to take hold.

Understanding this long-standing record of negotiation is essential to navigating the current era of engagement. It demonstrates that the path to normalization was paved not by a single administration's whim, but by a half-century of

persistent, behind-the-scenes effort. By acknowledging this foundation of secret diplomacy, we gain a clearer perspective on the ongoing challenges and opportunities that define the future of the U.S.-Cuba relationship in the 21st century.

And now, after the extraction of President Maduro from Caracas, oil flow to Cuba has been disrupted. Cuban authorities have been prompted to retake contacts with the U.S., especially when external support from Russia or China was not looming in the horizon. *Realpolitik* in action.

2. CUBA'S CURRENT FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Cuba's problem is not only "poverty" in a generic sense. It is a hard-currency and import-capacity crisis. Reuters reported in July 2025 that Cuba's economy had contracted again in 2024, extending a five-year decline of roughly 10% since 2019; foreign-currency revenues had fallen by about 30% in recent years; and hard-currency earnings were below prior-year levels even as imports rose, worsening debt pressure. The last official foreign-debt figure cited by Reuters was \$19.7 billion in 2020.

The currency side is also critical. In August 2025, Reuters reported the Cuban peso had fallen to four hundred per dollar on the informal market, with partial dollarization feeding inflation, inequality, and social tension. **That matters because it means ordinary Cubans face a double squeeze: scarcity in state channels and prohibitively expensive access in dollarized or informal channels.** Reuters also noted that, alongside sanctions, critics point to slow economic reform as part of the problem.

The lived effects of that macro crisis are shown very clearly in Cubans everyday life: **people choosing between eggs, transport, and medicines; hospitals limiting non-essential services; electricity outages undermining schools and internet access; and households reverting to wood for cooking.**

Financially, that implies a state that cannot reliably supply energy, import enough essentials, or stabilize purchasing power. In analytic terms, the crisis is both fiscal-administrative and balance-of-payments driven.

The energy shock is now central. Reuters reported that no fuel had entered Cuba for three months by March 13, 2026, and that outages in Havana had risen to more than 12 hours a day after a national blackout. Díaz-Canel himself said diesel and fuel-oil reserves had been depleted, making the electrical grid increasingly unstable.

That energy shortage is now feeding directly into foreign-exchange weakness through tourism. Reuters reported in February 2026 that the jet-fuel shortage crippled the tourism sector: **major carriers suspended service, up to 1,709 flights were expected to be cancelled through April, hotel groups closed or consolidated properties, and tourism—worth \$1.3 billion in foreign exchange in 2024 and around 10% of export earnings—was placed at risk.** Cuba had already attracted only 1.8 million visitors in 2025, down from 2.2 million the year before.

So, the best overall diagnosis is this: **Cuba is in a compound fiscal crisis made up of four mutually reinforcing elements—loss of hard currency, currency erosion and inflation, collapse in energy availability, and damage to tourism and productive capacity.** The crisis must be attributed primarily to **U.S. sanctions.** A balanced reading is that sanctions and the 2026 oil squeeze are major accelerants, but they are interacting with older structural weaknesses: decayed infrastructure, low productivity, dependence on imports, and slow reform.

3. CONVERSATIONS UNDERTAKEN BETWEEN CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES

There has been a clear public shift. On January 12, 2026, Díaz-Canel said there were no conversations with the U.S. government, except technical contacts on migration. On March 13, 2026, he publicly acknowledged that recent conversations with U.S. officials had in fact taken place. That means something changed between January and March, either in the reality of the channel or in Havana's decision to disclose it.

According to Granma's account of Díaz-Canel's March 13 remarks, **the talks are discreet, lengthy, and still in an initial phase.** He set out three purposes for the process: first, to identify which bilateral problems need solutions; second, to explore possible ways to solve them; and third, to determine whether there is enough political will to take actions beneficial to both peoples, including cooperation in areas tied to security and peace. He also said Cuba's position is that **any process must rest on equality, sovereignty, reciprocity, respect for each state's political system, and international law.**

Reuters adds more operational detail. Díaz-Canel said the talks were aimed at **addressing bilateral differences through dialogue** and moving the two countries "away from

confrontation." Reuters also reported that he said he was directing the talks for the Cuban side **together with Raúl Castro and other officials. He did not identify the U.S. participants, though Trump has said Marco Rubio was involved.** Reuters further reported that Cuba described the talks as being in their initial stages and intended partly to assess whether there is genuine will on both sides for agreement.

The political context, however, is extremely adverse. Trump has publicly said **Cuba is close to collapse** and has even floated the language of a possible "friendly takeover." A White House official told Reuters that Cuba's rulers should "make a deal," while Trump's administration has simultaneously tightened pressure by **cutting off Venezuelan oil and threatening tariffs on countries supplying fuel to Cuba.** That means the **dialogue is not occurring in a détente framework;** it is taking place under maximum coercive leverage.

That asymmetry is the key fact behind the talks. Havana appears to want de-escalation, limited relief, and stabilization without surrendering political sovereignty. Washington, or at least the current White House line, appears to want a deal that translates Cuba's vulnerability into structural political and economic concessions. Granma's formulation and Reuters' reporting line up on this point: **Cuba frames the process as sovereign dialogue; Trump frames it as pressure on a failing state to submit.**

4. CONCLUSIONS... SO FAR

The prospects are real but narrow.

There is now enough **evidence to say the contacts are not rumour.** Díaz-Canel has acknowledged them publicly; Granma has laid out the Cuban terms; and Reuters has confirmed that Havana says the process is underway and in an **initial phase.**

But the likely ceiling is limited. The reason is simple: **the two sides are not entering the talks with the same objective.** Cuba is seeking breathing room—especially on fuel, energy stability, and perhaps broader bilateral de-escalation. **The Trump team appears to be seeking leverage conversion—using Cuba's economic emergency to force political and economic movement on U.S. terms.** Trump's rhetoric, the White House line, and the wider oil pressure campaign point in that direction.

That makes a small, tactical understanding more plausible than a true rapprochement. The most realistic positive scenario is a limited arrangement that reduces immediate

pressure, creates technical channels, or opens narrow cooperation areas. A broader normalization like the Obama-era opening looks **much less likely** because the strategic environment is harsher and **the rhetoric from Washington is overtly coercive.**

So, the final judgment boils down to the following: **the contacts are significant because they are real, official, and publicly acknowledged—but their prospects are fragile because they are being conducted from radically unequal bargaining positions.** Cuba is negotiating from economic emergency; the United States is negotiating from pressure. That does not rule out an agreement, but it strongly suggests that any near-term outcome will be transactional, limited, and unstable, rather than a durable strategic reset.

One more thought about these talks. Trump has not shown any interest so far in any of his adventures abroad (Venezuela, Palestine, or Iran) in any real change of regime in those places. He is just seeking for friendly-led regimes in the places he is intervening. He is not prone to put boots on the ground. **He just looks forward to dealing with vassal states.** This is precisely the approach that Putin applies within his own sphere of influence.

It was without saying that the **Venezuela and Cuba cases fall strictly under the Donroe strategy Trump crows about.** He is just being honest to himself.



ANNEX. TALKS HELD

Year	Overt or Covert	Outcome	Key Participants	Negotiation Topics
1959	Overt	Multiple meetings occurred following the revolution; Vice President Nixon recorded skepticism of Castro's leanings, while Ambassador Bonsal discussed protections for U.S. private interests and agrarian reform laws.	Fidel Castro, Richard Nixon, Ambassador Philip Bonsal, and Minister of State Roa	Diplomatic leadership, U.S. private agriculture and utility interests, and programs for economic progress.
1961- 1962	Covert	Release of nearly 1,200 prisoners from the Bay of Pigs invasion in exchange for \$53 million in food and medicine.	James B. Donovan and Fidel Castro	Prisoner exchange and humanitarian aid.
1962	Covert	Resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis; Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba in exchange for a U.S. non-invasion pledge and the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey.	John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, Anatoly Dobrynin, and John Scali	Removal of Soviet nuclear missiles and U.S. security guarantees.

1963	Covert	Rapprochement probes were initiated but ultimately terminated due to the assassination of President Kennedy.	John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, and Lisa Howard (intermediary)	Potential restoration of diplomatic relations.
1964	Covert	A message was relayed to President Johnson regarding Cuba's interest in continuing secret talks following the U.S. election.	Lyndon Johnson, Fidel Castro, and Lisa Howard	Continuation of secret diplomatic dialogue.
1965	Overt	Establishment of the "Freedom Flights" program, which facilitated the airlift of over 260,000 Cuban refugees to the United States.	U.S. and Cuban officials	Migration coordination following the opening of the Camarioca port.
1973	Overt	An agreement was reached to cooperate on ending the hijacking of aircraft and maritime vessels between the two nations.	Not in source	Anti-hijacking measures and maritime security.
1974-1975	Covert	Exploratory talks and back-channel diplomacy were initiated to restore relations; results included the easing of some sanctions and an exchange of messages.	Henry Kissinger, Lawrence Eagleburger, Frank Mankiewicz, Fidel Castro, Ramón Sánchez Parodi, and Néstor García	Normalization of relations, human rights, and lifting of the trade embargo.

1977	Overt	Formal agreement to establish "Interests Sections" in Washington D.C. and Havana to facilitate limited diplomatic representation.	Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro, and U.S./Cuban delegations	Fishing treaties, maritime boundaries, and re-establishing formal ties.
1978	Covert	A series of high-level secret meetings resulted in the release of 3,600 political prisoners and the execution of a prisoner swap (CIA agents for Puerto Rican nationalists); however, progress stalled over Cuba's military role in Africa.	David Newsom, Peter Tarnoff, Robert Pastor, David Aaron, Robert Gates, José Luis Padrón, Tony de la Guardia, and Fidel Castro	Political prisoner releases, the U.S. trade embargo, and Cuban military intervention in Angola and Ethiopia.
1978	Covert	Use of a private intermediary to maintain a personal link between the U.S. President and Castro, bypassing the formal bureaucracy.	J. Paul Austin (Coca-Cola CEO), Jimmy Carter, and Fidel Castro	Normalization of relations and removing obstacles to diplomatic progress.
1980	Covert	Multiple attempts to resolve the Mariel boatlift and other crises; Castro eventually ordered the port of Mariel closed, though broader talks on the embargo and Afghanistan reached a "dead-end."	Peter Tarnoff, Robert Pastor, Wayne Smith, J. Paul Austin, Fidel Castro, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, and José Luis Padrón	Mariel migration crisis, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the trade embargo.

1981	Covert	Dialogue was held regarding regional conflicts, but talks broke down over Cuban support for the Salvadoran FMLN rebels.	Alexander Haig and Carlos Rafael Rodriguez	Weapons shipments to El Salvador and regional stability.
1982	Covert	Secret meetings failed to produce a breakthrough; Castro rejected trading military halts in Central America for U.S. trade concessions.	Vernon Walters, Fidel Castro, and Carlos Rafael Rodriguez	Repatriation of Mariel refugees and military shipments to Central America.
1984-1985	Overt	An immigration agreement was signed to repatriate 2,746 "excludable" migrants and issue 20,000 annual visas; Cuba suspended the deal in 1985.	U.S. and Cuban government representatives	Normalization of migration procedures and visa quotas.
1987	Covert	Successful renewal of the 1984 immigration agreement, with Cuba accepting the return of 2,600 additional excludable nationals.	Kenneth Skoug, Jr. and Cuban officials	Immigration agreement renewal and repatriation.
1988	Overt	Signing of the Tripartite Accord, leading to the phased withdrawal of Cuban troops from Africa.	Foreign Ministers of Cuba, Angola, and South Africa (with U.S. and USSR mediation)	Withdrawal of Cuban military from Angola and independence for Namibia.

1994-1995	Overt/Covert	Agreements reached to resolve the "Balsero" (rafter) crisis; the U.S. committed to 20,000 annual entries, and the "wet foot, dry foot" policy was established.	Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Jimmy Carter, and Fidel Castro	Migration crisis resolution and repatriation of rafters interdicted at sea.
2002	Overt	Former President Carter visited Cuba and delivered a televised speech on human rights, marking the first visit by a U.S. President (former or sitting) since 1959.	Jimmy Carter and Fidel Castro	Human rights, democracy, and the trade embargo.
2011	Overt	Exploratory meeting regarding detained personnel; resulted in public calls for the release of Alan Gross and the "Cuban Five."	Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro, and Alan Gross	Release of USAID subcontractor Alan Gross and the "Cuban Five" intelligence agents.
2013-2014	Covert/Overt	The "Cuban Thaw" breakthrough (17-D); secret talks mediated by the Vatican led to a prisoner swap (Alan Gross for the Cuban Five) and the resumption of full diplomatic ties.	Barack Obama, Raúl Castro, Pope Francis, and Cardinal Pietro Parolin	Normalization of relations, humanitarian issues, and prisoner releases.

2015	Overt	Formal reopening of embassies in Havana and Washington D.C. following high-level productive talks.	John Kerry, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, and Josefina Vidal	Restoration of full diplomatic relations and normalization framework.
2017	Overt	Repeal of the "wet foot, dry foot" policy; Cuba agreed to accept the regular return of deportable nationals.	Barack Obama and Raúl Castro	Ending preferential migration treatment and enhancing repatriation agreements.
2024	Covert	Release of 533 prisoners; U.S. removed Cuba from a terrorism-related list and suspended certain sanctions (Helms-Burton Title III).	Joe Biden, Cuban officials, and the Vatican (mediator)	Prisoner release and sanctions relief.
2026	Overt/Covert	Ongoing engagement amidst an energy crisis; Cuba released 51 detainees via Vatican mediation as a confidence-building measure.	Miguel Díaz-Canel, Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, and Pope Leo XIV	Oil blockade, energy shortages, bilateral security, and political exit strategies.