

2026

# Advances in Cuban talks



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

A significant diplomatic milestone was recently reached when a U.S. State Department-led delegation travelled to Havana on Friday 17 April 2026, marking the first time a U.S. government plane has landed on the island (outside of the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base) since President Barack Obama's visit in 2016.

The meetings represent a critical juncture in U.S.-Cuba relations under the Trump administration, taking place amidst **soaring tensions** and a desperate economic situation in Cuba.



The primary Cuban interlocutor for these talks was **Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro**, widely known as "El Cangrejo," a lieutenant colonel in the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) and the **grandson and head of personal security** for Raúl Castro.

Washington engaged with him directly because they view him as the *de facto* voice of Raúl Castro, who at 94 years old retains the true power in the country over the formal president, Miguel Díaz-Canel.



# 2. A SUMMARY

These negotiations take place as Cuba experiences its **most severe crisis** since the **Special Period** of the 1990s. The

island's economy is described as being in a "freefall". **The Cuban economy has already shrunk by 23% since 2019**, and it faces a projected GDP decline of 7.2% this year alone. This economic collapse has been severely exacerbated by a U.S. energy blockade and **the sudden halt of Venezuelan oil supplies** following the capture of Nicolás Maduro in January.

Prior to this momentous meeting in Havana, **foundational contacts were established earlier in the year**. In February and March, during a CARICOM summit in St. Kitts and Nevis, "El Cangrejo" met U.S. representatives, which included either Secretary of State Marco Rubio himself or a close advisor to Rubio. This set the stage for the direct talks in Havana, where the U.S. delegation warned the Cuban elite that they have a **"brief opportunity to implement key reforms supported by the U.S. before circumstances become irreversibly worse"**.

Information regarding the negotiations has surfaced through media leaks and public statements, revealing a mix of firm ultimatums and conditional offers. **The U.S. has made explicit demands for embargo relief**, which include the release of political prisoners, compensation for American properties seized after the 1959 Revolution, and guarantees of political freedoms leading to free and fair elections. Concurrently, the U.S. offered **pathways to economic relief and a specific proposal to help restore free and reliable internet access** to the island through Starlink satellite services.

A paramount issue for the United States is national security. U.S. officials expressed **grave concerns over foreign intelligence, military, and terrorist groups operating under the Cuban government's permission** just 100 miles from the U.S. homeland. President Trump has publicly underscored the high stakes of these relations, recently stating that his administration might focus on Cuba—which he described as a "failing nation"—after the war in Iran concludes. In response to this mounting pressure, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel has publicly stated that while the U.S. has no valid reason to attack, Cuba is ready to combat military aggression if it becomes inevitable.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The structure of these negotiations reveals a highly **pragmatic approach by the United States**. By bypassing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and dealing directly with a MININT official who guards Raúl Castro, **Washington is framing these talks as an "intelligence-to-intelligence channel dressed in diplomatic clothing"**.

The U.S. is strategically converting a long-standing counterintelligence concern into an explicit precondition for economic survival, forcing the Cuban regime to choose between preserving its relationships with Russian, Iranian, and Chinese intelligence entities or facing total economic ruin.

**Short-term Concessions:** Intelligence assess that there is a roughly even chance (50%) within the next 60 days that Havana will make a visible but modest reduction to at least one foreign-intelligence facility. This would serve as a "costly signal" to the U.S. to show compliance and a willingness to negotiate.

**Long-term Outlook:** Despite the pressure, a deep and fundamental restructuring of the regime's alliances or power dynamics remains highly unlikely without a complete regime transition.

**Escalating Tensions:** The Trump administration, with Marco Rubio as Secretary of State, is perceived as being highly reluctant to make unilateral concessions. A senior official noted that the U.S. "will not allow the island to pose a greater threat to national security if Cuba's leaders are unable or unwilling to act". If the Cuban regime fails to offer the U.S. satisfactory security assurances and democratic reforms, the economic and diplomatic blockade is poised to tighten further, accelerating the island's economic collapse.

## 4. LINK BETWEEN THE CIA AND THE SVR

The following might seem detached from the topic that has been dealt with but it may very well not be so. Iran and Cuba are linked as both involve Russia.

At the April 15 joint meeting of the SVR and Belarusian KGB boards in Kaliningrad, **Sergey Naryshkin** (head of SVR) used a routine intelligence forum to deliver a layered political message. On the surface, he portrayed the western border as dangerously tense, compared Baltic and Polish militarization to the pre-World War II period, claimed EU governments are committed to prolonging the war in Ukraine, and said Russia and Belarus were actively exchanging counterterrorism intelligence. In parallel, he told reporters that the SVR remains in contact with the CIA on Iran and that Moscow is consulting with various countries on the Middle East crisis. Taken together, those lines were not incidental remarks but a coordinated public framing effort. They cast Russia and Belarus as a single security space while presenting Moscow as a necessary interlocutor on Iran and regional crisis management. It also implicitly

warns European services that Moscow will treat pressure on Belarus as pressure on Russia itself.

The sharper point is the Iran channel. By publicly reaffirming contact with CIA Director John Ratcliffe, Naryshkin appears to be locking the March 11, 2025 SVR-CIA line into Moscow's preferred narrative before Washington can narrow, downplay, or redefine it. Because the claim was amplified through Russian and state-aligned reporting, while **no comparable US description of substance has been offered**, the disclosure serves both diplomatic and informational purposes. It can signal genuine intelligence contact on crisis containment, but it can also exaggerate Russia's role in order to make Moscow appear indispensable to any Iran file. Meanwhile, the prewar-border rhetoric functions as propaganda packaging for Belarusian and European audiences, and it also helps normalize a broader influence narrative directed at the Baltics and Poland. The result is a dual-use message: operational ambiguity abroad, political utility at home, and a more formalized Russia-Belarus intelligence posture overall.

This type of channel helps prevent miscommunication in regions of shared interest, like Cuba. Established after the 1961 Cuban missile crisis, this line of action addresses the risks of indirect communication. Both agencies use these links for verification and clarification during conflicts, and parallel military channels are also applied. In this case this channel might also be useful while dealing with Cuba.

