

GEOPOLITICAL RISK OBSERVATORY

## Cuba crisis: US strategy, possible scenarios and key risk factors

### **An overview**

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**15 July 2026**

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## Cuba crisis: US strategy, possible scenarios and key risk factors

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Six months after the capture of Nicolás Maduro, the Cuban crisis has become the principal unresolved issue within the renewed US strategy in the Western Hemisphere. The combination of maximum economic and diplomatic pressure with backchannel contacts involving members of the Cuban regime suggests that Washington is pursuing a reconfiguration of the island's political order, while the means through which this objective will ultimately be achieved remain undefined.

This note reviews the main developments that have shaped the current crisis, examines the broader strategic context in which it has evolved, and assesses the most likely future scenarios together with the principal factors that may influence their trajectory.

### 1. Evolution of the crisis

The current phase of the crisis stems from a combination of economic and geopolitical developments that have progressively undermined the resilience of the Cuban system.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro in January 2026 deprived Cuba of its principal energy supplier, bringing an end to the preferential Venezuelan oil deliveries on which the island had long depended. Washington subsequently imposed a de facto energy embargo extending to third countries willing to supply Cuba with fuel.

The result has been a rapid deterioration of the country's economic and energy situation, characterised by prolonged power outages, reduced industrial activity, mounting pressure on the healthcare system and a broader worsening of domestic economic conditions.

At the same time, the United States initiated backchannel contacts with selected members of the Cuban regime while maintaining significant political pressure through additional sanctions, the indictment of Raúl Castro for the 1996 shootdown of US civilian aircraft, and intensified intelligence activities across the Caribbean.

## 2. Strategic context

### *2.1 The renewed US projection in the Western Hemisphere*

The Cuban crisis forms part of the broader US strategy aimed at reasserting its influence across the Western Hemisphere.

The Trump Administration appears to have progressively embraced an approach broadly consistent with the traditional Monroe Doctrine, treating Latin America as a priority strategic sphere while displaying reduced tolerance towards the political and military presence of extra-regional powers, particularly China and Russia.

Within this framework, Cuba represents one of the principal obstacles to the consolidation of a more cohesive US sphere of influence.

### *2.2 The Venezuela Effect*

The operation leading to the capture of Nicolás Maduro has reshaped the regional strategic environment in three key ways:

- it demonstrated Washington's willingness to employ direct military instruments when considered functional to the achievement of broader political objectives;
- it strengthened the credibility of US deterrence vis-à-vis other hostile regimes in the region;
- it deprived Cuba of its principal regional economic partner, significantly increasing the island's vulnerability.

### *2.3 Constraints on Washington*

The US Administration nevertheless continues to operate within a framework characterised by significant strategic constraints.

- Middle East theatre: the strategic stalemate reached with Iran, combined with the failure to achieve Washington's initial objectives, complicates a full US disengagement from the Middle East while making the opening of an additional crisis theatre more difficult.

- Midterm elections: the approaching midterm elections strengthen the Administration's incentive to secure a rapid and politically visible foreign policy success. Conversely, Havana may seek to prolong negotiations in anticipation of a potential shift in the political balance in Washington.
- International support: any military intervention against Cuba continues to face limited international backing, as reflected in recent discussions within the United Nations.
- US domestic opinion: limited domestic support for another prolonged military engagement reduces the likelihood of direct intervention and reinforces Washington's preference for economic and diplomatic coercive measures.

### 3. Possible scenarios

#### 3.1 *Negotiated transition within the regime*

The most likely scenario remains the gradual emergence of an understanding between Washington and elements of the current Cuban establishment.

Under this scenario, economic pressure would be progressively eased in exchange for political and economic reforms, preserving at least part of the existing institutional framework while reducing the costs associated with political transition.

|                           |
|---------------------------|
| Probability: Medium-high. |
|---------------------------|

#### 3.2 *Prolonged pressure and stalemate*

Should the regime retain sufficient internal cohesion, the United States may continue its current maximum-pressure strategy without resorting to direct military action.

This scenario would entail a prolonged economic and humanitarian crisis, accompanied by intermittent negotiations and the progressive erosion of the regime's resilience, with an increasing risk of systemic collapse.

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|----------------------|
| Probability: Medium. |
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#### 3.3 *Limited military intervention*

The possibility of a direct use of force cannot be excluded.

Under this scenario, Washington could resort either to special operations aimed at capturing senior regime figures or to limited precision strikes against military and intelligence targets in order to increase negotiating leverage.

By contrast, a large-scale invasion of the island currently appears to be the least likely scenario, given the strategic constraints outlined above and the substantial political and military costs such an operation would entail.

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|--------------------------|
| Probability: Medium-low. |
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#### 4. Key risk factors

Several variables are likely to influence the evolution of the crisis.

- *The regime's economic resilience*; A further deterioration of the energy crisis could accelerate internal instability or encourage greater openness to negotiations.
- *Cohesion of the Cuban ruling elite*; The existence of backchannel contacts between Washington and members of the regime suggests the possibility of growing divisions within the governing apparatus.
- *The role of Russia and China*; Both countries retain a strategic interest in the survival of the Cuban regime, although their capacity to shape developments remains relatively limited.
- *Risk of miscalculation*; The increase in US military activity across the Caribbean raises the possibility of incidents capable of triggering unintended escalation.
- *US political calendar*; As noted above, the approaching midterm elections may encourage Washington to pursue a politically visible outcome within a relatively compressed timeframe.

#### 5. Conclusions

The available evidence suggests that Washington continues to favour a strategy combining maximum economic pressure with backchannel engagement involving elements of the Cuban regime, rather than an immediate military option. The credible threat of force nevertheless remains an integral component of US coercive strategy and is expected to continue serving primarily as leverage to strengthen Washington's negotiating position.

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