



By: *Roberta Lajous*

Trump's goals in Cuba can be achieved without the use of force



Ever since Fidel Castro's forces overthrew Fulgencio Batista's regime in 1959, Cuba has served as a revolutionary paradigm for Latin American leftists – and America's Achilles' heel in the region.

While the regime's oft-predicted demise has failed to materialize, that may change now that US President Donald Trump has seized control of Venezuela's fossil-fuel industry, enabling his administration to establish an effective oil blockade of Cuba.

Although Trump recently **eased restrictions** on private oil sales to Cuba, his pressure campaign has plunged the country into crisis, resulting in dire humanitarian conditions and significantly increasing the risk of uncontrolled migration by boat to the United States and Mexico.

Florida, the closest US state to Cuba, could probably handle an exodus on a scale larger than that of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, when around 125,000 Cubans reached Miami after Castro briefly lifted the ban on emigration.

But this might cause a political uproar, especially given Trump's anti-immigrant agenda. Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, another major destination for **Cuban migrants**, lacks the resources to receive and care for those fleeing the island, as has become evident in recent years.

Innovative measures

To alleviate Cubans' suffering and prevent a new migrant crisis, urgent and innovative measures are required.

Instead of threatening a "**friendly takeover**," the US government should position itself as a potential trade partner.

This would require lifting the trade embargo, which former US President Barack Obama tried to do, though partisan divisions doomed the effort.

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The timing is right for such an approach. With a mandatory joint review of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) scheduled for later this year, its members should consider inviting Cuba to join.

Tourism is the island's main source of revenue, and more than half of its **annual visitors** come from these three countries. Moreover, Cuban leaders have indicated their eagerness for investment.

These factors, coupled with the risk of societal breakdown, might be enough to compel Cuba to launch a transition to a market-based economy with a predictable legal framework.

The EU's integration of post-communist countries

Such a shift is not unheard of. Consider, for example, the European Union's successful integration of post-communist countries.

The prospect of EU membership created huge incentives for internal change. Market liberalization, of course, triggered shocks, but most of these countries are now far better off for taking the reform medicine, with **Poland** emerging as one of the EU's best-performing economies in recent years.

Expansion was beneficial not only for the European market but also for regional security.

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Compared to Europe, North America shares stronger cultural affinities, including three primary languages (English, Spanish, and French) and, despite the wars fought in the 19th century, a common sense of belonging to a new world that had shaken off the shackles of colonialism.

Moreover, the implementation in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement strengthened cohesion and improved lives in all three countries.

Trump, who sought to terminate NAFTA in his first term before realizing that doing so would be political suicide, replaced it in 2020 with the USMCA, which tightened the rules of origin for merchandise trade.

As a result, Mexico became the top US trading partner, with Canada close behind, and the three countries are even more integrated today than before Trump first took office, putting them in a stronger position to compete with China.

This remains the case despite Trump's belligerent rhetoric against America's neighbors and imposition of high import tariffs in his second term.

In fact, Mexico and Canada have fared relatively well following the introduction of tariffs, because USMCA-compliant goods are exempt.

Regional integration

The Trump administration is currently facing several challenges. Prices remain high ahead of the midterm elections, and the US-Israeli war in Iran threatens to exacerbate the electorate's affordability concerns.

Adding Cuba to the USMCA would create a larger market, improve access to **critical minerals**, which are already being mined in Cuba by Canadian companies, and secure Cuba's transition to a market economy without resorting to force.



Trump and Rubio must choose the most effective and least painful route: regional integration

Just as US President Richard Nixon's strident anti-communist views gave him political cover to open relations with the People's Republic of China, Trump's far-right credentials make him well placed to risk a reconciliation with Cuba.

As the son of Cuban immigrants and a hardliner, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio is also uniquely positioned to achieve this outcome.

But Trump and Rubio must choose the most effective and least painful route: regional integration.

Cubans have endured enough **suffering**, including the pain of exile and family separation. It might seem improbable, but a new and peaceful Cuban revolution is possible.

Roberta Lajous, a career Mexican diplomat, is a former Mexican ambassador to Cuba.