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Cuba: U.S. Policy Overview

Cuba is a one-party authoritarian state with a government that has sharply restricted freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and other basic human rights since shortly after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Over the past six decades, U.S. policy has generally sought to isolate the Cuban government to promote change on the island and limit Cuba's ability to engage in malign activities abroad. Congress has played an active role in shaping U.S. policy toward Cuba, including by enacting legislation related to U.S. sanctions and appropriating funds to support access to information and promote democracy and respect for human rights in Cuba.

Political and Economic Developments

Miguel Díaz-Canel succeeded Raúl Castro as president in 2018 and as head of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 2021. Cuba's National Assembly elected Díaz-Canel to a second and final five-year presidential term in April 2023. The departure of Castro and other older leaders from the PCC's Politburo—the party's highest decisionmaking body—reflects the generational change in Cuban leadership that began in the early 2000s. While in power from 2008 to 2018, Raúl Castro (who succeeded his brother, Fidel Castro, Cuba's leader from 1959 to 2008) relaxed restrictions on private economic activities, but his government's gradualist approach did not produce major economic improvements. Cuba adopted a new constitution in 2019 that introduced some reforms but maintained the state's dominance over the economy and the PCC's predominant political role.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Cuba has grappled with food, medicine, fuel, and energy shortages as its economy has struggled to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) reported that the Cuban economy contracted by 10.9% in 2020 and grew by less than 2% annually in 2021 and 2022, before again contracting by an estimated 1.9% and 2% in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Fuel oil shortages, a slow return of hard-currency-wielding foreign tourists, hurricane damage, continuing distortions and inefficiencies in the centrally planned economy, and the effects of U.S. sanctions have reportedly slowed recovery. In late 2024, Cuba's electrical grid experienced recurring collapses, causing prolonged nationwide blackouts that hindered the provision of basic services. A major importer of food, Cuba has struggled with declining agricultural production and rising global food prices, resulting in shortages and concerns about food insecurity.

Increased Repression

Cuba's already poor human rights situation has deteriorated since 2021. On July 11, 2021, anti-government demonstrations broke out in Havana and throughout the country, with thousands of Cubans protesting economic

conditions (including food and medicine shortages and blackouts) and the lack of political freedoms. The government responded with harsh measures, including widespread detentions of protesters, civil society activists, and bystanders. Hundreds of the July 2021 protesters have been tried and convicted, and many others reportedly have been forced into exile.

In response to renewed protests in March 2024, the Cuban government reportedly took some steps to address food shortages and power outages while employing short-term internet shutdowns and arbitrarily detaining some protesters. In November 2024, the Cuban attorney general's office announced that it had made several arrests after scattered demonstrations broke out in several provinces to protest power blackouts. The human rights group Prisoners Defenders reported that, as of November 2024, there were 1,148 political prisoners (up from 152 on July 1, 2021).

Increased Cooperation with China and Russia

Amid Cuba's domestic challenges, the government has aimed to increase ties with China and Russia. The Biden Administration asserted that China has had an intelligence collection facility in Cuba since at least 2019, and a U.S. think tank identified four possible spy facilities using satellite imagery. At the same time, some analysts assess that Cuba's precarious economic situation may limit opportunities to deepen economic ties with China. Cuba also has strengthened diplomatic, commercial, and military ties with Russia. In June and July 2024, Russian warships visited Cuba, in part to conduct joint military drills.

U.S. Policy

Since the early 1960s, when President Kennedy imposed a congressionally authorized trade embargo on Cuba, U.S. policy has centered largely on economic sanctions aimed at isolating the Cuban government. The Obama Administration initiated a policy shift away from sanctions and toward engagement and the normalization of relations. Policy changes included the rescission of Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism (May 2015); the restoration of diplomatic relations (July 2015); and easing restrictions on travel, remittances, trade, telecommunications, and banking and financial services (2015-2016). The Trump Administration reversed course, introducing new sanctions in 2017, including restrictions on transactions with companies controlled by the Cuban military. By 2019, the Trump Administration had largely abandoned engagement and increased sanctions, particularly on travel and remittances.

In its initial months, the Biden Administration announced that it was conducting a review of policy toward Cuba, with human rights as a core pillar. In the aftermath of the Cuban government's harsh response to the July 2021 protests, the Biden Administration criticized Cuba's repression and

imposed sanctions on those involved, including financial sanctions on three Cuban security entities and eight officials, and visa restrictions against 50 individuals involved in repressing protesters.

In May 2022, the Biden Administration announced several policy changes aimed at increasing support for the Cuban people. It expanded immigrant visa processing at the U.S. Embassy in Havana and eased travel restrictions by reauthorizing scheduled and charter flights to cities beyond Havana and reinstating group people-to-people travel (e.g., for educational purposes). It also eased restrictions on sending cash remittances by eliminating the dollar and frequency limits for family remittances and reauthorizing donative (i.e., non-family) remittances to Cuban nationals. In May 2024, the Biden Administration amended existing sanctions regulations with the stated intention of promoting internet freedom and supporting the Cuban private sector, including authorizing Cuban entrepreneurs unaffiliated with prohibited members of the Cuban regime to establish and remotely access U.S. bank accounts and banking services.

The Biden Administration also resumed meetings with Cuban officials on selected issues of bilateral concern that were suspended during the Trump Administration. These included the U.S.-Cuba Law Enforcement Dialogue and semiannual talks to review implementation of bilateral migration accords.

Selected U.S. Sanctions

The Biden Administration opted to maintain some sanctions implemented during the Trump Administration, including the following measures.

Transactions with the Cuban Military. In 2017, the State Department published a list of entities controlled by the Cuban military, intelligence, or security services “with which direct financial transactions would disproportionately benefit such services or personnel at the expense of the Cuban people or private enterprise.” This “Cuba restricted list” includes 231 entities (e.g. ministries, hotels, businesses).

Travel and Remittances. Since 2019, U.S. restrictions have prohibited travel to Cuba by cruise ships and by private and corporate aircraft. Since 2020, most U.S. travelers have been prohibited from staying at over 400 hotels and private residences identified as owned or controlled by the Cuban government.

Terrorism Designations. On January 11, 2021, pursuant to several laws, the Secretary of State redesignated Cuba as a state sponsor of international terrorism, citing its harboring of several U.S. fugitives and members of Colombia’s National Liberation Army (ELN)—a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. Although the Biden Administration maintained this designation, in May 2024, the Secretary of State removed Cuba from an annual list of countries certified as “not cooperating fully with United States anti-terrorism efforts,” pursuant to the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. §2781), for the first time since 2019. Officials attributed the change to the resumption of the U.S.-Cuban Law Enforcement Dialogue and

Colombia’s 2022 decision to suspend its request to extradite members of the ELN.

Irregular Migration

Driven by Cuba’s difficult economic conditions and political repression, irregular migration from Cuba to the United States has surged since FY2022. U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered an average of 214,170 Cuban migrants annually from FY2022 to FY2024, a fivefold increase over FY2021. Most of those encounters occurred at the Southwest land border. U.S. maritime interdictions of Cubans also have increased, with the Coast Guard reporting 6,182 interdictions in FY2022 and 6,910 in FY2023.

As part of broader efforts to stem irregular migration, the Biden Administration sought to increase legal pathways for migrants to enter the United States. In January 2023, for example, the Department of Homeland Security launched a new humanitarian parole program allowing up to 30,000 individuals per month from Cuba and other selected countries to enter and remain in the United States for two years with work authorization, subject to sponsorship and vetting requirements. As of August 2024 (latest data available), more than 108,200 Cubans had arrived in the United States under the program.

Congress: Selected Actions on Cuba

For decades, Congress has shaped U.S. policy toward Cuba through oversight, appropriations, and other legislation. The 118th Congress enacted several provisions related to U.S. Cuba policy. For example, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47, Division F), stipulates that U.S. funding for democracy programs in Cuba may not be used to support business promotion, economic reform, or entrepreneurship. The act also directs the Secretary of State to report on countries and international organizations that are paying the Cuban government for “coerced and trafficked labor of Cuban medical professionals” and to impose sanctions on officials from such countries and organizations, with certain exceptions. The explanatory statement accompanying the act designates \$25 million for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting and \$25 million for Cuba democracy programs. The No Stolen Trademarks Honored in America Act of 2023 (P.L. 118-137) prohibits executive agencies from recognizing or enforcing trademarks used in connection with a confiscated business or asset, including those confiscated by the Cuban government after it took power in 1959. The Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (P.L. 118-159) extends through 2025 four provisions related to U.S. Naval Station, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba—leased since 1903 via treaty—including a prohibition on the use of FY2025 funds to close or relinquish control of the station.

The 119th Congress may assess funding levels for U.S. programs in Cuba as it considers appropriation measures. Members also may consider other options related to Cuba, such as legislation to tighten or ease U.S. sanctions. Congress may also conduct oversight over the incoming administration’s implementation of U.S. policy.

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