

A deal that Cuba (and Trump) cannot refuse?

The US president wants to talk and so does Havana. They both have things the other needs and we all want to avoid a hostile overthrow.

-Lee Schlenker
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Last week, President Trump [declared](#) a national emergency regarding [Cuba](#) and [threatened](#) to impose 30% tariffs on countries supplying Havana with oil. The move made clear that Washington is exerting maximum leverage over the island in bilateral talks the president [says](#) are taking place but Cuban authorities [deny](#).

As Cuba's economy [descends](#) into free fall and its population [leaves the island](#) at unprecedented levels, Trump [says](#) he'll be "kind" and wants to avoid a "humanitarian crisis" in the deal he intends to strike with Cuban leaders. At the same time, he [reiterated](#) his hopes that talks will lead to a "free Cuba" and the return of Cuban Americans who left after the 1959 Cuban Revolution and resettled in South Florida.

As Cuban authorities [say](#) they are ready for "serious dialogue" with the U.S. on a range of issues, except for "its constitution, political system and economic model" — and in the wake of an apparent [detente](#) with the ruling regime in [Venezuela](#) following the [capture](#) by the U.S. military of its president, Nicolas Maduro — one could ask, what would a realistic deal with Cuba look like right now?

An obvious agreement with Havana is waiting on the table for Trump to seize. If only his advisers, most importantly Cuban-American Secretary of State Marco Rubio, to whom he has thus far effectively outsourced Cuba policy, weren't [leading](#) him to believe that the Cuban regime is about to [collapse](#), and that civil unrest from prolonged power cuts will [magically](#) produce a pliant regime rather than a consolidation of the armed forces and mass emigration during an election year.

Through pragmatic [negotiations](#), Trump can strike a deal with Cuba that helps revive the country's tourism industry, gain access to critical minerals and supply chains for U.S. companies, and resolve billions of dollars in outstanding property claims through investment in future development and infrastructure projects. In exchange for the lifting of U.S. restrictions on travel and investment, Cuba can release political prisoners, accept more U.S. deportees, reduce its ties with extra-hemispheric actors, and boost security, counterterrorism, and judicial cooperation with the U.S. — setting the two adversaries on an imperfect, yet necessary, path toward normal relations.

To be clear, Trump's [threat](#) to impose increased tariffs on exports to the U.S. by third countries, particularly Mexico, if they continue to provide fuel to Havana would constitute [collective punishment](#) that could result in the needless death of thousands of innocent Cubans.

The pretext that Cuba — a tiny, broke, and aging island — constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the United States is ludicrous. The consensus [view](#) of the U.S. intelligence community is that Cuba does not sponsor or finance terrorism. There is also no evidence that Cuba hosts foreign military or intelligence bases; and there is no credible evidence that it [welcomes](#) transnational terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, as Trump's executive order [asserts](#).

Cuba is, in fact, a reliable U.S. [partner](#) on shared [security](#) issues and [seeks](#) even greater counternarcotics and counterterrorism cooperation with Washington, which many U.S. law enforcement agencies [favor](#) as well.

These issues, among [others](#) that form the basis of the administration's purported "America First" foreign policy toward the Western Hemisphere, should remain front and center in any talks with the Cuban government, which some dissident [media](#) outlets [say](#) have been taking place between the CIA and Raul Castro's son, Alejandro Castro Espín in Mexico since at least last week. Castro Espín was the lead Cuban negotiator during secret bilateral talks under the second Obama administration which concluded with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Yet Rubio and his allies in Congress who have long [rejected](#) dialogue with a government they see as [illegitimate](#) and who [insist](#) that the president cannot lift Cuba sanctions until there is regime change, could play spoilers in any deal with Havana. Rubio, however, has been forced to [go along](#) with Trump's apparent rapprochement with the *chavista* government in Venezuela, and, while Cuba may be the one issue where Rubio will not moderate his stance, he may decide that any future presidential [aspirations](#) he may hold would not necessarily be undermined by going along, at least in the short term, with something less than the overthrow of Cuba's government.

Rubio and other high-level Cuban-American officials would be wise to put aside their maximalist demands for immediate regime change — which, in any case, have [never](#) produced concessions from the Cuban government — and help deliver a [realistic](#) deal for the president that can help advance his strategic aims on immigration drug trafficking critical minerals, and reducing Russian and Chinese influence 90 miles off Florida's coast.

The good news is that these areas, including others, such as economic reforms in Cuba itself, are ones that Havana is open to discussing, assuming the U.S. upholds its side of the deal, sources familiar with the Cuban government's thinking tell RS.

Trump's executives have for years [scouted](#) and [registered](#) Trump's trademark on the island, and the president has many wealthy Cuban-American friends and [donors](#) who would like to do business there on favorable terms. As Cuban tourism [plummets](#), with hotel occupancy rates hovering around 25%, Trump could, under Cuba's current foreign investment laws, facilitate the development of numerous hotels and resorts on Cuba's prime, yet underdeveloped, oceanfront

real estate, similar to his company's recently [announced](#) plans in Vietnam. These privately owned developments could offer a major boost to the Cuban economy if accompanied by relaxed U.S. travel restrictions to the island and the issuance of specific licenses to import U.S. provisions and fuel.

Cuba also has the world's third and fifth largest [reserves](#) respectively, of cobalt and nickel, both strategic minerals currently being mined by the Canadian firm Sherritt International. A deal with Cuba could include an agreement for U.S. companies to bid on Sherritt's mining concessions, explore Cuba's [modest](#) offshore oil reserves — currently being [developed](#) by Chinese, Angolan, and Australian [firms](#) — and help modernize the country's deteriorated energy infrastructure, as the island [seeks](#) in its foreign investment portfolio.

Trump has mentioned that he [wants](#) the “people that came from Cuba, that were forced out or left under duress, taken care of,” leading many to believe he's referring to the billions of dollars in unresolved [property claims](#) stemming from the nationalizations that took place after the Cuban Revolution.

Because Cuba has no money to pay out these claims — and with two of these high-profile disputes being [heard](#) by the U.S. Supreme Court this month — Trump could work out an arrangement whereby certified claimants could acquire investment stakes in much-needed development and infrastructure projects on the island, similar to the [debt conversion](#) program Cuba recently worked out with Spain. Washington and Havana made limited [progress](#) on resolving these claims through similar mechanisms in 2015, yet any serious negotiation would have to [contend](#) with Cuba's counterclaim for billions of dollars in damages from Washington's 64-year-old trade embargo.

With these commitments made by the U.S. side, which could help revive the Cuban economy, assuage some of the island's energy shortages, and clear obstacles to increased foreign investment, Cuba could commit to releasing hundreds of political prisoners, as Secretary Rubio has [demanded](#). Havana abided by a similar, [Vatican-mediated deal](#) reached in the final days of the Biden administration last year.

It could also agree to [accept](#) more regular deportation flights from the U.S., a priority of Trump's, and commit to boosting security cooperation, resuming joint counternarcotics operations and contributing intelligence to U.S. anti-money laundering and terrorism financing investigations, as the island has repeatedly [offered](#).

But most importantly, with increased investment, tourism, trade and security ties with the U.S., Cuba could agree to reduce its economic and military ties with extra-hemispheric actors like [Russia](#) and [China](#) which the island has sought out mostly out of [necessity](#), not choice.

Trump recently [acknowledged](#) that Cubans are “tough people,” noting that their government has endured despite the economic challenges it has faced following the collapse of its chief patron, the Soviet Union, more than 30 years ago. Before his first term in office, he [said](#) that he was

“fine” with President Obama’s opening to Havana but insisted that he would’ve made a better deal.

Trump intuitively understands that pragmatic engagement and direct negotiations — rather than coercion, intransigence and force— offer the best path to securing cooperation from Cuba and advancing U.S. interests on the island.

It’s now up to Marco Rubio to decide whether he wants to stand in the president’s way, or help break a 60-year stalemate and deliver the deal with Cuba that Trump has always [sought](#).

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