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The downtown skyline of Havana, Cuba, circa December 14, 2023. The US is pressuring Cuba's government to fall without a long-term strategy. (Shutterstock/Sean Pavone)

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Why the US Needs a Clear Cuba Strategy

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By: [Steven Hendrix](#)

Without a plan, the United States could see Cuba's current crisis drift into a regional problem.

The most revealing part of [CIA](#) Director [John Ratcliffe](#)'s recent visit to Havana was not the visit itself. It was what came next.

On May 20, the [Justice Department unsealed an indictment](#) charging former Cuban President [Raúl Castro](#) and five co-defendants over the 1996 shutdown of two unarmed civilian aircraft operated by Brothers to the Rescue over international waters. The department says the charges include conspiracy to kill US nationals, destruction of aircraft, and murder. The [Associated Press reported that a warrant had been issued](#) for Castro's arrest.

That changes the meaning of Ratcliffe's May 14 visit. According to the Associated Press, [Ratcliffe met Cuban officials in Havana](#), including Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro, Raúl Castro's grandson, Interior Minister Lázaro Álvarez Casas, and the head of Cuban intelligence. A CIA official said Ratcliffe delivered President [Donald Trump](#)'s message that Washington was prepared to engage on economic and security issues, but only if [Cuba](#) made "fundamental changes." [Reuters described the visit as only the second known visit](#) by a CIA director to Cuba since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

Cuba's government told a different story. [Granma](#), the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, framed the meeting as a visit requested by the [United States](#) and approved by Cuba's revolutionary leadership. The Cuban statement said Havana had shown it was not a threat to US national security and had no reason to remain on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

That contrast matters. Washington presented pressure. Havana presented sovereignty. Miami exile outlets saw an opening. Left-leaning outlets saw coercion. Regional outlets saw something more practical: a country running out of fuel, power, and options.

That is the point Americans should focus on. Cuba is no longer just the subject of an ideological argument. It is now a state-capacity problem in the [Caribbean](#) basin. [The Guardian reported](#) that Cuba had run out of diesel and fuel oil. [Al Jazeera reported](#) worsening fuel shortages and blackouts. [Reuters reported](#) that Cuba nearly doubled gasoline and diesel prices while many filling stations remained closed because of supply shortages.

Cuba sits about 90 miles south of [Florida](#). If its power grid fails, if fuel runs out, if food shortages deepen, or if fear spreads, the effects will not stay on the island. Migration pressures, public health risks, and foreign meddling could turn a political crisis into a regional crisis.

The United States does not need hostile intelligence activity near Florida. It does not want [Russian](#), [Chinese](#), or other adversarial influence to grow in Havana. It does not want a failed state in the Caribbean. It does not want a sudden migration crisis. It also should not want ordinary Cuban families pushed deeper into hunger and darkness.

That requires strategic clarity. If Washington's goal is reform, it needs a policy that creates incentives for change while protecting space for ordinary Cubans, churches, entrepreneurs, artists, and civil society. If the goal is security cooperation, it requires channels that mitigate risk while defending US interests. If the goal is political transition, it needs to say so honestly and plan for the humanitarian, migration, and regional consequences.

Right now, US policy appears to mix pressure, possible aid, intelligence engagement, criminal charges, and public signaling. That may create leverage. It may also create confusion. Pressure without a plan is not a strategy. Engagement without leverage is not a strategy either.

The indictment of Raúl Castro may be legally significant. The Justice Department says an indictment is only an allegation and that defendants are presumed innocent unless proven guilty. But politically, the indictment is already a major escalation. Reuters described it as a "[new low](#)" in US-Cuba relations. The Associated Press reported that Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel [condemned the charges](#), while President Trump said the United States was ready to provide humanitarian assistance to a "[failing nation](#)."

That is the narrow path Washington now walks.

The United States can pursue accountability. It can demand changes. It can defend its security. But it should not conflate a legal case, an intelligence visit, and a humanitarian crisis into a single improvised policy.

Cuba's future should be chosen by Cubans. But US policy will affect the conditions under which Cubans make that choice. A weak Cuba is not automatically a free Cuba. A collapsing Cuba could also be more repressive, more dependent on outside patrons, and more dangerous for the region.

That is why the real question is not whether Washington should be tough or soft. The real question is whether Washington knows what outcome it wants.

Cuba's crisis is now about more than ideology. It is about electricity, fuel, food, migration, and state capacity in the Caribbean basin. If Washington cannot say clearly what it wants, it should not be surprised if events decide for it.

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