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Cuba's Public Diplomacy: Can it Be Effective Against Trump's Threats? ^[1]

Cuba has long engaged in the practice of public diplomacy. Even before the Internet the Cuban leadership realized that outreach to other countries was a way of ensuring the Revolution's survival. A small country could show the world how to withstand the pressure of its powerful neighbor. What power does Cuba's investment in public diplomacy have now in the context of the new pressure applied by the Trump Administration? To paraphrase Sun Tzu, the Chinese military strategist, "can you subdue an enemy without fighting?"

Early in the 1959 Revolution, Cuba projected youth, vigor, an ability to overturn a corrupt and brutal dictatorship, and an inspiration to many in the emerging post colonial era. Fidel Castro visited the United States in April 1959 to spread the message that he was willing to open a new era of relations with the U.S. The Eisenhower administration had already imposed an arms embargo on the Batista government, which he had overthrown.

But Castro came to believe that the new Revolution would not get what was wanted from the U.S, which suspected Cuba of leaning towards communism. Russia stepped in with support, particularly on oil. Castro struck the deal that gave Russia a military presence less than one hundred miles from Florida.

The major early public diplomacy success of Cuba was defeating the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. 65 years on, Cuba is facing an American blockade and threat of another invasion. Since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 , Kennedy's pledge to Khrushchev was that the U.S would not launch another invasion.

Hostile and coercive U.S. public diplomacy towards Cuba always suited Fidel Castro. The Revolution always need an enemy. He could justify all policies and Cuba's economic collapse on U.S. measures. So Trump's threats to take over Cuba and install Marco Rubio as President would have pleased Fidel.

Cuba has used U.S. hostility for decades as a public diplomacy tool. For the last 33 years, at the UNGA, Cuba has usually won overwhelming majorities voting against the United States embargo. In 2025, the vote was 165 in favor of the Cuba Resolution, to 7 against. A vote tabled this month showed 135 supporting Cuba. The U.S. exerted pressure on allies like Canada and Germany to abstain.

Cuba, long active in the Non-Aligned movement, has reinforced its public diplomacy outreach by medical and humanitarian diplomacy. Medical missions have been made over decades to more than 160 countries, now providing valuable hard currency receipts for Cuba. And humanitarian assistance after disasters has been another constant of Cuban -public diplomacy. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuban paramedics were some of the first to assist in the crisis in Northern Italy.

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Some overseas publics have been deceived by Cuba's public diplomacy. Diplomats living in Havana know the real state of Cuba's medical system, the repression of dissent, and privileges of communist party members and the military. The Cuban government's message of blaming the U.S. for conditions in country is no longer credible to ordinary Cubans. And millions have left the country since the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Cuba has built up an impressive credit in its public diplomacy credit account.

Both U.S and Cuban public diplomacy changed in 2014. President Barack Obama negotiated full diplomatic relations, loosening the trade and investment financing laws and releasing prisoners. U.S credit cards could be used in Cuba. President Obama's visit to Havana followed in 2016. Months later, in 2017, Trump scrapped the deal. But if that deal had gone ahead, American businesses, Cuban American businesses, and ordinary Cubans would be in a much better position than they are today

What is the state of Cuba's public diplomacy in 2026 in the context of Trump's threats?

Many traditional allies in the region like Mexico and Brazil have been continuing to provide humanitarian aid despite the blockade and new sanctions. But equally, Trump has insisted no country does business with Cuba unless he approves. So, this has seen countries like Guatemala scaling back their medical programs with Cuba. In June 2026, Cuba issued a package of 176 new economic reforms, opening up new areas of the economy to private business and Cuban Americans, plus allowing more foreign investment. Even private banks might now be permitted

These reforms are a new public diplomacy message. But they are unlikely to satisfy the Trump Administration because America does not want Cuba reviving foreign investment from non-American companies; U.S. sanctions remain, and U.S. pressure for a Trump deal remains. The terms of such a deal beyond economic reforms seem to change frequently.

Diaz-Canel's current public diplomacy message is that Cuba is ready for war and will fight to the last drop of blood. The Cubans know they hold cards which neither Iran nor Venezuela did. They know that Trump is unlikely to risk a ground invasion; as he said, "America does not have the stomach for it" in Iran. They also know that even their Soviet-era artillery and new drones could wreak havoc on America's Guantanamo Bay base. But the likelihood of a major investment boost from the U.S.—like that offered to Iran—may indeed be the inducement for reforms that Diaz-Canel may accept. The Cubans also know that, following his deal with Delcy Rodriguez in Venezuela, Trump is not looking to bring representative democracy to Cuba.

Equally, the power of U.S sanctions and blockade is not necessarily what it was. Crypto payments and deals through third parties are now undermining U.S dollar sanctions

throughout the world. That is part of the reason Iran was able to resist U.S. pressure. And Cuba has powerful friends like China, Vietnam, Russia and Iran. It also now has drones—probably from Russia and Iran—which are a worry to the U.S. military. And China is busy shipping solar panels to help with the energy crisis.

So, Cuba is in the midst of a public diplomacy battle. Will they offer Trump a bribe as Delcy Rodriguez did with oil? They know he wants a better Cuba deal than Obama's. And they have long had excellent intelligence on U.S. plans. Cuba has plenty of experience playing public diplomacy defense. This is their biggest test yet.
