



Cuba and U.S. Tensions Escalate

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I. Overview

A. Context

On February 25, 2026, a Florida-registered speedboat was intercepted about 30 feet away from approaching the north coast of Cuba near Cayo Falcones in the province of Villa Clara, carrying a group of 10 Cubans who had come from the United States. The Cuban Ministry of the Interior accused them of trying to infiltrate the country and carry out terrorism, describing them as "anti-government Cuban exiles." Cuban authorities alleged that when Cuban border patrol moved in to identify the boat, the occupants opened fire first, wounding the Cuban patrol commander. As a result, Cuban forces returned fire; according to Cuba's official statements, four people were killed and six were wounded. Cuban officials also claimed they recovered weapons and other gear on board, including rifles, handguns, explosives/incendiary devices (e.g. Molotov cocktails), camouflage equipment, and later reported nearly 13,000 rounds of ammunition. Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said Cuba would defend itself against the U.S., while U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed it was not a U.S. government operation and said the U.S. would independently verify what happened. Separate U.S. reporting later found that the boat had been reported stolen from a Florida Keys marina.

B. Surrounding Tensions

The recent tensions between Cuba and the U.S. also have previous context escalating the impact of this event on their relations. On January 3, 2026, U.S. President Donald J. Trump ordered a raid on the Venezuelan capital of Caracas, where Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Celia

Flores, were captured. Maduro's regime in Venezuela led to an authoritarian socialist reign on the nation and a stolen election. Maduro regained power despite losing to his opponent in the national polls⁵. Currently, Maduro and Flores are awaiting trial in New York for narco-terrorism, cocaine importation, and possession of a machinegun. After the strike on Caracas, the Cuban State Media announced that 32 Cuban citizens were killed during the attack, including military personnel from Cuba.

Since President Trump has taken office, he has held strongly in impeding on Latin American affairs, notably with his threats of tariff imposition against Mexico if there was not further action to control migration into the U.S. and against drug cartels⁷. Trump's stances on immigration and border control have also come into fire from Latin-American communities in the U.S., especially from previously Trump-supporting Cuban-Americans.

II. Policy Problem

A. Current Stances

Tensions between the United States and Cuba have risen sharply after the February 25, 2026 confrontation when Cuban border forces intercepted a Florida-registered speedboat entering Cuban territorial waters, resulting in four people killed and six wounded; Cuba claims the vessel was part of an armed infiltration, while U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio says U.S. government personnel were not involved and that Washington will conduct its own investigation before deciding next steps, even as Cuban officials emphasize national defense and condemn what they call aggression. Cuba's leadership, including President Miguel Díaz-Canel, has framed the event as resisting "terrorist" threats and reaffirmed its sovereignty, while Russia and other allies have warned against provocative actions. Within U.S. politics, Republican officials have called for accountability and

scrutiny of Cuba's account, and some Democrats are pushing legislation to ease the longstanding trade embargo, revealing divisions over how to approach Havana.

B. Policy Impact

In response to ongoing tensions, the Trump administration has escalated economic pressure on Cuba; President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order in late January 2026 declaring a national emergency on Cuba and authorizing tariffs on goods from countries that supply oil to the island, part of a strategy aimed at restricting Cuba's fuel access and signaling U.S. determination to counter what it calls threats to national security. Meanwhile, Congress has begun debating changes to long-standing Cuba policy, with Representative Jim McGovern introducing the United States-Cuba Trade Act to repeal or amend laws underpinning the decades-old embargo, marking one of the few legislative efforts to shift U.S. engagement with Havana; however, broader support remains mixed, and major bipartisan foreign policy reforms specific to Cuba have not yet passed.

III. Impact on Youth

The February 25, 2026 speedboat incident between Cuba and the United States will likely have significant effects on young people both domestically and abroad. For youth in Cuba, the event reinforces feelings of instability amid ongoing economic hardship, including shortages of fuel, electricity, and basic goods. Government framing of the incident as a defense of national sovereignty may strengthen nationalist sentiment among Cuban youth and shape their perceptions of the United States as a continued external threat. Increased tensions could also lead to heightened state messaging and reduced space for open political dialogue, further influencing how young people understand

global affairs. For Cuban diaspora youth in the United States—particularly in Florida—this incident brings foreign policy into their personal lives. Many may experience grief, anger, or fear, especially if they have family ties on the island. The event could increase political engagement among young Cuban-Americans, deepening debates over sanctions, diplomacy, and human rights. More broadly, U.S. youth may view the altercation as an example of how quickly geopolitical tensions can escalate and how foreign policy decisions directly impact civilians. Exposure to this conflict through social media and news coverage may shape a new generation's views on diplomacy, military action, and U.S.–Latin American relations. Across all communities, the psychological impact should not be overlooked, as anxiety and uncertainty surrounding international conflict can affect young people's sense of security, identity, and trust in political institutions.