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Cuba is left reeling in the aftermath of the Venezuela strike

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Cubans attend a rally Saturday in Havana in solidarity with Venezuela after the United States ...



For months as the US military prepared to strike Venezuela, many Cubans have asked me a simple, if disconcerting, question: “Are we next?”

Following the devastating attacks on Venezuelan military bases and surgical **apprehension of leader Nicolás Maduro** by US Special Forces, Cuba seems very much in the Trump administration’s sights

Maduro's capture is a seismic reversal of fortune for Cuba's communist-run government, which for decades has relied on massive aid packages from its **oil-rich South American ally** for the island's very survival.



Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel delivers a speech Saturday in Havana as he flutters a Venezuelan national flag in support of Maduro. (*Adalberto Roque/AFP/Getty Images*)

At a protest Saturday in front of the US Embassy in Havana, a defiant Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel promised not to let the Cuba-Venezuela alliance go down without a fight.

“For Venezuela, of course for Cuba, we are willing to give even our own life, but at a heavy cost,” Diaz-Canel proclaimed.

But if anything, the Cubans I have spoken with since the strikes seemed shocked by how easy it seemed for the US military to snatch Maduro without any loss of US personnel.

“For decades, first (former Venezuelan leader Hugo) Chavez and then Maduro warned of a US intervention,” said one Havana resident, who did not want their name used. “But when it finally happened, no one was ready for it. The Venezuelans had billions of dollars to equip their military. We don’t.”



Protesters hold pictures of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro (right) and former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (left) as they take part in a demonstration against the US operation in Venezuela, in front of the US Consulate in Amsterdam on Sunday. (*Robin van Lonkhuijsen/AFP/ANP/AGetty Images*)

The attack on Venezuela appears to have already come at a heavy cost for Cuba, as President Donald Trump told the New York Post on Saturday, “You know, many Cubans lost their lives last night. ... They were protecting Maduro. That was not a good move.”

The Cuban government, in a post on Facebook on Sunday, said 32 of its citizens were killed during the operation “in combat actions, performing missions on behalf of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior, at the request of counterparts of the South American country.” The government declared two days of mourning.

It would appear to be the first time in decades the former Cold War-era foes engaged in combat.

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And it seems to confirm what has long been suspected: Maduro’s inner circle of bodyguards were Cuban. Foreign diplomats stationed in Caracas reported to me for years that Maduro’s personal security spoke Spanish in Cuban accents and that Maduro, who studied in Havana in his youth, often trusted Cuban advisers over his own people.

Now, Maduro’s capture puts at risk a decadeslong alliance that saved Cuba from total economic ruin following the collapse of its former economic patron, the Soviet Union.

For years, first Chavez and then Maduro sent **billions of dollars' worth of oil** to prop up the Cuban government in exchange for a seemingly never-ending stream of Cuban intelligence and economic advisers and health care professionals.

Chavez, before his **death from cancer in 2013** following months of treatment in Cuban hospitals, declared Cuba and Venezuela were not two nations but *la gran patria* – the one homeland.

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Over the years as I traveled regularly between Cuba and Venezuela, it was hard to tell where one nation began and another ended. I once came upon a detachment of Venezuelan soldiers building a bridge in the Cuban province of Guantanamo. When I asked how long they had been there, the Venezuelan official in charge, frustrated at the lack of supplies, barked at me “Too long!”

More often than not, when I visited clinics in the poorest slums of Caracas, I encountered Cuban doctors working there. One time while covering the political upheaval in Venezuela, my cameraman and I were detained for four hours in the hot sun by Venezuela’s feared secret police, the Sebin.

They threatened to interrogate and mistreat us for being American spies but then abruptly let us go after coming across my Cuban resident ID card.

After Chavez died, official mourning was declared across Cuba to the degree that singing was banned that day in my then-2-year-old daughter’s preschool in Havana.



The coffin with the remains of late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is taken from the Military Academy to former 4 de Febrero barracks in Caracas on March 15, 2013. (*Juan Barreto/AFP/Getty Images*)

Cuba then declared Chavez to be the island's most stalwart ally since the Cuban revolution and granted him Cuban citizenship, making him the only foreigner to receive that designation since Argentine revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

But the symbiotic Venezuelan-Cuban partnership is facing unprecedented pressure in the second Trump administration and may soon be at a breaking point. Invoking a new **Monroe Doctrine**, Trump has vowed to not tolerate countries in the Western Hemisphere with interests and objectives that run contrary to that of the United States.

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“The rapid success of US military operations to oust Maduro can only empower the regime-changers in the Trump administration to put other Latin American nations in their crosshairs, starting with Cuba,” Peter Kornbluh, the coauthor of the book “Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana,” told CNN.

The increased bellicosity could not come at a worse moment for Cubans.

Already, on most days much of the island is plunged into **prolonged blackouts** because of a lack of fuel and aging power plants that break down with increasing frequency. On each government-run television newscast, an official appears to discuss the outlook of the worsening power situation as if they were predicting the weather. Shortages of food, once guaranteed by a government rationing system, are threatening to push millions of Cubans closer to malnutrition.

In December, a government commentator on state-run TV raised hackles from many on the island when he advised Cubans to give up eating rice.

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“We live in a state of war without war,” a Cuban friend told me weeks ago.

But the actual threat of military intervention may soon be coming as the end of the alliance with Venezuela would leave Cuba the most isolated it’s been since the fall

of the Soviet Union.

For regime-change hawks in the Trump administration, the opportunity to finally eliminate a foe just 90 miles from the United States could prove irresistible.

It's unclear whether threats alone will suffice in forcing Havana to give in to US pressure and release political prisoners and hold multi-party elections.

"There has never been a time when we have not faced the possibility of invasion," one stone-faced Cuban official recently told me.



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