



Integrated Country Strategy

CUBA

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

Cuba completed a multi-year political transition that placed both the Communist Party and government under the nominal control of Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez in 2021. The generational transition to a post-Revolution leadership has yielded no significant changes to Cuba. Rather, the Cuban government responded to political, economic, and COVID-related challenges by utilizing the authoritarian playbook that has sustained the regime since the Cuban Revolution: violent repression, ineffective centralized economic planning, and strident propaganda that attempts to blame the United States for its failures. While the embassy continues to operate under extremely limited staffing due to the anomalous health incidents that began in 2017, the mission is operationally focused on three key priorities: supporting Cubans seeking to exercise their universal human rights, protecting the national security of the United States and its citizens, and encouraging the growth of an empowered, innovative, and inclusive Cuba, while ensuring the safety and well-being of staff assigned in Havana.

Human Rights

Since assuming leadership as First Secretary of Communist Party in 2021, President Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez added a new chapter to Cuba's 63-year-long history of atrocious human rights abuses. Announcing on July 11, 2021 that "the order to combat has been given," Diaz-Canel unleashed a wave of state-sponsored violence and repression on the thousands of Cubans who took part in overwhelmingly peaceful protests to express their frustration over Cuba's economic failures and lack of democratic freedoms. State security forces detained roughly 1,300 people in response to the protests and created hundreds of new political prisoners who faced harsh detentions, rigged trials, and, in many cases, decades-long prison sentences for sedition. Cuban authorities regularly harass, imprison, or force into exile those who express dissenting opinions.

In an environment where the state has criminalized expressing dissent, the embassy continuously seeks to advance the cause of human rights in Cuba. While aware of the very real risks they face, the mission maintains regular engagement with human rights activists,

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dissidents, and members of civil society. Supporting independent media, access to information, and building the capacity of the independent civil society organizations to effectively advocate for the democratic aspirations of the Cuban people will remain a constant area of focus for the entire mission.

Protecting the Security of the United States and its Citizens

Throughout its modern history, Cuba has witnessed waves of irregular, outward migration. Political repression and economic hardships are among the many reasons Cubans leave to seek a better future abroad. That journey has often ended in loss of life, whether in the Florida Strait or the perilous journey overland to the United States southwest border. It is in the interest of the United States and Cuba to ensure that migration from Cuba is safe, orderly, and legal.

To that end, as staffing and safety circumstances allow, the Embassy will gradually restore consular services in Havana to include the issuance of immigrant visas, non-immigrant visas, and the processing of cases under Cuban Family Reunification Program. The mission will also seek to maintain and expand the existing cooperation between the United States and Cuba on matters related to maritime migration, law enforcement, and disaster response.

Encouraging an Empowered, Innovative, and Inclusive Cuban Society

Cuba faces a deepening economic crisis provoked mainly by years of economic mismanagement and compounded by the impacts of the COVID pandemic. Incremental reforms of Cuba's planned economy – including the legal recognition of micro, small, and medium enterprises – have followed a pattern first set during the infamous "Special Period" in the early 1990's: slowly implemented, insufficient to the real needs of the economy, and always limited by the regime's need for complete control of key sectors. Other reforms, such as the monetary unification and economic "re-ordering" that took place during a grinding recession in 2021, failed miserably and unleashed severe inflation that greatly eroded the purchasing power of Cuban workers and retirees who must live on wages and pensions paid in local currency. Cuba's economy remains heavily controlled, with large and inefficient state enterprises.

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Economists estimate Cuba's GDP shrank by as much as 13 percent during the recession that preceded the pandemic in 2020. Even optimistic projections suggest only modest GDP growth for the foreseeable future.

Cuba's economic potential lies not in continued state investments in 5-star hotels controlled by the country's military-controlled business conglomerate, but in the entrepreneurial potential of its people. The Embassy will continue to seek new ways to engage with Cuba's independent economic actors, foster Cuba's entrepreneurial eco-system, while expanding outreach to Afro-Cubans, women, and other historically disadvantaged groups.

Building a Management Platform to Best Support U.S. goals and Future Mission Growth

Embassy Havana is building a management platform prepared to support US priorities now and into the future. The reduction of Embassy staffing in 2017 exacerbated the historic challenges faced by diplomatic staff in Cuba for generations: the timely issuance of diplomatic visas and customs clearances of diplomatic cargo. As a result, the chancery is in poor condition, lacks back-up systems, and limits the ability of staff to do their work efficiently and effectively. Post has a plan to engage with Washington stakeholders to move forward quickly on various projects to improve the embassy's infrastructure, build redundancies, and ensure the safety of our entire mission team. Improving staff morale and empowering our diverse team will be a clear mission priority.

2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Advance human rights and democracy in Cuba

- **Mission Objective 1.1:** Promote respect for human rights and support human rights activists
- **Mission Objective 1.2:** Identify and engage the next generation of Cuban civil society leaders in support of their democratic aspirations

Mission Goal 2: Protect the national security and safety of the United States and its citizens through proper engagement in law enforcement, border security, and emergency response

- **Mission Objective 2.1:** Foster effective communication and coordination between U.S. and Cuban law enforcement and security agencies to increase cooperation on shared goals, including border security and safe, legal, and orderly migration.
- **Mission Objective 2.2:** Facilitate safe and efficient legitimate travel of Cuban citizens to the United States
- **Mission Objective 2.3:** Provide routine and emergency services to ensure the safety and well-being of U.S. citizens residing in and visiting Cuba
- **Mission Objective 2.4:** Enhance air, maritime, and first responder cooperation in search and rescue, environmental disaster response, and other crisis situations

Mission Goal 3: Encourage the growth of an empowered, innovative, and inclusive Cuban society

- **Mission Objective 3.1:** Support the development of private economic activity and encourage a more open economy through engagement with entrepreneurs and private businesses

- **Mission Objective 3.2:** Leverage diplomatic, information and economic tools to support underserved communities and to engage with civil society on racial and gender equity and social inclusion.

Management Objective 1: Upgrade the Embassy's infrastructure to properly support the functions and demands of the bilateral relationship and to support increased staffing of U.S. personnel, as required

Management Objective 2: Strengthen the resiliency of U.S. staff and improve their quality of life in Havana

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1: Advance Human Rights in Cuba

Description: Advancing human rights has been at the forefront of U.S. policy toward Cuba for nearly half a century. The Cuban Communist Party and the authoritarian government it controls consider legitimate dissent both a threat and a criminal act. The individuals and organizations that speak up on behalf of Cubans' aspirations for universal human rights do so at considerable risk, as dissidents and peaceful protestors face harassment, arrest, and lengthy prison sentences. The United States, through its engagement with human rights activists and denunciations of Cuban abuses, upholds our universal values and promotes human dignity in the face of a regime that denies its citizens the basic freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which it is a signatory.

Objective 1.1: Promote respect for human rights and support human rights activists

- **Justification** | With hundreds of Cubans facing decades-long prison sentences for peaceful protests in 2021, the cause of promoting respect for human rights and raising global awareness about those arbitrarily imprisoned by the regime is as desperately needed as ever. Creating space, through our support and advocacy, for them to do their work is vital. This includes Cuba's independent media, which is under constant threat.
- **Linkages:** Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) Goal 3, Joint Regional Strategy (JRS) Objectives 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, and 6.1
- **Risks:** The Cuban government actively represses human rights activists with threats, fines, and arbitrary detentions. It uses every authoritarian tactic at its disposal to block both U.S. and international efforts to foster basic respect for universal human rights. Persistent engagement and support for these individuals is essential and helps mitigate the great personal peril they face for their activism.

Objective 1.2: Identify and engage the next generation of Cuban civil society leaders in support of their democratic aspirations

- **Justification:** Cuba's future will be determined by its youth. To build a future with greater economic and political freedoms, they need to remain connected with each other and the outside world. In contrast, the regime actively attempts to frustrate those efforts and to condemn its youth to de-facto exile or imprisonment simply for publicly expressing dissent.
- **Linkages:** JSP Objectives 3.1 and 3.2 JRS Objectives 1.1, 2.1, and 6.1
- **Risks:** Cuba does not permit a civil society to exist independent of Communist Party control. Members of civil society organizations, the independent press, and similar interests live under constant threat.

Mission Goal 2: Protect the national security and safety of the United States and its citizens through proper engagement in law enforcement, border security, and emergency response

Description: The United States and Cuba have a shared interest in deterring irregular migration, disrupting transnational criminal organizations, ensuring safe transportation networks, and in protecting their citizens. That shared interest has ensured that cooperation in these areas has remained relatively productive despite other strains in the bilateral relationship. Our persistent engagement helps advance our national security and protects U.S. citizens at home and in Cuba. The gradual restoration of visa-related consular services in Havana will further reinforce our commitment to safe, legal, and orderly migration. While the COVID pandemic limited Cuba's willingness to accept repatriation flights, cooperation in the repatriation of Cuban migrants interdicted at sea continued unabated. Advance coordination and planning in areas of disaster and emergency response could potentially help protect the welfare of permanent and temporary U.S. visitors in Cuba after a hurricane or other emergency.

Objective 2.1: Foster effective coordination between U.S. and Cuban law enforcement and security agencies to increase cooperation on shared goals, including border security, law enforcement, search and rescue, and disaster response

- **Justification:** Cuban mass migration events have figured prominently in the 63 years of US/Cuban relations since the 1959 Revolution. Both countries have a shared interest in ensuring that migration is safe, legal, and orderly. Similarly, both countries have a shared interest in denying transnational criminal organizations the ability to operate and pose a threat to our national security.
- **Linkages:** JSP Objectives 3.4 and 1.3 JRS Objectives 3.1 and 3.4
- **Risks:** Cuba's economic mismanagement and political repression are a significant push factor for irregular migration. Following the July 11 protests and lifting of pandemic travel restrictions, Cuban migration to the United States has reached levels

not seen in decades. While the Cuban regime publicly asserts its interest in deterring irregular migration, historically the government has used migration as a 'pressure release valve' to help reduce internal pressures connected to its repression and the lack of economic opportunities on the island.

Objective 2.2: Facilitate Safe and Efficient Legitimate Travel of Cuban Citizens to the United States

- **Justification:** The efficient provision of visa services will help reduce some pressure to pursue irregular routes of migration. This includes both immigrant visas, which will allow families in the United States to reunite with relatives with long- pending immigrant visa petitions as well as the resumption of some non-immigrant visa services that support the U.S. interest in facilitating short-term travel for business, education, cultural exchange and tourism.
- **Linkages:** JSP Goal 5, JRS Objective 3.1
- **Risks:** The restoration of a fully functional consular operation will be gradual. Therefore, reducing the backlog of pending immigrant visa cases will take time. Managing expectations for Cuban travelers and, in the case of immigrant visas, their U.S. family members will be required as demand will exceed the embassy's capacity in the short and medium term.

Objective 2.3: Provide routine and emergency services to ensure the safety and well-being of U.S. citizens residing in and visiting Cuba

- **Justification:** The well-being of American citizens resident or visiting Cuba is a mission priority. It is hard to understate the importance of providing emergency consular services given the nature of Cuba's police state.
- **Linkages:** JSP Objective 5.1, JRS Objective 3.1
- **Risks:** The Cuban government does not recognize the dual citizenship of Cuban-American citizens that it detains, making consular notification and access a challenge.

Mission Goal 3: Encourage the growth of an empowered, innovative, and inclusive Cuban society

Description: Cuba's mismanaged, state-dominated economy is struggling to emerge from a sharp recession exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cuban military's corporate conglomerate (Grupo de Administracion Empresarial or GAESA) controls the few sectors of the economy that remain profitable. Otherwise, Cuba's economy is dominated by large, unproductive state enterprises and an agricultural sector that suffers from too little government investment and too much government interference. Despite an extraordinarily difficult economic environment and the constraints imposed by the Cuban government, Cuba's innovative and determined private entrepreneurs continue to try and carve out space in which to operate. Cuba's largest sources of income – tourism, service exports in the form of medical and other workers, and remittances – fall short of sufficiently funding the multitude of imports the island needs to sustain its people, including food, fertilizers, medicine, and fuel. Direct foreign investment is minimal. Recent economic reforms have done little to stimulate new, sustainable economic development. In some cases, they worsened the ongoing economic crisis, which rivals the years known as the Special Period, which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and its generous subsidies.

Objective 3.1: Support the development of private economic activity and encourage a more open economy through engagement with entrepreneurs and private businesses

- **Justification:** Cuba's route to a more prosperous future lies in the innovation and enterprise of the Cuban people. U.S. economic outreach is designed to support and empower Cuba's private sector innovators, as they seek new pathways to prosperity, through programs that build their capacity and link them with the broader global economy.
- **Linkages:** JSP Goal 2.1 JRS Goals 2 and 4, Objective 6.1

- **Risks:** For many years, Cuban reforms to permit and foster private economic activity have followed a pattern of slow implementation, insufficient measures, followed by periods of retrenchment. One of the many factors that constrains Cuba's economic growth is the risk that any private sector reforms could (and have been) easily be rescinded.

Objective 3.2: Leverage diplomatic, information and economic tools to support underserved communities and to engage with civil society on racial and gender equity and social inclusion

- **Justification:** Cuba's future prosperity will rest – in part – on developing an open economy that serves all members of society. Historically, Cubans have not benefitted equally in Cuba's development since the 1959 Revolution. Afro-Cubans, for example, have unequal access to higher education and professional opportunities. Despite the ideals espoused publicly by Cuban officials, Cuba has much work ahead if it is to achieve a society that is inclusive, accepting, and that provides equal opportunities to all.
- **Linkages:** JSP Objectives 2.1, 2.2, and 3.2 JRS Goal 2 and Objectives 4.1 and 4.3
- **Risks:** As with any Cuban who attempts to raise awareness or advocate about issues in society, such advocacy poses certain risks for the individuals doing that important work, particularly if they are perceived as engaging directly with the United States or the embassy.

4. Management Objectives

Management Objective 1: Upgrade the Embassy's infrastructure to properly support the functions and demands of the bilateral relationship and to support increased staffing of U.S. personnel, as required.

- **Justification:** Embassy facilities have suffered from decades of insufficient support and maintenance due to the strict shipping and visa limitations imposed by the Cuban government. Those chronic issues have been exacerbated by the impacts of Hurricane Irma in 2017 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Irma caused significant damage to the chancery and COVID travel restrictions further limited the delivery of critical supplies. In order to better support 21st century diplomacy and have the flexibility to support increased staffing, the backlog of projects in the chancery building, post housing, and information technology projects need to be addressed.
- **Linkages:** JSP Goal 4 and JRS Objective 7.1
- **Risks:** Post's ability to address these projects is completely dictated by Cuba's willingness to allow them to take place. Delays in the issuance of Cuban visas and/or onerous shipping restrictions could bring any planned project to a halt.

Management Objective 2: Strengthen the resiliency of U.S. staff and improve their quality of life in Havana

- **Justification:** Even during normal times, an assignment in Cuba can test the resiliency of USDH staff. As an expeditionary post operating at staffing levels a fraction of normal levels due to the anomalous health incidents (AHIs), the resiliency and morale of USDH staff has been greatly tested – especially when the COVID pandemic led to even greater scarcities in basic items due to the inability to deliver diplomatic pouch shipments. This forced the embassy management team to take on abnormal responsibilities just to ensure continued operations. Post-pandemic, a reinvigorated Havana Employee Association and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access (DEIA) committee will play a significant role in helping ensure that embassy staff, both U.S. and local hires, will have greater resiliency and support, and build a stronger team to support to U.S. diplomatic objectives in Cuba.
- **Linkages:** JSP Goal 4 and JRS Objective 7.1
- **Risks:** Maintaining active and robust volunteer organizations like an employee association or diversity committee requires a significant time commitment, particularly for a post with such reduced staffing. Service in Cuba poses a perennial resiliency challenge given the unique factors, like constant state surveillance, that come with life in a police state.