

# The United States, Venezuela, Cuba and the Caribbean

by George Friedman - October 20, 2025

Much has been made of the deployment of U.S. naval forces in the Caribbean, off the coast of Venezuela, to interdict and sink ships belonging to drug cartels. But less attention has been paid to Washington's increased interest in the Caribbean generally.

The Monroe Doctrine, which was issued in the early 19th century, said that the United States would resist any intrusion of European powers in the Western Hemisphere. This policy was the basis under which the U.S. acted against the Soviet presence in Cuba and, in the 1980s, was engaged in funding the Contras in Nicaragua. Both instances were presented as based on fundamental geopolitical U.S. interests. The Monroe Doctrine also said that the U.S. would not engage in Europe, a principle that was broken with some reluctance in the world wars and the Cold War.

The current fundamental policy of the United States is to disengage from Europe, not to mention the rest of the world, to the extent possible. This is based on the strategic principle that the Monroe Doctrine is the geopolitical foundation of the U.S., insulated as it is by two oceans. Given the doctrine and the policy of disengagement, it follows that the U.S. will oppose intrusion from outside powers throughout the Western Hemisphere. The right to national self-determination was, of course, dismissed by President James Monroe; the doctrine implicitly meant the U.S. would intervene in South and Central America without the consent of South and Central American governments. In short, the Monroe Doctrine was both an imperial dictate and a geopolitical necessity for U.S. national security.

It is in this context that we must consider U.S. actions in the Caribbean. The U.S. used the Monroe Doctrine to justify its military interventions in Latin America throughout the Cold War, and especially in the 1980s. The interventions had two dimensions: covert operations against drug cartels and, most notably, the Soviet presence in Cuba.

A significant portion of U.S. activity was triggered by the fact that the Soviet Union was engaged in covert operations designed to destabilize Latin American countries and, if possible, create pro-Soviet regimes. In some of these cases, the Soviets supplied cartels with weapons advisers to capitalize on the weakening of government power. The U.S. countered with its own covert operations designed to

block Soviet efforts and to intervene against the cartels, in Colombia, for example. Many of Moscow's operations were run out of Cuba. But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has limited its engagement. Meanwhile, drug cartels grew dramatically stronger. And because Russia was less engaged with them, the U.S. reduced its engagement in kind.

To me, the present-day tensions between the U.S. and Russia have new concerns over Cuba. Moscow recently signed a new military agreement with Cuba, raising the possibility of an increased Russian presence as a response to U.S. actions in Ukraine (including the possible provision of Tomahawk missiles) that, to Russia, make Moscow vulnerable to attack. Russia's logical counter would be to renew its relationship with Cuba and place advanced weapons in Cuba.

Moreover, a presence in Cuba would put Russia in a position to expose one of America's biggest economic liabilities. At least half of all U.S. imports and exports go through the ports of the Gulf Coast. Texas and Louisiana are of fundamental economic importance to the U.S., and if they were blocked, America's Atlantic and Pacific ports would struggle to offset any trade shortfalls. And it wouldn't be difficult to block: The Gulf ports have a single exit point, the Straits of Florida, located just south of Key West and spanning about 90 miles (145 kilometers) wide at their narrowest point. The straits are a necessity to the United States and are therefore of interest to the Russians.

U.S. President Donald Trump has been concerned about drug cartels. Given the current geopolitical reality, the possibility of renewed Russian relations with the cartels may be well-founded, especially in light of the recent military agreement in Cuba. U.S. policies in Ukraine make a Russian reprisal conceivable.

Assuming this analysis of the situation is correct – and it may not be – it would explain U.S. actions against Venezuela. The increased naval presence in the Caribbean provides a force to threaten Cuba from the south and north and significantly limits Russia's ability to threaten the Straits of Florida. It also deters a potential Russian naval buildup. Last, it makes Cuba think more about U.S. interest in its future. Placing Russian missiles in Cuba might threaten the U.S., but it would create an existential threat to the Cuban regime.

Again, my analysis may be wrong, but it seems to me that the Ukraine war and the fear of U.S. weapons in Ukraine have triggered a Russian counter in Cuba itself, enhancing the power of cartels that are already seen as threats to U.S. interests. This may be a signal to Russia that, in reality, it has no counter.

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