

# The credible threat of the use of force by the United States and the transformational change in Cuba. Interview with Juan Antonio Blanco

*Juan Antonio Blanco*

**A**t a moment marked by abrupt transformations in hemispheric politics and economics, Nicolás Maduro's departure from power has reshaped the geopolitical balance in Latin America, particularly for authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. In this interview, Ph.D Juan Antonio Blanco, historian, diplomat, political analyst, and director of the Cuban Observatory of Conflicts (OCC), to whom I am grateful for his time and willingness, analyzes the implications of U.S. foreign policy doctrine and the new dynamics of pressure on the Venezuelan and Cuban regimes. Drawing on a historical and strategic analysis, he reflects on the role of international pressure, the relevance of public opinion, and the real possibilities of a transition to democracy.

**Sergio Angel [S.A.]** Well, Juan Antonio, it's a pleasure to meet you and have this conversation at such a unique juncture. It's been almost two months now, perhaps a month and a half, since Nicolás Maduro was removed from power, and with that removal, the entire landscape for Latin America changed, particularly for the authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as well as for other governments that were beginning to undergo a process of autocratization. So I want to start there. For you, what does Nicolás Maduro's removal from power, through the U.S. operation that led to his arrest and subsequent detention in a U.S. prison, mean in this context?

**Juan Antonio Blanco [J.A.B.]** It's clearly a change in the rules of the game as they had been played up until now by various U.S. administrations and the leeway they had gradually granted to the Maduro regime, the Chavista regime

The rules of the game changed; it was demonstrated that they had changed not in rhetoric, but in practice, because the Cuban side, evidently, along with the Chavistas, was betting that everything would remain the same and that it was simply Trump's rhetoric that was novel, but that it would not go beyond the limits of what had been done since Lyndon B. Johnson to the present, which was to apply the doctrine of containment.

In other words, in the face of the Cuban revolutionary phenomenon, Eisenhower in 1959 and later Kennedy, for a

short time, applied the *Rollback* doctrine or how to bring about regime change "backwards". After the 1962 missile crisis, an agreement was reached with the Soviet Union, and the doctrine of containment was applied from then on. That is what had governed the situation until now.

That is why, as long as the balance of no nuclear weapons on the island was maintained, Cuba, as a sub-power allied with Moscow, was allowed, time and again, to engage in subversion in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, simply because that threshold of nuclear threat that had existed in 1962 was not crossed. They believed it would be the same with Trump. That only his rhetoric was different, and they realized that no, that the Trump doctrine rolls back the paradigm of foreign policy toward the hemisphere to the Monroe Doctrine, adapting it with its Trump corollary. It is now simply a *rollback* of communist and mafia regimes.

**S.A.** What do you think was revealed by the fact that Nicolás Maduro's closest security detail was composed of Cuban agents, after the Cuban regime had repeatedly denied the presence of Venezuelan military personnel on its territory in various instances?

**J.A.B.** It became evident that the Cuban regime was lying. There are even recorded interviews, for example, of Maduro with Latin American and U.S. journalists in which he categorically denies that anyone in his personal guard is Cuban, yet it was demonstrated that the dictator's immediate security rings were made up of Cubans.

But other things were also demonstrated, the weakness of Cuban intelligence in foreseeing what was going to happen was demonstrated. It was Cuban intelligence that persuaded Chavismo, persuaded Maduro, that he was perfectly protected by their intelligence capacity to anticipate any type of American intervention, as well as by the Russian and Chinese weaponry they had there, to defend themselves efficiently from any interference, military intervention, etc.

It became clear that there had been Cuban interference and military intervention on Venezuelan territory. The full extent

of it hasn't come to light yet. It will come to light there is a wealth of evidence.

So, that supposed effectiveness of the Cuban intelligence service in foreseeing and anticipating events didn't work. They simply misjudged this president. They were viewing him as just another U.S. president they were about to face or even thought it will just be a repetition of Trump's policies in his first term.

I remember that in an interview, the journalist said to me, "Well, the Cubans say they've already faced twelve presidents; this is the thirteenth one they're ready to defeat". My response was, "Remind them that the number thirteen is connected to bad luck; that number is unlucky".

And clearly things aren't going well for them. But they aren't going well because the first thing you need to anticipate is a good assessment of what you're facing. And this isn't just another U.S. presidency. This is a president and an administration that isn't here to "administer" the powers of the United States in a creative way within an inherited and stable paradigmatic framework.

This is an administration that aims for a change in the international and national order. It aims for a change in the international order because it does not accept the rules that have been governing it as such. For example, they openly refer to the UN, the OAS, and NATO as institutions that, if not radically reformed, they would prefer to see disappear. In other words, "either we fix things, or Washington isn't interested in being part of that international order".

Internally, you see that as they eliminate, for example, certain services and ministries, and return or decentralize education back to the states, there is a transition process to transform the great welfare state created by Franklin D. Roosevelt into a minimal government that focuses on empowering private enterprise and individual initiatives. The aim, in any case, is to strip the central government of its authority, leaving it a skeleton that is basically dedicated to matters of security and the economy, the latter mostly understood as business promotion.

Everything is a regime change; that is, that was the previous regime that all the other governments were managing. What, as they say, communist now mafia-like Cuba faced was different, it was something else, and they had another doctrine to confront Cuba, it was the doctrine of containment. This one, I repeat, is managing an international and national regime change.

All of these are shifts in paradigms and systems of governance. What is being "managed" is a shift in the paradigm

and the system of international and national governance. A revolution.

As I mentioned before since 1962, international policy toward Cuba had been governed by a doctrine of containment. On January 30, after suspending oil shipments from Venezuela to Cuba, higher trade tariffs were announced for any country sending oil to Cuba. This jeopardized the possibility of shipments from Mexico, which, since 2025, had already begun to offset the reductions in oil shipments from Venezuela. This acute pressure has placed regime change in Cuba back onto the agenda through outstanding economic pressure on any negotiation.

**S.A.** How do you view this approach? Do you think it will be effective enough, or how far will the Trump administration escalate this?

**J.A.B.** I believe that some of those kinds of overall economic measures could be elements of a general policy of maximum pressure, but that this will not necessarily bring about the result aimed at. I am also often asked if there are ongoing negotiations. There is a great deal of semantic confusion in that people talk about negotiations and dialogues where there are only conversations. The three things are not the same.

At the most basic level, you may have an exchange with your adversary about specific issues you need to resolve. During the Vietnam War, the Americans would occasionally meet with the Vietnamese to reach an agreement not to attack each other during Christmas and the Lunar New Year. That was a specific issue; they weren't trying through those conversations to reach an overall agreement to bring about peace in Vietnam.

Later, Kissinger established a dialogue, a higher level of exchange, with the Vietnamese in Paris, where they began to explore whether it was possible to negotiate peace and, to that end, identify what the basic needs of each side were. When I say "needs", it's because there's always a lot of rhetoric in these exchanges, but in the end, you have to boil it down to the essence, "Tell me honestly what is essential to you, and I'll tell you honestly what is essential to me", and then we'll see if those issues can be resolved or not.

When that dialogue in Paris revealed that a peace agreement recognizing certain premises was possible, they moved on to negotiations. That is the phase where you sit down with pen and paper, write a paragraph, write another, negotiate changes, and so on. The press, colloquially, uses those terms, conversation, dialogue, negotiation interchangeably. When they should say that the United States sought a conversation with Cuba, they will tell you, "the United States is seeking a negotiation

with Cuba”, and that confuses people and creates many false expectations.

There’s also another important point, these exercises are very different when you’re dealing with criminals. The SWAT team’s negotiation manual is different because the counterpart is different. It’s very different to talk to criminals. It’s not the same procedure used for negotiating according to Harvard; they’re different. At Harvard, they teach you how to negotiate with a rational actor; in SWAT, you learn to negotiate with irrational actors.

So, what does a SWAT negotiator do when he arrives at a bank that has been taken over by a group of criminals? The first thing he does is to position snipers on the surrounding rooftops so that their laser beams shine through the building’s windows, ensuring that the conversation is backed by the credible threat of possible use of deadly force. At the same time, a SWAT negotiator presents a calm and rational perspective to the other side, “You are surrounded; you have no chance of getting out of here alive. If you harm the hostages, you will all die, and if you try to escape, you won’t succeed and you will die as well. Now, if you hand over the hostages to me, I promise we can speak with the Prosecutor’s Office to consider that you released the hostages, regretted what you had done, and always treated the hostages humanely. That way, we can negotiate some kind of agreement with the Prosecutor’s Office”. At that moment, SWAT is talking to the other side based on a credible threat to use deadly force. The credibility of the threat is underscored by the sniper’s laser beam coming through the window.

Well, at this moment, they are also talking with the Cuban government; they are seeking avenues for conversation. But what they are seeking at this initial stage is not yet a dialogue or a negotiation, but a conversation.

What is the other nonverbal communication mechanism the United States is using with Cuba’s leadership?

Maximum economic pressure and the presence of warships around the island, along with reconnaissance flights to determine where the radars are and what frequencies they use. All of that is also nonverbal communication; it is also language.

On the one hand, you’re telling the bandit, “We’d better reach an agreement on this”, and the other way to communicate with the bandit is that you have an aircraft carrier parked off the coast of Varadero, you have two warships in the northeastern part of Cuba, you have two more ships in the Passage between Cuba and Haiti, and you have reinforced GITMO, the Guantanamo base, with helicopters and aircraft. Therefore, all of these are elements of communication that you are using between Washington and Havana that the latter

cannot ignore. It is a reminder that your offers to talk are backed by a credible threat of the possible use of deadly force.

So, that is where we stand right now, even though the press tries to claim otherwise.

We are seeking to talk with the other side, and we are seeking to talk with the real power in Cuba, not the formal power represented by Díaz-Canel. What is clear from this entire process is that the United States is not interested in Díaz-Canel, nor is it interested in Marrero. The State Department’s response was spot-on when a journalist asked, “Who are you negotiating with?” and they replied, “We are not negotiating; we are talking”. That was said by someone who knows what he was

*S.A.* Do you think that for this conversation to turn into a dialogue and negotiations, greater pressure from Washington is necessary? By pressure, I mean, for example, imposing sanctions on countries that contract medical missions or missions in general; that would directly affect Cuba’s main source of income, which is the export of professional services. Do you think there could be sanctions against those who have, for example, some kind of connection to tourism on the island? That would be directly affected, it already is due to existing sanctions, but if this were to be escalated, for instance, to include Spanish companies and flights, which, ultimately, are the only thing still allowing for some kind of supply chain that remains in place, those would be permanently suspended. Where is this increased pressure headed? Because that’s also somewhat the Trump model, ramping up pressure to the maximum to force negotiations under unequal terms that favor the U.S. position. Where do you think this pressure will continue, or do you think the pressure is already sufficient?

*J.A.B.* Some of the things you’ve mentioned have already happened. For some time now, the United States has been sanctioning and pressuring countries that have Cuban medical brigades. Several countries in the Caribbean and Central America have already told them that the contract with the Cuban medical brigade is ending and they’re leaving, so that pressure is already being exerted.

The United States still have other cards to play, meaning they can target GAESA’s offshore accounts in tax havens and freeze them. Just like they did recently, when Maduro’s accounts were frozen in Swiss banks. So, it’s also possible to carry out “surgical financial operations” against the Cuban oligarchy.

But when I’ve been asked about this, I have always said the following, “There are people who, with the best intentions in the world, believe that everything boils down to

the economy, and that is false. The economy doesn't decide everything. What decides everything is people's perception of their circumstances, of the causes of their circumstances, and of whether they believe they can change those circumstances—whether they believe they can or cannot transform the situation they're in. We must be very careful not to fuel the Cuban regime's propaganda campaign by taking measures that can easily be exploited to distort their purpose and present them to the population as unnecessary measures aimed more against the Cuban people than against the regime. If they succeed in this propaganda maneuver, then some people who hate them and want them to leave the country as soon as possible might begin to have doubts about whether they should welcome the U.S. policy of maximum pressure with open arms.

That is a strategic, central, and decisive issue, to first think how Cuban public opinion may react and swing. The rest is another story. But Cuban public opinion is where many decisive battles will be won or lost. And they won't win simply because you took away 100 more barrels of oil or allow the arrival of an additional 100 barrels of oil; they are won when people understand why they are in the situation they're in, even though the oligarchy lives in the best possible paradise. We are struggling to win over the reasoning process of the regular citizen. That is where a decisive cognitive dissonance has already been created for the promotion of change. An internal psychological conflict between what for several decades they had come to believe fanatically and what today's reality tells them. The way millions of people try to rationalize this in order to cope with their sense of guilt for having supported that regime for decades boils down to the following, "They sold me a revolution of the humble, by the humble, and for the humble, and these people betrayed it, turning it into a society of oligarchs, by the oligarchs and for the oligarchs. This is not what they promised me. I am living in a way that I neither deserve nor have any reason to tolerate".

Now, those who make policy decisions regarding Cuba from abroad must think four times before making any decision about how it will be interpreted by the population in Cuba. Will it encourage them to fight, or will it confuse and demobilize them?

**S.A.** Under these circumstances, and considering, moreover, that we are still in an election year in the United States, even though there is time until November, do you think the *deadline* for the Trump administration regarding this possibility of change is November? In other words, are we talking about an expiration date for pressure on the Cuban regime, a regime that is also an expert at buying time? How do you view this issue?

**J.A.B.** I'd say August or September. First, oil supplies will run out by the end of March, and in April, as unbelievable as it may seem, the situation will deteriorate to a level even more serious than it is now even if a few ships loaded with oil arrive to the island. Now, why do I say September? When summer begins, if they even make it to summer, it's statistically proven that social unrest increases, but this time at a very delicate and fragile moment. So, how are they going to handle the repression when they have a new kind of president in the United States right next door, who could stand with the protesters and say, "I'm not going to seek an agreement to maintain the same government with basically the same people; instead, I'm going straight for a change in the political system, the government team, and the economic model". And additionally, "I am not going to allow that you unleash another brutal repression against those who think of you as I do in Cuba".

Maduro and Raul are different cases. It's not worth trying to remove a 94-year-old man, who might die before we get him on the helicopter, and who isn't worth the money that operation would cost me. But Trump can tell them, "If you once again unleash the repressive hordes of black-bereted police, Section 21 of the Ministry of the Interior, and the special military counterintelligence brigades against peaceful protesters, I will pulverize those units and their top commanders".

And for doing that, the USA don't have to put a single ranger on the ground or a pilot in the skies over Cuba. They can do it for days, weeks or months with *Predator* drones firing *Hellfire* missiles with tremendous precision, as well as with *Tomahawk* missiles that can be launched by U.S. Navy ships off the Cuban coast. When the Cuban people come to realize that Washington is willing to protect and defend them from these repressive hordes that have acted with impunity until today, they will very likely take to the streets in masse, far more so than on July 11, 2021, and under such conditions, it is also very likely that the chain of command within the military will break down and the civilian government will fall as well.

Venezuela is not Cuba. Venezuela is, and still is, a criminal, corrupt, murderous dictatorship, a narco-state, but it is not a totalitarian regime. If it were a totalitarian regime, there would be no registered political parties; it would not even have been possible to hold a sham election, let alone for the opposition to win one. That does not happen in Cuba. In Cuba, all political and economic power is centralized. In Venezuela, power is distributed across an archipelago of autonomous, armed power centers, Diosdado over there with his *colectivos*, Padrino with the armed forces, the ELN and FARC guerrillas armed and controlling territory. That doesn't happen in Cuba, the entire national territory is centralized and controlled.

To use a metaphor, one could say that the beheading of the head of the snake, whether it decides to step aside on its own or is forcefully cut off, will likely cause the entire chain of command to collapse, and the story ends as suddenly as the disappearance of the USSR after the failed coup against Gorbachev. So, to begin with, Venezuela and Cuba are not at all the same things. It's a very different situation. And you don't always need a traitor at the top of the government, but rather a figure with clean hands, preferably a high-ranking military officer, active or retired, who says, "Listen, I'm willing to cooperate with a transition".

The Polish military leaders who had indeed previously killed people during the demonstrations of Solidarity said at one point, "It's over; we're going to engage in dialogue, we're going to reach an agreement, and we're going to change this situation and initiate a transition process". When they will finally come to realize that repression won't allow them to continue controlling Cuba's *status quo*, because the U.S. is paralyzing their repression, which is the only tool they have to stay in power, then they'll have an epiphany and will have to start thinking about how to join (instead of opposing) a change that's already inevitable.

And that's where talks come in handy. Trump spoke with Maduro more than once. Essentially, he told Maduro, "You can leave; you can go wherever you want, you can take a sum of money with you, you can take your immediate family with you, but if you stay there, you will face the consequences". The guy decided to stay and had to face the consequences. So, talking is not a crime against humanity, far from it; talking is telling your adversary what his options are and, most importantly... that he will have no others.

**S.A.** Juan Antonio, given these circumstances, if your *deadline* is August or September, what happens the day after? I mean, what's going to happen? What do you foresee in terms of that change? Because the big question, if there is a transition, is that I think we all still have a hard time talking about this word, but we also had a hard time talking about that word with Venezuela. What will that process be like that moment afterward? Because they're going to aim for, I mean, if there are negotiations, this will lead to a fraudulent change, as has been seen in moments like, for example, during the Obama administration. How do you see it?

**J.A.B.** In Cuba, we don't have to face an archipelago of autonomous armed powers like in Venezuela that you need to neutralize until everything those in power are finally replaced by a democratically elected government. Here, the situation is completely different.

What would that transition phase look like? In the Venezuelan case, there was no roadmap backed by the U.S.

Congress. For Cuba, there is a script written and approved in 1996 with overwhelming bipartisan support a law that exists and is in force, which can only be repealed if two-thirds of the Senate and the House of Representatives vote in favor to do so, something impossible under current circumstances. I am referring to the Liberty Act, known as Helms-Burton, which specifically establishes a roadmap for that first phase of transition and the later move toward democracy.

When one talks about Helms-Burton, everyone focuses on what Chapter Three says, which is what has been talked about the most, which is the one that establishes the compensation that can be claimed in U.S. courts by those persons who were U.S. citizens and whose properties were confiscated with a value of more than \$50,000 dollars at the time of confiscation.

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No one talks about Chapter Two. Chapter Two is a roadmap for how the United States can immediately support a transitional government and what the tasks of that transitional government would be. It explains how that transitional government, over an 18-month period, must create the conditions for recovery and stabilization necessary to hold elections. Then, with a democratically elected government, elections internationally observed and certified by the U.S. Congress, the country would enter a truly democratic transition.

Now, the Helms-Burton Act does not tell you how the first stage begins, nor does it specify how one reaches the point at which a transitional government "emerges". It does not say, "The transitional government will emerge from the current government itself, with a reformist group". It does not say that the transitional government is the one that will emerge when the opposition overthrows the existing government. Neither does not say, "The transitional government is the one we will achieve when we intervene militarily in Cuba and impose such a government".

It says none of that. What it says is that if a transitional government emerges in Cuba, and it leaves it to the imagination how that might happen, that government must release political prisoners, restore political, civil, and economic freedoms, pave the way for a constituent assembly and free elections, open up to foreign investment, and change, modify, and update the role and mission of the armed and security forces. And it establishes that the United States, as soon as it sees that there is a transitional government, however it may come about, and it begins to fulfill these requirements, must immediately begin to provide support in the form of massive humanitarian aid,

electricity generators, the search for resources for investment within the country, and advice to the armed forces to modify their military doctrine immediately. All of that even before elections have taken place.

Now, what form would that transitional government take? Well, that remains very open-ended and depends on how the change comes about. If the change occurs because, from the outset, there is a genuine breakaway by a group of people who, I repeat, step aside and negotiate with civil society, etc., well, that is one way. The other way is that they are defeated by some sort of U.S. military intervention when they begin to repress protesters, in which case a different situation arises. In any of those circumstances, there might be a need for some kind of provisional transitional governing administrative council (cannot be called government because it will not be elected), supervised or whatever you want to call it, under U.S. auspices. That doesn't mean they have to put "boots on the ground", as they did in 1898.

And I would say that this initial transition period, during which the country is not yet under the leadership of a democratically elected government, shall be led by a meritocratic, professional administration like the one established by governor Leonard Wood in 1898. Under his leadership, Cuban and American experts jointly worked to create the institutions of the new Cuba so that the first government elected by Cubans in free elections could later emerge and take over.

All of this was provided for in the U.S. declaration of war against Spain. Article Four of the Joint Resolution, introduced as an amendment by Senator Henry M. Teller, stated that immediately following a period during which the United States would help create the institutional structure and prepare Cubans for self-government, elections would be held and full sovereignty and independence would be transferred to them. There was then a debate over the Platt amendment that the U.S. wanted added to the 1901 Cuban Constitution, which in this case had been drafted by Senator Thomas C. Platt. Undoubtedly, the amendment placed limits on sovereignty in that Cuba could not cede military bases to other countries, demanded three for the USA (they only got one in Guantanamo) and economic agreements with other powers (they later extended a special favorable economic treaty to Cuba) would also have to be reviewed. Now, in point four of the Joint Resolution, it was the Teller Amendment that, leaving no room for misunderstanding, established that once the war was over, the United States was committed to respecting the independence and sovereignty of the Cuban people and transferring power to them.

What the United States did not want to do in 1898 was to recognize the armed Cuban government, just as it now refuses

to recognize the government of María Corina Machado, because it believed a period of stabilization was necessary, given that the war in Cuba had caused a humanitarian crisis and left deep wounds and resentments between the two sides.

The efforts to secure concrete action from Washington, rather than merely declarative statements as had been the case up to that point, were carried out by the Mambí diplomacy. The long-held notion that the Mambís were winning the war and that the imperialist eagle snatched victory from them is not supported by reality. It is a legend of Cuban nationalism. There are letters from Don Tomas Estrada Palma, the country's first president, to whom Martí entrusted the affairs of the Party when he went to Cuba to join the war, that tell a different story. It was Don Tomás who led Mambí diplomacy within the United States. And there are letters from him in which he essentially states, we had to ask for U.S. intervention because we had lost the Ten Years' War, and we had already been fighting for three years; without support from any other country and with the fortunes of Cuban patriots in exile depleted, we were on the verge of losing this new war of independence. And it is for that reason, not because they were winning the war, that Máximo Gómez, military commander of all the insurrectionary forces, wrote a letter on February 9, 1897, to President Cleveland (and later sent it president McKinley) requesting U.S. a US forceful initiative in the name of the Monroe Doctrine, and citing the need for humanitarian intervention in Cuba due to the disaster created by Spanish military policy.

All of this is perfectly documented; a black legend has concealed that part of history to foster anti-imperialist sentiment, and that is precisely what the regime's propaganda machine is working on right now, "Remember that they snatched our independence away from us". All of that is an absolute lie, and they are trying, once again, to instill fear that any American action, even if it's on the side of the people, must be rejected because no one knows what will happen next. I don't think it will work for them. People know very well what is happening to them now, and they care less about what the regime says might happen to them later.

S.A. Juan Antonio, let's hope that before September we can exert enough pressure so that the talks lead to a path that, hopefully, can bring a more democratic and prosperous future for Cuba, because what we have today is a true catastrophe. I don't think there are even any precedents for what Cuba experienced in the 19th century, and I think you frame it very well in terms of those paths, both in Chapter Two of the Helms-Burton Act and with what happened with the Joint Resolution and the Platt Amendment. Thank you very much, Juan Antonio

**J.A.B.** What I'm saying isn't that this or that is going to inevitably happen. What I'm saying is, this is what might happen, and this is what would make it more likely to happen. And that has been my approach when you've asked me how I think events will unfold. I'm not saying that this or that would be the best thing that could happen to Cuba, but there are things that, while not ideal, aren't the worst that could happen in the current situation. To me the worse scenario would be the continuation of the status quo. I wish these guys who have destroyed the country would have an epiphany and say, "Sorry, Cuban people, for what we've done to you; now we're going to take our millions and enjoy ourselves on the island or in another country". Such idealistic event is totally impossible to happen unless they're removed from power under the credible and forceful threat of losing their freedom, their assets, and their very lives. But the starving, disorganized, unarmed Cuban people cannot successfully confront a state apparatus that is armed and ready, not to defeat an American invasion, but to crush the population militarily. And we have a duty to try to prevent, by every means possible, just as the Mambí diplomacy did in 1898, that they are crushed them mercilessly or that these awful people continue to reign eternally in Cuba. Thank you very much for your interest in these matters.