

How Will Cuba Respond to Growing U.S. Military Pressure?

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Why Is Cuba's Military Position Changing?

Cuba is facing greater U.S. military pressure in 2026 as Washington examines possible military action against the island. CBS News reported on 16 July that Pentagon planners had considered several possible operations, including a large Army assault involving the 101st Airborne Division. U.S. officials emphasised that the planning did not mean that an operation had been authorised (LaPorta et al., 2026). U.S. forces have also continued operating around Cuba. On 04 June, Marines from Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, and 2nd Marine Regiment, and the Maritime Raid Force LCF-24 conducted insertion training at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay while Army CH-47 Chinooks assigned to Joint Task Force-Bravo practised landing operations aboard USS *Fort Lauderdale* (Doublet, 2026). These activities demonstrate available capabilities but do not establish that an attack is imminent.

Cuba cannot match U.S. naval, air, or intelligence capabilities, creating an incentive to preserve its own forces, disperse military functions, and maintain outside sources of support.

Cuba's external position has also become less favourable. Venezuela was previously an important source of energy and political support. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported in March that Venezuela's leadership had moved towards cooperation with Washington, while Russia was aiming to expand its geopolitical and security partnerships with Cuba (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2026). Havana therefore faces greater pressure with fewer dependable options nearby.

Existing analysis has focused heavily on the military options available to Washington. The Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) assessment from 03 June examines several possible forms of U.S. military action (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026). The central problem for Cuba is how to preserve state control despite its conventional disadvantage. The answer depends on whether Cuba can maintain its military and security institutions, limit the effects of maritime pressure, and preserve enough external support to keep the state functioning.

1. What Can Cuba Do Against a Stronger Military?

The main constraint on Cuba is the large difference in military capability between the two countries. CSIS estimates that the Revolutionary Armed Forces have roughly 50,000 active personnel, around 39,000 reservists, and almost 90,000 paramilitary personnel. It also assesses that much of Cuba's major military equipment is outdated and that the country has limited long-range strike capabilities (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026).

Its more practical objective would be to ensure that enough of its military and political structure survives an initial attack to continue operating.

Cuba's military organisation supports this approach. Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL) identifies three territorial armies, Western, Central, and Eastern, divided into military regions that generally correspond to provincial areas. These regions are responsible for preparing both military units and the wider population for defence (RESDAL, 2024).

CSIS reports that American forces have increased aerial intelligence collection over Cuba to better understand the capabilities and deployment of the Cuban armed forces (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026).

Cuba's objective is therefore more likely to be survival than conventional victory. Preserving command, communications, and military functions could prevent the destruction of individual targets from immediately becoming political collapse.

2. Why Would Cuba Rely on Territorial and Asymmetric Defence?

RESDAL describes military regions as structures that coordinate defence preparations among military units, state institutions and local organisations. Its assessment also identifies exercises intended to improve coordination between the Revolutionary Armed Forces and Interior Ministry during unconventional conflict scenarios (RESDAL, 2024).

The Eastern Army is particularly important because its military regions cover Camagüey, Las Tunas, Holguín, Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo. Granma reported in April that Raúl Castro highlighted the Eastern Army's role in Cuba's defence system during the formation's 65th anniversary (Granma, 2026). This places part of Cuba's territorial defence structure around the same region as the U.S. base at Guantánamo Bay.

Cuba has also acquired an asymmetric capability through military drones. Axios reported in May that U.S. intelligence indicated Havana had obtained more than 300 military drones from Russia and Iran since 2023, with U.S. officials concerned about their possible use against American forces and vessels (Caputo, 2026). CBS News subsequently confirmed that U.S. intelligence had identified Cuban attack drones, despite sanctions going into effect this year (LaPorta et al., 2026).

These drones would not eliminate the wider U.S. military advantage, but could increase the cost and uncertainty of operating near Cuba, particularly around Guantánamo and maritime approaches.

3. How Could Maritime Pressure Affect Cuba?

The country depends heavily on imported fuel, meaning restrictions on shipping could affect transportation, electricity, and military logistics simultaneously.

CSIS assesses that Cuba has little naval capacity with which to challenge a U.S. maritime campaign and that tankers could be monitored and intercepted by U.S. forces (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026).

CBS News reported in May that U.S. intelligence was monitoring the Russian-flagged tanker *Universal* while it attempted to reach Cuba. The report also noted that other vessels travelling toward Cuba had altered their routes amid concerns about possible U.S. interception (LaPorta et al., 2026).

U.S. forces also possess the regional capabilities needed for maritime operations. The June exercise involving LCF-24 demonstrated the ability to coordinate Marines, helicopters, reconnaissance elements, and an amphibious ship in operations extending from the Caribbean to Guantánamo. LCF-24 had assumed its Southern Command mission only days earlier, bringing more than 1,300 Marines and sailors into the regional force structure (Doublet, 2026).

4. How Does the Loss of Venezuelan Oil Change Cuba's Options?

The loss of Venezuelan support matters because it removes an energy source that Cuba previously used to sustain the state during external pressure. Cuba produces relatively little oil domestically and has historically depended on imported crude. The Washington Post reported that Venezuelan supplies accounted for a major share of Cuba's imports, while Mexico and Russia provided alternative sources (Javaid, 2026). The disappearance of that supply therefore affects more than Cuba's civilian economy. Fuel availability determines how much electricity can be generated, how transport can operate, and how much petroleum remains available for military vehicles, aircraft, and naval vessels.

A military that retains personnel and equipment but cannot reliably fuel vehicles, aircraft, or generators has less usable capacity. The energy problem is already visible. Reuters reported in July that Cuba was experiencing severe fuel shortages and widespread blackouts as U.S. pressure on its oil supplies intensified (Reuters, 2026).

Havana has therefore had to replace not simply a political ally, but part of the logistical system that supported the state. Russia has provided some alternative energy access, while China has focused heavily on infrastructure and renewable energy. The Washington Post reported that Chinese-backed solar projects could eventually provide a significant share of Cuba's electricity, allowing Beijing to address part of Cuba's energy vulnerability without replacing Venezuelan oil directly (Tan & Lu 2026).

Neither, however, can easily reproduce Venezuela's combination of geographic proximity, energy supplies, and political alignment.

The result is a narrower margin for Havana. Cuba can diversify its external relationships, but doing so takes time and cannot immediately replace a lost supply network. If U.S. pressure continues to target maritime access, Cuba's ability to obtain fuel becomes a constraint on every other part of its defence strategy. External support is therefore more than diplomatic backing because it affects how long Havana can keep its military and state institutions functioning under sustained pressure.

5. What Could Cuba Do if Military Pressure Escalates?

Cuba is already preparing for a prolonged confrontation rather than waiting for a conventional invasion to begin. Since January, the government has held weekly National Defense Days across municipalities and defence zones, including exercises involving the Milicias de Tropas Territoriales, rapid-response groups and the wider population. In March, President Miguel Díaz-Canel said the exercises were intended to prepare each person for a defined role in the defence of their local area, reflecting Cuba's *War of All the People* doctrine (Tamayo León, 2026). By July, these exercises were

still taking place every Friday, with national, provincial, municipal, and local defence councils involved (Martínez Hernández, 2026).

If the blockade continues, Havana can shift resources towards territorial defence and local resilience. If pressure escalates into strikes, the same system could disperse personnel and defensive functions across local zones while keeping the regular armed forces focused on military targets and key approaches. Cuban officials have also continued to emphasise the use of local resources and coordination between civilian and military structures during exceptional situations (Jesús Matos, 2026).

This approach gives Havana several options short of trying to match U.S. conventional power. The regular armed forces could concentrate on protecting command centres, air-defence positions, communications and other critical military infrastructure, while territorial forces maintain security and basic functions elsewhere. Cuba could also draw on its reported drone inventory to complicate operations around military facilities and exposed forces. These capabilities would not change the military balance, but could raise the cost of operating near Cuba and make a rapid breakdown of the defence system more difficult.

Guantánamo would present a particularly sensitive area. Havana has maintained direct military communication with U.S. Southern Command, including a May meeting between U.S. Southern Command General Francis L. Donovan and Cuban General Roberto Legrá Sotolongo concerning security around the base (Tactics Institute, 2026). Maintaining this channel could become increasingly important if military activity around the base intensifies, particularly because an incident there could quickly create a wider confrontation.

Cuba's geography also gives Havana reasons to avoid concentrating its remaining military capacity around a few locations. The island stretches roughly 1,250 kilometres from west to east, with Havana at the western end and Guantánamo near the opposite end. A military campaign would therefore have to operate across a long island with different regional defence commands, while Cuba could move personnel and resources between areas that remain functional. This would not prevent U.S. forces from reaching targets, but it could make it harder to translate strikes on particular bases or infrastructure into control over the wider country. For Havana, the value of its territorial system is therefore not simply that it can defend individual locations, but that it gives the government more places from which to continue operating if pressure becomes sustained.

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