

# Trump administration escalates threats against Cuba

Alexander Fangmann  
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On Wednesday, in a set of twin events presided over by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, the administration of US President Donald Trump announced its reversal of a policy shared by Democratic and Republican administrations alike for nearly a quarter of a century by imposing a set of draconian economic sanctions against Cuba.

In addition to reversing a number of Obama-era measures loosening economic restrictions against Cuba, the administration is ending the regular waivers of Title III of the anti-Cuban Helms-Burton Act, which provides penalties even for non-US citizens and companies conducting business on the island. Title III, which has been continuously waived every six months by US presidents since the law was signed by Bill Clinton, authorizes US nationals to sue persons or companies for damages in US courts if they are found to be “trafficking” in property confiscated by the Cuban government following the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro.

The statements of the two US officials, and Bolton’s in particular, delivered to the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association near Miami, made clear that Washington’s ongoing actions against Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are part of an effort to re-impose the absolute dominance of US imperialism in the Western hemisphere. It is also part of the anti-socialist campaign launched by Trump and the Republican Party in an attempt to whip up support among the far right in advance of the 2020 elections.

Pompeo told a State Department press conference that the full provisions of Title III would take effect May 2. Those sued could have assets in the US seized in recompense or have US travel visas denied or revoked. Justifying the new measures in relation to Cuba’s

support for Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chavez, Pompeo said, “Cuba’s behavior in the Western Hemisphere undermines security and stability of countries throughout the region, which directly threatens United States national security interests.”

Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Kimberly Breier said at the press conference that 6,000 Title III claims have already been certified, with a potential for up to 200,000. The 6,000 claims already certified have a stated value of \$8 billion. Notably, Title III claims have to be for confiscated property worth over \$50,000, and the law mandates a \$6,700 filing fee, shattering any pretense that this measure would benefit any but the wealthiest individuals and corporations.

Among the highest claims certified so far are those of Exxon Mobil, Coca-Cola and Office Depot. Should they prevail in US courts, they would reap their rewards through the seizing of the US assets of foreign companies, mostly European and Canadian, operating in Cuba, exacerbating already sharp global trade tensions.

Pompeo said, “Those doing business in Cuba should fully investigate whether they are connected to property stolen in service of a failed communist experiment.”

Following the announcement, representatives of Canada and the EU, among Cuba’s biggest trade partners, issued a joint statement, saying, “The decision by the United States to renege on its longstanding commitment to waive Title III of the Helms-Burton (LIBERTAD) Act is regrettable, and will have an important impact on legitimate EU and Canadian economic operators in Cuba. The EU and Canada consider the extraterritorial application of unilateral Cuba-related measures contrary to international law.”

They also stated they would be challenging the US action through the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute resolution framework.

The Mexican Foreign Ministry also issued a statement, noting, “As it has done historically, Mexico rejects the application of unilateral trade laws with extraterritorial character, since they violate the norms of international law.”

Other measures announced include a reduction in the amount of remittances Cuban residents of the US are able to send to their families on the island to \$1,000 every three months. Under Obama, restrictions on remittances had been lifted entirely, and while average remittances are around \$200 per month, the restrictions will have serious repercussions for numerous families as well as small businesses, which have relied on such remittances essentially as a form of foreign investment.

Pompeo also said that the US would be shutting down travel to Cuba for anything but family visits, eliminating several categories of travel that had been authorized by the Obama administration, which would now require authorization from the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). This is expected to have an effect on American tourism to the island, and will reduce family visits by Cubans and Cuban-Americans as airlines eliminate flights and raise fares in response to decreasing demand.

Another measure will ban so-called “U-Turn” transactions through which the Cuban government indirectly accesses the US financial system by making transactions in third-party countries.

Additionally, five Cuban entities will be added to the list that prohibits direct financial transactions with US companies. The only one named so far is Aerogaviota, an airline founded by the Cuban military.

The net effect of all these restrictions will be to further squeeze the Cuban economy, which is already facing shortages of energy and other imports resulting from slow growth, as well as falling deliveries of subsidized fuel from Venezuela. The hope, especially in regard to Title III of the Helms-Burton Act, is to discourage companies from doing business in Cuba or encourage them to exit. The strategy is, essentially, to starve the island into submission.

The political character of the actions of the Trump administration were made especially clear by Bolton’s

appearance at the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, near Miami, where he spoke to a group of ultra-right Cuban exiles celebrating the 58th Anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion, an abortive CIA-led effort to overthrow the Castro government using an army of right-wing Cuban exiles. He ludicrously compared the counterrevolutionary band, which surrendered en masse to the Cuban military after a day of fighting, to “the brave men of Bunker Hill, Belleau Wood and Normandy.”

Referring to Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua as the “troika of tyranny,” Bolton’s speech was loaded with blood curdling anti-socialist rhetoric reminiscent of the height of the Cold War. Saying that “the twilight hour of socialism has arrived in our hemisphere,” Bolton said it was time to “reverse the consequences of disastrous Obama-era policies and finally end the glamorization of socialism and communism.”

Bolton also stated, “Today, we proudly proclaim for all to hear: the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well,” referring to the historic US policy of claiming unfettered dominance over the Americas.

Perhaps most provocatively, he appealed to the ultra-right elements in attendance to be prepared for a confrontation with the growing socialist sentiments in the US itself, saying, “We will need your help in the days ahead. We must all reject the forces of communism and socialism in this hemisphere—and in this country.”



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