

PRISM *Insights*

Regime Change, Major Powers, and the Prospects for Venezuela, Cuba, Iran

Part II: What are the Prospects for Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran?

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This is Part II of a two-part article. Part I provides a very brief history of post-World War II regime change operations and identifies the four factors that make U.S.-sponsored regime change most likely to succeed in the long term. Three of these factors concern the means and motives for sponsors of the old regime and spoilers of the new regime: pre-existing access and relationships, geography, and loss aversion. When sponsors and spoilers have the advantage over the U.S. in these three areas, the U.S. will struggle to achieve long-term success. The fourth factor concerns U.S. ambitions and recognizes that smaller changes are easier to achieve and sustain than larger ones. Finally, Part I showed that in the post-Cold War era, the overt use of U.S. military force should be kept to a minimum to reduce financial costs and reputational risks for the United States. Part II (this part) uses the four factors to assess the prospects for successful U.S.-sponsored regime change in Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran and the costs and reputational risks associated

with the level of overt U.S. military force employed. Throughout both Parts of this essay, regime change operations are defined as operations by a major outside power to change the personnel and/or structure of a foreign regime.

Applying the Four Factors to Assess Regime Change Potential in Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran

Venezuela

Venezuela recently experienced a form of regime change and a short history of Venezuela helps put its situation in context. During the Cold War, oil made Venezuela a rich country and it was solidly in the non-communist bloc. After leading an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1992 and being imprisoned between



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1992 and 1994, [Hugo Chavez](#), was elected President in 1998. He remained in office until his death in 2013. Chavez handed off the Presidency to his chosen successor, Nicolas Maduro, who ruled from 2013 until his arrest in 2026.

Decades of Chavez/Maduro rule presents a deceptive image of stability. The Cold War was long over when Chavez came to power, but he decided to align himself with communist Cuba and pursue an increasingly anti-U.S. agenda he described as [socialism for the 21st Century](#). Confiscating foreign assets ended foreign investment and socialist policies led to declines in oil production and in the rest of the economy. As the economy slumped and the charismatic Chavez was replaced by the wooden Maduro, the regime performed [worse in elections](#) and resorted to more [overt oppression](#) that further alienated Venezuelans and strained relations with the United States. A combination of U.S. sanctions and incompetent economic management by regime loyalists led to [economic collapse in Venezuela](#) in the 2020s.

When Chavez began supporting Cuba in 2000, Venezuelan support rescued Cuba from economic disaster and Venezuela was the patron with Cuba as the client. However, as the Venezuelan economy declined, Venezuelan support decreased, and as domestic unrest inside Venezuela increased, [Cuban security forces](#) became more important to Venezuelan regime survival and the relationship evolved from patron/client to mutual dependence.

By 2025, when the new U.S. administration began increasing pressure on Venezuela, Cuba was supporting the existing regime and preventing regime change. Cuba had the advantage over the United States in each of the four areas mentioned above. In terms of relationships and access, decades of close Cuban advice and assistance left Cuba deeply enmeshed in the Venezuelan regime, and particularly its security forces, while the U.S. did not even have an embassy in Caracas. Geographically, Cuba is closer than the U.S. is to Venezuela, though Cuba has no land border with Venezuela and the U.S. Navy can insert itself between Cuba and Venezuela. Worst of all, Cuba felt not merely loss aversion at the prospect of regime change in Venezuela, but an existential threat since Cuba depended on Venezuelan support. Finally, Cuba was demanding zero change in the Venezuelan regime whereas the U.S. was advocating for substantial changes. Clearly the U.S. needed to remove Cuban support and security forces from Venezuela to have any serious chance of achieving and sustaining a positive regime change.

On the positive side, Cuba was Venezuela's only serious sponsor. Russia, Iran, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) cheered Maduro's anti-American

rhetoric, but they are far away and show little interest in taking on the expense of protecting the incompetent and unpopular Venezuelan regime from U.S. pressure. A regional power, like neighboring Brazil, could step in and protect the Venezuelan regime, but [a falling out](#) between the Maduro regime and the leftist Lula administration in Brazil gave Brazil no incentive to save Maduro.

On January 3, 2026, the U.S. took full advantage of its naval assets and military superiority to [arrest President Maduro](#) and take him to New York for trial. The [operation killed 32 Cuban](#) troops, indicating just how closely Cuban forces were guarding Maduro. U.S. officials had previously [negotiated with Maduro's Vice President](#), Delcy Rodriguez, and when she took over after Maduro's removal, she radically [decreased the Cuban presence](#) in Venezuela. With Cuban security forces out of Venezuela, the prospects for long-term U.S. success in regime change increase dramatically.

Arresting Maduro was an extremely high-risk operation that could have ended badly for the U.S. Even in success the operation increased political and reputational risks by increasing U.S. responsibility for outcomes in Venezuela. However, the Maduro arrest was a virtually cost-free and nearly instantaneous operation compared with the military actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Serbia mentioned in Part I of this essay. The ability of the U.S. to negotiate with Delcy Rodriguez while Maduro was still in power, and the successful capture of the heavily guarded Maduro indicates that the U.S. had better relationships and access inside Venezuela than most analysts realized. The U.S. decision to endorse Delcy Rodriguez, a career-long Chavez/Maduro loyalist and regime insider, to run post-Maduro Venezuela indicates that the U.S. is pursuing a less extreme, or at least, less abrupt regime change than those discussed in the post-Cold War section of Part I of the series and perhaps one more like the limited regime changes typical during the Cold War.

The final outcome in Venezuela will be the result of a long contest pitting Rodriguez and other [regime insiders](#) who want no change, ever, against [U.S. officials](#) and anti-regime Venezuelans who want a great deal of change, very rapidly. Regardless of how the contest turns out, Venezuela represents a new and different model of regime change from that pursued by the U.S. after the end of the Cold War and its prospects for long-term success look pretty good.

Cuba

Fidel Castro led the Cuban revolution to success in 1959 with zero Soviet assistance but [quickly turned](#)

to the USSR for support and protection when relations with the U.S. broke down. Unlike Venezuela, the current Cuban regime has never been economically self-sufficient and has survived for almost seventy years thanks to massive foreign assistance. The USSR not only prevented a U.S. invasion of Cuba by [threatening nuclear war](#), but also [provided enormous economic aid](#) amounting to more than 20% of Cuban Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Cuba was a bad investment for the Soviets and in the post-Soviet era, Russia has not renewed Soviet-style support for Cuba. The PRC has likewise made no effort to replace what the USSR provided, even though Cuba hosts [valuable PRC signals intelligence facilities](#).

The end of the USSR meant the loss of Soviet support which pushed Cuba into economic crisis in the early 1990s. Cuba's [GDP dropped by one-third](#), a larger contraction than U.S. GDP suffered [during the Great Depression](#). The regime was rescued in 2000 when Chavez took over Venezuela and decided to take up the burden of supporting Cuba. Venezuelan support never matched the scale of Soviet support, but it allowed the Cuban regime to continue its corrupt, incompetent, and oppressive practices without facing serious domestic challenges. Cuba and Venezuela [formed a partnership](#) to resist internal and U.S. pressure on both regimes. Venezuela provided oil and money to Cuba. Cuba provided Venezuela with security personnel who were world-class experts at crushing all challenges to government authority.

Unfortunately for the Cuban regime, Venezuelan support diminished as the Venezuelan economy declined, and [Venezuelan support ended in 2026](#) after the arrest of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro. Before the fall of Maduro, Cuba was already facing its [worst economic crisis](#) since independence in 1898. Even with Venezuelan support, Cuba's economic situation was so bad that it received humanitarian aid from many sources including the [European Union, the United Nations, Canada, Japan, Russia, PRC, and Mexico](#). The loss of Venezuelan support [makes everything worse](#) for the regime.

Without a major external patron to replace Venezuela, it is not clear how long the Cuban regime can survive, and regime [insiders are negotiating with the U.S.](#) to reform their government in return for U.S. assistance. The ability to negotiate openly with regime insiders indicates more U.S. relationships and access to Cuba than public rhetoric would suggest. U.S. willingness to negotiate with regime insiders also indicates that the U.S. is seeking a relatively small change in the regime, increasing the chances of success. Prospects for successful U.S. regime change in Cuba are further enhanced by geography, i.e., U.S. proximity to the island and the ability of the U.S. Navy to control access

to Cuba. The U.S. also benefits from the fact that aside from Venezuela, which can no longer intervene in Cuba, no other possible patron will feel a major threat to its national interests from regime change in Cuba.

Leftist politicians in Latin America, including the Presidents of [Mexico](#) and [Brazil](#), have a sentimental attachment to the Cuban regime and have extensive relationships inside Cuba, but the U.S. is geographically closer, and the U.S. Navy can control access to the island. Mexico and Brazil do not feel they control Cuba, and they have supported the regime [mostly with rhetoric](#). Loss aversion will probably not cause them to confront the U.S. militarily and economically by rescuing the current Cuban regime or by supporting armed resistance or conducting hybrid warfare against a new Cuban regime.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is another possible patron that might rescue Cuba, but it faces a severe geographic disadvantage compared to the United States. The PRC has garnered a lot of media attention with [large gifts of rice](#) to Cuba and facilitating [Cuba's transition to solar power](#) to relieve its energy crisis, but rice is cheap, and the PRC has a [huge surplus of solar panels](#) so these moves cost little and will not rescue the regime. Historically, the PRC has shown little appetite for money-losing projects like supporting Cuba, particularly given [Cuba's refusal to follow](#) the PRC's economic advice.

None of this guarantees U.S. success, but Cuba looks like a promising candidate for U.S.-sponsored regime change in the near future.

Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran that came to power after the 1979 Iranian Revolution was hostile to both Cold War superpowers, did not join either bloc, and instead tried to [create and lead an Islamic bloc](#). In 1980, shortly after the Revolution, [Iraq invaded Iran](#) and started a devastating war that lasted until 1988. The end of the Cold War eliminated the USSR as a target of Iranian hostility, but the 1991 Gulf War left a large U.S. military presence near Iran and helped make the United States a focus of regime hostility.

Like Venezuela and Cuba, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a revolutionary regime that aspires to transform its region but has, in fact, failed its people. [World Bank data](#) indicates that in 1979, when the Islamic Republic replaced the Shah, Iranians enjoyed a slightly higher per capita GDP than their Turkish neighbors. Forty-five years later, in 2024, Turkish per capita GDP was three times higher than Iranian per capita GDP, and recent conflicts have only made Iran's situation worse. World Population Review's [Human Freedom](#)

[Index](#) rates Iran as the second least free country in the world, a little better than Syria, but slightly worse than Yemen and Sudan. Iranians are painfully aware of the regime's failures, but Iran is a much harder target for U.S.-sponsored regime change than Venezuela or **Cuba**.

Considering the first of the four criteria described above, it is apparent that the U.S. has much less valuable relationships and access inside Iran compared to what it has inside Venezuela and Cuba. In Venezuela, the U.S. was able to negotiate an agreement with the sitting vice president that allowed a smooth, legal, and immediate transition of power from the uncooperative Maduro to the more cooperative Rodriguez. In Cuba, both the U.S. and [Cuban governments](#) admit that negotiations are underway that might lead to significant changes in Cuba. In Iran, the U.S. reportedly [negotiated with former Iranian President](#) Mahmud Ahmadi-nejad to take over after Iran's supreme leader was killed by airstrikes on February 28, 2026. However, Ahmadi-nejad was under house arrest at the time, and it is unclear how much control he could have exercised over the government of Iran even if he had attempted to hold up his end of the bargain. Russia and the PRC, on the other hand, enjoy much closer relationships and better access in Iran than the U.S.

The second factor, geography, is also working against the U.S. in Iran. The United States is far away from Iran whereas Russia and the PRC are quite close. Russia enjoys easy access to Iran through the Caspian Sea and the PRC can reach Iran through Afghanistan or Pakistan or Russia, and none of these routes can be interdicted by a U.S. naval blockade. It is unclear whether Russia and/or the PRC will rescue the Iranian regime or play a spoiler role after a successful U.S. regime change in Iran, but they are geographically well positioned to do so.

The third factor, loss aversion, will not cause Russia or the PRC to rescue Iran since neither one feels it controls Iran. But Iran is much more valuable to Russia and the PRC than Cuba or Venezuela. As already mentioned, Iran is much closer geographically and Iran's GDP is [more than twice](#) the combined GDP of Cuba and Venezuela. Iran also supports Russia in its war against Ukraine and provides oil to the PRC at discounted prices. Thus, Iran is a self-sustaining asset to Russia and the PRC whereas Cuba and Venezuela would be expensive dependencies.

Arguably, the U.S. is also demanding more change from Iran than from Venezuela and Cuba. For example, in foreign policy the U.S. wants Iran to abandon its nuclear program, limit its missile program, stop funding and training its regional terrorist proxies, stop shouting "death to America" and "death to Israel," etc. The U.S. demands much less extensive foreign policy changes from Cuba and Venezuela aside from ending cooperation between them, which has already happened. On the other hand, Russia and the PRC are not advocating any change at all, further enhancing their position.

The use of significant U.S. military force to attack Iran during [Operation Epic Fury](#) dramatically increased the diplomatic, reputational, military, and economic cost of U.S. efforts to change the Iranian regime.

Thus, two of the four factors -- relationships and access, and geography -- indicate that Iran is a much more difficult target for regime change than either Venezuela or Cuba because Russia and the PRC have the advantage over the U.S. in both categories. The third factor, loss aversion, is roughly similar for Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela, since Russia and the PRC control none of them, but from a cost-benefit assessment, rescuing Iran is a much better option for Russia and the PRC than rescuing Cuba or Venezuela. The fourth factor, extent of desired change, is also more difficult in the Iran case since Russia and the PRC desire no change from any of the three countries, but the U.S. is demanding more change from Iran than from Venezuela or Cuba. These differences help explain why the U.S. has invested vastly more resources to achieve less promising regime change results in Iran compared to Venezuela and Cuba.

Conclusion

The regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran are all threats to their neighbors, their regions, and the United States, and all three have inflicted enormous and unnecessary misery on their long-suffering people. Regime change is therefore long overdue in all three cases. In Venezuela and Cuba, there is reason for optimism about the prospects for successful long-term regime change success based on the four factors used throughout both parts of this essay. Unfortunately, those same four factors indicate that odds of a successful U.S.-sponsored regime change are significantly lower in Iran.

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