

Transcript – Crisis in Cuba: George Friedman on the Return of US Pressure

Christian Smith: Hello and welcome to this podcast from Geopolitical Futures. I'm Christian Smith. The US Government has been ramping up its pressure on Cuba ever since Donald Trump returned to the White House. And this week, the Department of Justice announced that it would indict Cuba's president, Raul Castro, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a rare video address to the Cuban public attacking Cuba's leadership and offering them a new relationship with the US. So with Cuba in crisis, are we about to see the US Make a move on the island nation? Well, on this episode of the podcast, we discuss what the long history of US Cuban relations tell us about the current moment, why the US Might act at all, and what its impact would. To do so, I am joined by Geopolitical Futures chairman and founder, George Friedman. Hello, George.

George Friedman: Hi, George.

Christian Smith: Before we get into the latest a bit of history, we mainly think of the US And Cuba and its relationship, I really think dating Back to the 60s, Castro, Fidel Castro, not his brother Raul, the Bay of Pigs, the missile crisis, that sort of thing. It's actually got a much longer and important history compared to that, doesn't it?

George Friedman: Very much so. Going way back to the Beginning of the 19th century, Cuba was where Cuba always was, but it was owned by Spain. The Monroe Doctrine was issued very much with Cuba in mind because we didn't trust the Spaniards to not block the United States. So after that, the United States offered to buy Cuba from the Spaniards. They declined. In the end, we fought a war with the Spaniards, the Spanish American war that pivoted to a great extent around Cuba. So when you think of Theodore Roosevelt and his charge up San Juan Hill, San Juan Hill was in Cuba. We invaded it. We won that war. Cuba was one of the prizes. Puerto Rico was the other one. Also the Philippine Islands. These are the things we took from the Spaniards. Cuba was the most important one. And there was great discussion of making Cuba a state of the United States. That was decided not to be done. But for a very long time, the United States was a dominant force

Christian Smith: until

George Friedman: the Castro regime emerged. That regime, like the previous regimes that were loyal to Spain, was greatly loyal to the Soviet Union. And that was something the United States could not stand for one reason that I said before, because the Straits of Florida between Key west and Cuba are 90 miles wide. And if any country blocked that road, U.S. trade, which originates to a great extent on the Gulf coast, would be blocked and could be catastrophic to the United States economy. Therefore, the problem that the Cubans have is that once said, we are too far from God, and too close to the United States. And that's in a way true. Now, remember Cuban missile crisis, we almost went to war, nuclear war with the Soviets over Cuba. So this has been a long standing thing. This is not a Trump invention of some strange sort. He is following on in a long history of American concern, going back to Monroe Doctrine, that he, under these circumstances, wants to do something about Cuba, is partly involved with the cartel issue with which the Cubans were involved with Cubans cartels itself, in a way, selling things in the United States. So there are various reasons which the United States is concerned. And this sequence of concerns began with Fidel Castro, with the Communist regime. When the Soviet Union collapsed, they lost the support of Russia. In many ways, their economy began to decline and the United States stood back. Now it's a very different world, but it should be understood that Cuba has been on the American President's minds since almost the founding of the United States.

Christian Smith: George, we last spoke about Cuba in January. Now you touched a bit on it there. But just remind our listeners about this geography and geopolitics here. As you say, Cuba's 90 miles away from Key west in Florida. Some people might be thinking, well, George, that's a long, long way away. Why is that so important? That sea lane there, it's not like the Strait of Hormuz, for example, which is much narrower. Why is it so important?

George Friedman: Well, first, it's important because at least half the goods the United States imports or exports comes in not through New York or the coast, but through the Gulf of Mexico. The Straits of Florida is the primary way to get in and out of the United states by boat. 90 miles used to be a very significant passageway. This day it is no longer that. Yes, it's wider then, but with mines at sea, with submarines, with all sorts of vessels, nations can block that. That never

happened. But it was feared in the First World War that the Germans would do it. That they didn't do it was very silly of them. In both the first and the Second World War, it would have really hurt us. So when we take a look at this, this is a potentiality and as important, Cuba is not difficult to reach from the United States. And so when we talk about cartels basing themselves to some extent in Cuba before making the final run to the United States made a great deal of sense. The Cubans were involved with the cartels. And there's a fundamental reality in Cuba. There is no government of Cuba but the Cuban army. The Cuban army is no longer ideological. It is basically a Criminal organization controlling Cuba through domination, but also having relationships all over the region in the drug trade and other things. So the fact is that Cuba has evolved far away from what some liked because they were leftists, far away from Fidel Castro's days. His brother Juan is still there, but at the same time, the regime itself consists of the army, which is the only major organization in the country that can handle it. And so it is both impoverished, oppressed, and the United States is not interested in saving them from the depression, but really is nervous to some extent in the long term of having them there, both in past, in the future.

Christian Smith: And this obviously fits quite nicely into the administration's new Western Hemisphere focused strategy. We saw that play out with Venezuela earlier in the year. How does Cuba fit into this when it comes to stabilizing the region, as the administration might put it, for America's favor?

George Friedman: Well, remember, the Monroe Doctrine was the same as Trump's doctrine, which is we do not want European or foreign influence deeply in Latin America in the Western Hemisphere, and in particular not in Cuba, because it's so close to us at this point. There is not much foreign influence, say, from Russia, but there is much from Latin American cartels and so on. So when we look at this, this is an old issue in American geopolitics. You look at the map, you see how close Cuba is. Also, it's not a small island. Distance between New York and Chicago is the length of this island. It's thin, but it's long and blocks all of the Gulf potentially. So it is a potential threat. It is certainly a massive irritation. And at this point, given that Trump is returning to the old policy of keeping others out of the Western Hemisphere, Cuba has to be on stage. As I said before, these talks, in these discussions we've had, when we went, the United States went into Venezuela with two aircraft carriers and God knows how many

other ships, I said, this is not about Venezuela. You don't need that much to block it. This is about Cuba. And it has been. But knocking out the Maduro regime took away one of the foundations of Cuba, because remember the people guarding Maduro, the president of Venezuela, when we invaded with the Delta Force, they were Cubans. He was not being protected by his own armies, Venezuelans. He was being protected by Cubans. And so in this context, the concern of the United States can be understood.

Christian Smith: Want actionable insight from geopolitical futures. Introducing geoeconomic lens, helping you understand not just what is happening, but how global power dynamics shape economic stability, dependency and opportunity. Explore the first issue for free@geopoliticalfutures.com Lens so we are a geopolitics podcast. We don't do military tactics or things like that. But what do you think the US Might actually do here, George? Could it be about regime change, military action of some kind? Might we see a Maduro esque move where they try and swoop in and seize Castro? They are of course in the process of indicting Maduro, which is what they did indicting Castro, which is what they did with Maduro. What do you think we could see here?

George Friedman: Well, the hope I think of the American government is a collapse of the Cuban economy, which has already happened. The standard living is third world in Cuba. They don't have electricity, we've blockaded oil going there. The situation is catastrophic. The primary hope is, I think, that there will be an uprising in Cuba. But the army itself has so much to lose. The members of it, because they're well to do and covered, they're likely to be able to put down this revolt. So the first step is to try to get the country itself to overthrow the military force. An invasion could be very costly. And I think Trump has learned a lesson that it is not. Even though it may be the most powerful nation in the world, in a particular situation like Iran, it can face many difficulties as we have in wars in the past. I think Trump is averse to the idea of invading the country. It's a large country, as I'm saying, it would take a lot of troops. The army would likely fight and possibly fight well. So I think the American strategy at this point is simply to allow Cuba to continue its decline in standards of living in the existential needs. This is not something that was imposed by the United States. It was the result of the behavior of the regime well before Trump was in power, anything like that. But I think the primary strategy is allow it to go to the point where it's so

disastrous in the country that even the army falls apart and then we would move in. Now that's possibly wishful thinking. The idea of fighting a ground war against desperate troops who are well armed and trained is not appetizing, I think, to the regime. So they will try pressure. We will try everything that we possibly can, such as saying that the 94 year old Castro brother is now going to be charged with a crime having killed some fighter, some shot down some aircraft, or just some aircraft shot down years ago. Well, this is the pressure they'll put on it. But I suspect that going into war in Cuba, which we only did once, and that was Teddy Roosevelt, would not be a wise move.

Christian Smith: And even when using others in the Bay of Pigs, it wasn't a great move either. The CIA's chief was there earlier this month. Why do you think that was that

George Friedman: I've been trying to figure out for quite a while. CIA head does not normally engage in open negotiations with foreign governments. It would seem to me, if I try to develop a theory, and this is a theory of why he was sent, is because I suspect the United States wanted them to know how deeply penetrated Cuba was in the sense that we knew all of their assets, all their resources. We were also aware of the things they were doing in Latin America with the drug dealers and so on. It may have been a risky move, but I don't think they were crazy enough to kill the head of the CIA. But this guy, the head of the CIA is an operational guy. He's not a diplomat. He's going in. He controls one of the most powerful intelligence agencies in the world. And it may have been just a signal saying, you're not going to fight the US army, you're going to fight a covert force that will take you down. And I would guess, purely guess that one of the things he was saying is just how much we know about them and what they do and where they are in order to let them know that nothing that they're doing is invisible. I hope nothing they doing is invisible even to the CIA, because then I would have lost the game. But I. I'm trying to understand why he was sent. And that's the best theory I have. And if anybody's got a better theory, let me know because I don't have one.

Christian Smith: Do you think there's any truth in the suggestion that he may have been there in some ways trying to do what the US did with Maduro's government? I suppose Maduro's other officials, where he might be saying to

some people, look, we'll basically let you off the hook and give you some money if you let us effectively take over the running of the country.

George Friedman: Well, I'm not sure we want to run the country. The country is in disastrous condition. I don't think the United States is in a position to simply resurrect it through its rule. And there will be others in Cuba who grew up under this sort of regime. We'll be hostile. We would like to replace the government. So when we take a look at what we did in Venezuela, we took out Maduro, captured him, arrested him, took him home. We have influence over the new government in some ways created it, but to a great extent they're the ones calling the shots in Venezuela.

Christian Smith: In that sense then, I suppose in the sense of bringing in a more American friendly government, well, certainly we would

George Friedman: like one less hostile. Whether friendly or not will depend how we treat them afterwards. But very frankly, even if we don't treat them well, we'll treat them much better than the current government is. I mean, this is a government that collapsed in this economy not because of American intervention or anything like that, they just collapsed. The level of corruption was so high, the army is well to do and everybody, nobody else is. So the hope is here that the Cuban public and their signs indicating that are really tired of this regime deep down their souls, but are terrified of acting against it. So if in some way we remove that terror, they may govern themselves under heavy influence in the United States, as

Christian Smith: with medicine, bringing it back to the question of Cuba's location and I suppose the wider picture of whether any action by the US would be justified, I mean, I suppose a counterpoint, counterfactual for you, George, would be, well, there's lots of countries with other countries near them, such as, and let's say, I mean Mexico is next to the US and they are not under the US's thumb or may in the future become opposed to the US's interests. Why is it that they, they should not also be brought under the US's thumb in the same way that Cuba might be?

George Friedman: Firstly, they're vaster countries. Second, they don't pose threats because their military can't penetrate the United States directly. Finally, the Soviets based nuclear weapons there and that was a striking moment in the

United States. I was live then, we were terrified. And at that point the old fear of the Monroe Doctrine came to life, that a European power would use Cuba as a base of operations to undermine the United States. So when you look at the location, how close it is to the United States, how hostile it is to the United States, and has been for a very long time, there's reason to be concerned about them more than the Mexicans or other countries. So you see these island nations, I believe in England, they had a little problem with the island called Ireland. They fought for extended periods of time. So when a great power has an offshore island like Taiwan or something, they tend to look at them differently than all the other countries. So you're in London, you may not have been there at the time the Irish wars went on, but it went on for a long time. So put it in that context. That here's an island potentially blocking us access to many parts of the world, potentially having nuclear weapons placed in them by some hostile country. Imagine Iran placing nuclear weapons in there, and it is just too frightening a thought. And we would like to have a government that's friendly to us. I don't think we intend to subdue and crush the island. We'd much rather have good relations. Marco Rubio is leading this in a way. He's of Cuban descent. And there are vast numbers of Cubans in the United States now, having grown into the next generation, which sector is a state. So this is also partly that, that the influence in Florida and other places of the Cuban migrants is one of the forces that's taking us down. But on the other hand, you have to remember that the Cuban people are near starvation, not having any electricity for many hours and many days, and they themselves would, I suspect, want to change. So it's possible.

Christian Smith: Just sticking with the island point for a moment, George, what is it about islands and geopolitics that make them so important in that way? Does it speak to the ability, the importance of sea lanes and the ability of those countries to block them?

George Friedman: Really, very much so. In the case of England, Ireland, Britain was a maritime power, controlled areas all over the world, and at least to some extent Ireland. If a hostile power could block their navy, Taiwan is the same for the Chinese. Taiwan sits right inside gap between Japan and Philippines. And if it's a hostile power, it blocks their access to Pacific. For the United states during the 19th century, that was the fundamental issue. Fundamental issue during the Cuban Missile crisis was Russia using that as a base of operations against the

United States. At this point, it's not a nation problem, but a cartel problem. Cuba is linked closely to the cartels. The army makes much of its money off the cartels and so on. It's also potentially a base from which to send goods into the United States. So when we look at these island countries, it's interesting to note they sometimes pose really great dangers, or think they do, or think they might. And so just as Britain reacted to Ireland, China to Taiwan, we were at react to Cuba.

Christian Smith: Take a moment to follow and rate us on your preferred podcast platform. If you're already watching on YouTube, don't forget to like and subscribe. How would this impact the US So the US has obviously tied up to a greater or lesser extent with what's going on in Iran at the moment. But what would the impact be? Can it afford to get involved also in Cuba, whether or not there might be the same time. Then on top of that, people have warned that we might start seeing half a million Cubans fleeing the island and trying to get over to Florida, for example, because of the issues that the economy there is having. What would the sort of medium to long term be here?

George Friedman: Well, if we attempted to invade, I suspect we have the force available on the ground to be able to carry out those two wars. And I think the Cuban war would be fairly short in the sense that the Cuban military is enough to suppress the Cuban people. It's probably not enough to be able to resist the United States. And again, it's a mercenary force in the sense that if you're in the army, you get good things. The last thing mercenaries want to do is die for their country. So I would assume that it would be possible to wage this campaign. But in a war, you never know what's going to happen. The United States thought that Vietnam would be a walk, in some ways wasn't. So Trump has been cautious until the Iran situation, where I think he overestimated his ability to frighten the Iranians out of resistance. And wars are unpredictable. So I think an American strategy is not to go to war. There is no offensive capability that the Cubans could throw at us. So one of the ways to do it is simply allow them to continue to decline as they do with trying to get their administration out of the way, such as Raul Castro, getting rid of him and bringing him over and trying him. All of which are symbolic but may frighten someone.

Christian Smith: Suppose it's one of those things where, much like Iran, people don't know what's going to happen until it starts. If it does, assuming that the US Is able to, assuming the Cuban economy collapses further, saying we have a

regime change or there is some form of closer relationship with the United States, as Marco Rubio seems to want to. As you point out over history, Cuba's always been an issue for America wants to stop this just not happening again in future. I mean, apart from the idea of the US Annexing Cuba itself, what's to stop Cuba from just not becoming anti US in some way down the line?

George Friedman: Well, Cuba is not a problem in itself. The problem always was the occupation of a foreign country, be it Spain or the Soviet Union. At that point, there was really a serious question about Cuba because a foreign military force of any sort deployed there would have many options. The Cubans don't. The Cubans can't invade us. The Cuban army is essentially a police force, an internal police force managing the country as also A cartel, sort of as a corporation, if you will, being the dominant corporation. So the threat to the United States is not so much Cuba, but that foreign powers may take advantage of Cuba. Now, we seem to reach an understanding with the Chinese in many things, and relations for the moment seem good. But imagine if China wanted to drive us crazy and start to put troops or missiles or whatnot into Cuba. So Cuba is in of itself significant only for its location and is not a threat, but in the hands of any other country which it might invite in it can be a terrible danger, as we saw in the 60s. So it's not so much the threat that Cuba poses as much as the weakness of Cuba and the possibility of occupation. And this is where the Monroe Doctrine came in, that we didn't want anybody there. And this is where the Cuban missile crisis came from. And this is from my point of view, a preemptive move, not necessarily against China, not even against Russia. But at this point, if we're going to be focusing on the Western Hemisphere, the one potential vulnerability of the United States that could be exploited by a foreign country is Cuba. And so long as Cuba remains hostile to the United States in itself, it doesn't threaten the United States. But if it opens itself to a foreign occupier, that's a very different game. So I think that's the thinking. It's not too complex. It's simply saying this terrain is dangerous for somebody who doesn't like us to hold and who has the weapons to use. Now it's occupied by people who don't like us. The military in Cuba, on the other hand, is not a threat to us. And that's the ideal time to take care of the issue.

Christian Smith: I suppose that's what the regime might want to happen. George, what do you think will happen? Do you think we're going to see a Cuba that is more friendly towards the US a pre revolution in the 1950s Cuba?

George Friedman: Well, the pre revolution Cuba was friendly to the United States, but in part because the American mafia living in America had great stakes in Havana. It was a place where you could wash money, have gambling, run all sorts of criminal activities. And if you watch the movies, there are many movies about life in Havana. Will Cuba become that? Probably not, because criminals don't act in that way these days. For me, not I may not know it, but they don't seem to act that way. But when you take a look at Cuba, the fundamental evolution is allow the catastrophe to evolve or intervene in the nation enough to allow them to rise up against this regime, which is not beloved in any way by. By the Cubans and clear the way for rising. That would be very logical to be done. And the way to do this is to severely weaken the military itself. One way to show that we will do that is by taking a Castro, kidnapping him for Ghana or so on, and bring him back to the United States. In any case, the more pressure we put on them, both in terms of access to oil, their economy and everything else, the weaker they become. The weaker they become and the worse the standard of living is in Cuba. Well, the army is a very powerful tool against civilians. They may or may not rise up. They may rise up with American help. So there are a number of options the Americans can take. One is covert and then CIA to have an uprising. The other is to strike militarily. And the other is simply to stand back and let them sweat it out if they can and likely go down in long term. I would have said a few months ago, Trump is not going to invade Cuba. At this point, I can't predict Trump, but then neither can the Cuban army.

Christian Smith: And on that note, George, let's leave it there. Thank you very much, as always, for being on the podcast. Thank you out there for listening. We won't be back next week with another episode, but we will the following week. So we will see you in a fortnight. Of course, you can go to geopoliticalfutures.com to find all of our analysis, including George's weekly articles. Thanks very much. Goodbye.

George Friedman: Bye.

Christian Smith: You can find all of our expert geopolitical analysis@geopoliticalfutures.com.