

Political analysis: Latin America

How do media narratives around the U.S. “blockade” shape geopolitical understandings of Cuba’s energy crisis, and to what extent do they downplay Cuba’s structural dependency on Venezuela?

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Summary

This paper analyzes how media narratives around the U.S. "blockade" shape the geopolitical understanding of Cuba's energy crisis, and to what extent they downplay Cuba's structural dependency on Venezuela. The central argument is that Cuba's crisis cannot be explained by external pressure alone. It is also the result of decades of structural dependency, institutional failures, and political decisions made in both Havana and Caracas long before 2026.

The paper is organized into five interconnected sections. The first provides the historical and structural background of the Cuba-Venezuela relationship, tracing the origins of the oil-for-doctors exchange, the collapse of Venezuela's oil industry, the institutional deterioration of PDVSA, and the gradual breakdown of the U.S.-Venezuela relationship that culminated in the 2026 military intervention. The second section analyzes the direct implications of these events for Cuba, showing how the island's energy vulnerability was already deepening before the U.S. blockade came into force, and how the intervention in Venezuela did not create Cuba's fragility but exposed it. The third section applies three International Relations theories, dependency theory, Marxist political economy, and realism, to explain the structural and ideological mechanics of the Cuba-Venezuela relationship and the geopolitical logic behind the U.S. intervention. The fourth section examines how Cuba's crisis has been framed in the media, identifying three key factors that shape coverage: the structural constraints of journalism, press freedom restrictions in Latin America, and the ideological orientation of parts of the global media landscape. It also analyzes the Nuestra America Convoy as a case study of how activism and media overlap to reinforce simplified narratives. The fifth and final section revisits these media dynamics through the lens of constructivism, critical theory, and Marxist political economy, revealing the power asymmetries that determine which narratives become dominant and which structural causes are systematically silenced.

Taken together, the paper argues that understanding Cuba's energy crisis requires two simultaneous moves: analyzing the material reality on the ground, and critically examining how that reality is constructed, framed, and contested in media discourse.

Key Actors and Interests

The key actors in this paper are Cuba, Venezuela, and the United States, whose relationships intersect across decades of energy dependency, ideological alignment, and geopolitical rivalry. Cuba's primary interest has been energy security and political survival, pursued through its alliance with Venezuela in exchange for medical personnel and diplomatic solidarity. Venezuela's interest, particularly under Hugo Chavez, was to use oil as a tool of regional influence and ideological projection, building a network of political allies through Petrocaribe and the broader Bolivarian project. The United States' interests have been both strategic and economic: reducing the influence of rival powers such as China and Russia in the Western

Hemisphere, controlling access to Venezuelan oil, and pursuing regime change in Cuba as a long-standing foreign policy goal.

Beyond these three central actors, the paper also examines the role of media organizations, activist networks, and public figures, including the participants of the Nuestra America Convoy, as actors in their own right. These groups shape how the crisis is understood internationally, demonstrating the growing power of influencers, journalists, and solidarity movements in constructing geopolitical narratives.

Implications and Open Questions

The events analyzed in this paper raise several important questions that remain unresolved and deserve further attention.

How is each sector, including governments, media organizations, activist groups, and independent journalists, shaping public understanding of the crisis, and whose version of events is reaching the widest audience?

What is actually happening in Cuba beyond media narratives? To what extent do ordinary Cubans' lived experiences align with or contradict the dominant framing of the crisis as primarily a product of U.S. aggression?

Why could Venezuela no longer sustain Cuba's oil supply even before the 2026 intervention? This question points to the structural collapse of PDVSA and Venezuela's oil industry as a cause that is frequently absent from mainstream coverage.

Is Cuba's crisis the result of a political blockade, economic sanctions, or internal collapse, or all three simultaneously? And if all three, how should their relative weight be assessed?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly: how do we analyze a crisis when the information environment itself is shaped by the same power dynamics that produced the crisis? This paper suggests that the answer lies not in choosing one narrative over another, but in developing the analytical tools to understand why certain narratives emerge, who benefits from them, and what they leave out.

Glossary of terms

1. Petropolitics

The use of oil as a tool of political influence and foreign policy. In this paper, petropolitics refers to how Venezuela used its oil resources to build regional alliances and project power across Latin America, particularly through the Petrocaribe initiative.

2. Petrostate

A country whose economy and political system are heavily dependent on oil revenues. Venezuela is a clear example, as oil came to represent the vast majority of its government income and export earnings, making it highly vulnerable to changes in global oil prices.

3. Bolivarian Political System

The political project promoted by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, inspired by the ideas of Latin American liberator Simon Bolivar. It combined socialist economic policies, state control over strategic resources, anti-imperialist foreign policy, and regional solidarity, particularly with Cuba, as part of a broader vision of Latin American integration outside U.S. influence.

4. Informational Asymmetry

A situation in which different actors have unequal access to information. In this paper, the term refers to how press freedom restrictions in Cuba and Venezuela limit the availability of independent reporting, which in turn shapes what international media can report and how the crisis is understood globally.

5. Agenda Setting

A concept from media studies that describes how the media, by choosing which stories to cover and how to cover them, influence what the public considers important. In this paper, agenda setting refers to how repeated coverage of the U.S. blockade as the primary cause of Cuba's crisis has shaped public perception, even when the structural evidence points to a more complex set of causes.

6. Systematic Silences

A concept used in this paper to describe the structural tendency for certain causes or perspectives to be consistently absent from media narratives, not necessarily because of deliberate censorship, but because of how information is produced, filtered, and distributed under conditions of political constraint and ideological alignment.

Introduction

In recent years, the crisis involving Cuba, Venezuela, and the United States has often been presented in the media as mainly the result of U.S. sanctions and the so-called "blockade." While these measures clearly affect Cuba's access to energy and international markets, this narrative oversimplifies a much more complex situation. For many years, Cuba relied heavily on Venezuelan oil through a political agreement in which it provided medical services in return, creating a system of mutual but unequal dependency. However, this arrangement was already weakening due to Venezuela's internal crisis, including declining oil production, economic instability, and long-term structural challenges, which reduced Venezuela's ability to support Cuba even before recent increases in U.S. pressure.

Cuba's current energy shortages cannot be explained only through external sanctions. They must also be understood through the island's long-term structural dependence on Venezuela and the gradual breakdown of that relationship. At the same time, recent developments in the region and broader geopolitical tensions have further disrupted these energy flows, contributing to the severity of the crisis on the island.

In parallel, humanitarian initiatives and solidarity campaigns, including recent flotilla-style missions and media-driven visits to Cuba, have gained visibility in international coverage. However, their role and framing remain debated, particularly in terms of how they represent the causes of Cuba's energy crisis. While such narratives often emphasize U.S. sanctions as the central explanation, they tend to place less attention on the longer historical and structural factors behind Cuba's situation.

The crisis is real, but the explanation offered in the media is incomplete.

This raises an important question: how do media narratives around the U.S. "blockade" shape the geopolitical understanding of Cuba's energy crisis, and how do they downplay Cuba's structural dependency on Venezuela? By combining International Relations theory with a critical reading of journalism, this paper argues that the Cuban crisis is not only a material issue of energy shortages and economic constraints. It is also shaped by how it is interpreted and framed in media discourse, which often emphasizes external causes while giving less attention to deeper structural factors. The paper further suggests that this is not only a regional issue, but one that reflects broader global dynamics of power, dependency, and information framing in international politics.

Section 1: Historical and structural background (Cuba–Venezuela)

When did Cuba's energy crisis actually begin?

For most international coverage, the answer is January 2026, the moment the United States intervened in Venezuela and cut off the oil supply that kept the island running. But that answer, while not wrong, is incomplete. The crisis did not emerge overnight from a single geopolitical decision; it was built over decades, through a combination of structural dependencies, institutional failures, and political choices made long before any U.S. blockade was in place. To understand what is happening in Cuba today, it is necessary to go further back, to the architecture of the Cuba-Venezuela relationship, to the internal collapse of Venezuela's oil industry, and to the decisions made in Havana that left the island with no viable alternative when that relationship finally broke down. The goal of this section is to establish the structural and historical context that any honest analysis of Cuba's crisis should also consider.

1.1 Oil-for-doctors system (Cuba and Venezuela)

Cuba and Venezuela developed a long-term oil-for-services relationship in which Venezuelan oil was exchanged for Cuban medical personnel, creating a system of regional dependency and cooperation. In the early 2000s, this system became particularly strong under the governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Fidel Castro in Cuba, especially following bilateral energy agreements and the creation of Petrocaribe in 2005. Petrocaribe was a regional oil cooperation initiative launched by Venezuela in 2005 to supply Caribbean and Latin American countries with subsidized oil under long-term, low-interest payment conditions in exchange for political and economic alignment.

According to regional policy analyses from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Petrocaribe functioned as a mechanism through which Venezuela supplied subsidized oil to Caribbean and Latin American countries under long-term, low-interest payment conditions, often in exchange for political alignment and regional cooperation. Additionally, a study from Science direct on *PetroCaribe: Petropolitics, energopower, and post-neoliberal development in the Caribbean energy region*, said that this system can be referred as “petropolitics,” where oil is used as a tool of geopolitical influence and regional power projection.

In return, Cuba expanded its international medical missions, sending doctors and healthcare workers primarily to Venezuela, but also to other countries in the region, including Brazil and Bolivia. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, this exchange functioned not only as economic cooperation but also as a tool of political alignment within Latin America, particularly among governments with similar left-leaning or “Bolivarian” political models.

1.2 Venezuela internal crisis and oil collapse

After oil was discovered in 1914 in the Lake Maracaibo region, Venezuela experienced a major oil boom throughout the 20th century and gradually became a petrostate, highly dependent on oil exports. Over time, oil came to represent the majority of government revenue and shaped the country's economic and political system. While institutions such as the Council on Foreign Relations explain how this dependence influenced Venezuela's development, regional sources offer a more detailed perspective.

Analyses published in Prodavinci, a Venezuelan digital platform recognized for publishing research and commentary from economists, historians, and academics, highlight how Venezuela's economic crisis is closely linked to structural issues in the oil sector, including long-term dependency and lack of diversification. According to discussions compiled by Prodavinci, these structural weaknesses, combined with hyperinflation and external debt, have made the economy highly vulnerable to external shocks.

However, this model became increasingly unstable after the mid-2010s, particularly following the global oil price crash between 2014 and 2016. According to analysis from the World Bank, this period represented one of the largest oil price declines in modern history, with prices falling by around 70%. Similarly, data discussed by the World Economic Forum shows that oil prices dropped from over \$100 per barrel in 2014 to below \$30–35 per barrel by early 2016, triggering a severe economic and political crisis in oil-dependent economies such as Venezuela. Regional perspectives help explain how this global shock translated into domestic collapse. Nueva Sociedad, a Latin American political and social analysis journal, reports that the fall in oil prices directly accelerated Venezuela's fiscal crisis, reducing state revenues and weakening its ability to sustain public spending, imports, and basic economic stability.

1.3 PDVSA's institutional decline

A key factor in this decline was the deterioration of PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.), Venezuela's state-owned oil company and the main source of national revenue. Created after the nationalization of the oil industry in 1976, PDVSA has historically been central to Venezuela's economy, generating the majority of export earnings and financing public spending.

Over time, the company suffered from corruption, lack of investment, loss of technical expertise, and increasing political intervention. According to analysis from the Istituto Affari Internazionali, an international policy research institute based in Italy, PDVSA's mismanagement and structural inefficiencies significantly reduced its operational capacity and ability to sustain production levels over time. This decline was reinforced by the loss of skilled workers and reduced maintenance of infrastructure, which weakened the entire oil sector.

Reporting from El País, a major Spanish newspaper with extensive coverage of Latin America, highlights how PDVSA's internal deterioration became a central driver of Venezuela's broader economic crisis. According to its investigations, widespread corruption, political control over the company, and the diversion of oil revenues transformed PDVSA from a relatively efficient state

enterprise into a politically managed institution with declining productivity. Further investigative reporting from El País also shows that this crisis deepened through large-scale mismanagement and financial extraction from the oil sector, with billions of dollars lost through corruption schemes and offshore networks, significantly weakening the state's main source of income and accelerating the country's economic collapse.

This collapse was further intensified when Venezuela experienced a severe macroeconomic crisis characterized by hyperinflation and economic contraction. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Venezuela experienced one of the most extreme hyperinflation episodes in modern history between 2017 and 2019, with inflation peaking at approximately 1,000,000% in 2018. This estimate is reported by Business Standard, which cites Reuters coverage of IMF projections on Venezuela's economic situation. At the same time, El Nacional, Venezuelan new outlet, reported daily how inflation destroyed salaries, reduced industrial capacity, and paralysed basic economic functioning, including the oil sector.

Investigative journalism platform Armando.info, one of the most well-known investigative outlets in Venezuela and an important voice in the fight against the suppression of press freedom in the country, has documented through detailed reporting how corruption networks, lack of reinvestment, and infrastructure deterioration accelerated the collapse of PDVSA from within. This body of investigative work shows that the crisis was deeply internal and structural, rather than only externally driven.

1.4 Black Gold to Broken Ties: Venezuela–US Relations from Oil Partnership to Military Intervention

Background: US as main oil buyer from Venezuela

During the second half of the 20th century and into the early 2000s, the United States remained one of the largest importers of Venezuelan crude oil, creating a relationship of strong economic interdependence. According to analysis by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), Venezuela's oil exports were historically concentrated toward the U.S. market, while U.S. refineries were specifically adapted to process Venezuela's heavy crude, reinforcing this structural connection.

However, this relationship began to change significantly after the rise of Hugo Chávez to power in 1999. His government promoted a more nationalist and state-centered oil policy, including the expansion of state control over the energy sector and the renegotiation of contracts with foreign companies. An article from CNN Español explains how these policies increased political control over PDVSA and reduced the role of foreign investment, contributing to long-term structural tensions within the sector.

At the same time, Venezuela's foreign policy shifted toward building alliances with countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and Cuba, using oil exports as a tool of geopolitical alignment. The explainer "*Timeline: 26 years of fraught US-Venezuela relations*" on Aljazeera explains the

evolution of this reorientation and how it contributed to growing diplomatic tensions with the United States, and how ideological differences and mutual distrust deepened over time.

These tensions intensified during the administration of Nicolás Maduro, particularly after 2017, when the United States imposed a series of sanctions targeting Venezuela's oil industry and financial system. These measures restricted Venezuela's access to traditional oil markets and limited its ability to conduct financial transactions linked to oil exports. As a result, Venezuela was forced to redirect its oil exports toward alternative markets, particularly in Asia. An article in geopolitics by the Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy explains how China became the primary destination for Venezuelan crude, often through indirect trade routes and intermediaries based in countries such as Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, and Malaysia.

2026 U.S military intervention in Venezuela

After analysing the previous tensions between Venezuela and the United States, it is clear that tensions between the two countries did not begin in 2026, but were built over decades. What changed in early 2026 was the form these tensions took.

On January 3, 2026, the United States launched a military strike in Venezuela and captured the incumbent president, Nicolás Maduro, along with his wife, Cilia Flores. The operation, known as Operation Absolute Resolve, began around 2 a.m. local time, when explosions were first reported in Caracas. Maduro and Flores were then taken to New York, where they faced charges related to narcoterrorism and pleaded not guilty in federal court, according to reports from the Associated Press.

The official justification for the operation was narco-terrorism. However, the motivations were more complex. According to analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the operation was intended to “reconstitute U.S. preeminence in the Western Hemisphere” and reduce the influence of rival powers such as China, while also helping to “rewire” regional geopolitics by weakening Venezuela’s alliances.

At the same time, economic motives were also highlighted. Statements by U.S. officials suggested that American companies could play a role in developing Venezuela’s oil resources after the intervention, reinforcing the idea that energy interests were closely linked to the operation. From a regional perspective, TeleSUR reported that Venezuelan authorities had warned that the United States was seeking to “seize the vast oil reserves” of the country, showing how control over oil was seen as a central issue in the conflict.

Section 2: Implications for Cuba (Analysis)

Did the United States cause Cuba's energy crisis, or did it simply make an existing one impossible to ignore?

Having provided the necessary background, this section analyzes the implications of these events for Cuba. The analysis is structured around two central questions: how did Petrocaribe, Venezuela's oil collapse, and the PDVSA disaster affect Cuba? And what did U.S. intervention in Venezuela mean for Cuba's energy stability? To understand Cuba's energy crisis, it is necessary to understand Venezuela's oil collapse and the nature of the U.S.-Venezuela relationship, because these events echoed into other economies that depended strictly on Venezuelan oil, Cuba being the most exposed.

2.1. Before the U.S. Intervention in Venezuela (2026)

The events preceding the U.S. intervention already explain much of Cuba's vulnerability. Cuba's decision to participate in Petrocaribe was a strategic one that helped the island improve its transport and infrastructure, but it came at the cost of tying the island's energy security to a single external economy: Venezuela and its state oil company, PDVSA, both of which would eventually collapse.

As Petrocaribe's top oil recipient, Cuba was deeply exposed whenever Venezuela struggled. The countries' relationship dated back to the friendship between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, leading to a services-for-oil agreement in 2000, under which Cuba received more barrels of crude per day than any other Petrocaribe member in exchange for the work of some 40,000 Cuban medical, educational, and military professionals in Venezuela annually. A chart from AS/COA, Americas Society/Council of the Americas, a U.S.-based policy organization focused on political, economic, and social affairs across Latin America and the Caribbean, illustrates how Cuba's oil receipts from Venezuela tracked directly with Venezuela's own economic fortunes, visually demonstrating that as Venezuela's crisis deepened, Cuba's energy supply contracted in parallel.

By 2025, this relationship was visibly deteriorating. According to 14ymedio, an independent Cuban media outlet based in Madrid, Venezuela's oil deliveries to Cuba had fallen sharply throughout the year, compounded further by a collapse in Mexican shipments, with Pemex exports to Cuba dropping 73% in the first ten months of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024. The decline in Venezuelan supply was tied directly to the broader collapse of PDVSA's production capacity. Petrocaribe began to disintegrate after PDVSA's production fell by nearly half in the mid-2010s, and Caracas could no longer justify the deficit generated by the arrangement. The accord was rendered effectively defunct after U.S. sanctions were imposed on PDVSA in early 2019.

According to ElectricChoice.com, which compiled data from CiberCuba, an independent Cuban digital news outlet, Cuba's oil imports had already fallen 35% in the first ten months of 2025 compared to 2024. By January 2026, oil imports fell to zero for the first time since 2015. As a result, the crisis had been building for years, driven by aging infrastructure, chronic underinvestment, and heavy dependence on imported oil that had for decades been supplied at subsidized rates by Venezuela. As those shipments declined over the preceding five years, the island's already fragile energy system came under increasing strain.

Finally, Venezuela's decision to nationalize its oil industry and cut commercial ties with its main buyer, the United States, also reverberated deeply in Cuba. The isolation of the Venezuelan oil sector from Western markets left both countries increasingly reliant on one another, deepening Cuba's exposure to any disruption in Venezuelan supply. The falling price of oil and the Venezuelan crisis gradually reduced the commercial value of these arrangements over the last decade, yet they remained essential to the Cuban economy. All of the above helps explain why Cuba's energy shortages and humanitarian crisis are not solely a product of recent geopolitical tensions, but the accumulated result of a long-term structural dependency on Venezuelan oil and the gradual internal collapse of Venezuela's production capacity.

2.2. After the U.S. Intervention in Venezuela / Impact on Cuba

Any analysis of the Venezuelan intervention is incomplete without accounting for its direct consequences on Cuba, and, crucially, without examining the structural vulnerabilities that made Cuba so exposed in the first place. Venezuelan oil allowed Cuba to stabilize its electricity supply, though it never fully modernized its grid. When those shipments became a casualty of the 2026 intervention, the consequences were immediate and severe.

Some analysts argued that the U.S. intervention in Venezuela was primarily a strategic calculation, and that Cuba was already past a critical breaking point. Pavel Vidal, a former Cuban central bank economist who teaches at Javeriana University in Colombia, stated plainly for a NBC News article that "if oil supply were to cease entirely, the Cuban economy would grind to a halt", a warning he issued to NBC News immediately after Maduro's capture in January 2026.

What tends to be overlooked in coverage of Cuba's blackouts is the degree to which they are not simply the product of external pressure, but of long-standing policy choices made by the Cuban government itself. In a March 2026 interview with Al Jazeera, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated: "These blackouts that are occurring have nothing to do with us. They were having blackouts last year. They're having blackouts because they have equipment from the 1950s in their grid that they've never maintained and never upgraded because they're incompetent." While Rubio's framing conveniently deflects from the role of the U.S. blockade, the underlying observation has analytical merit. Independent analysts, including those cited by ElectricChoice, note that both the cumulative effects of the U.S. embargo and domestic policy

decisions, including limited energy diversification and heavy reliance on subsidized Venezuelan oil, contributed to the current vulnerability of the system.

An article from The World, a publicly funded international news program produced by PRX in partnership with WGBH Boston and the BBC World Service, brings this reality to ground level: through the voices of Cuban journalist Abraham Jiménez Enoa and ordinary residents in Havana, it documents how blackouts lasting up to 20 hours a day, fuel scarcity, and daily uncertainty are reshaping life on the island and eroding public confidence in the government.. Regional outlets confirm this trajectory well before 2026. As early as March 2024, Cuba experienced large-scale power outages lasting up to 18 hours a day, driven by frequent breakdowns at the Antonio Guiteras Thermoelectric Power Plant and the lack of fuel shipments from Russia and Venezuela, as reported by Wikipedia's dedicated entry on the 2024–2026 Cuba blackouts, which draws on coverage from CiberCuba and Reuters. Both outlets had been tracking the deterioration of Cuba's grid consistently throughout 2024 and 2025, documenting each collapse well before U.S. intervention became the dominant story.

Cuba's energy crisis is real, and the U.S. sanctions have dramatically worsened it. But the depth of that crisis reflects decades of ideological rigidity, a refusal to diversify energy sources, failure to modernize infrastructure, and an over-reliance on Venezuelan subsidies. The intervention in Venezuela did not create Cuba's fragility, it exposed it. Understanding why those energy shortages exist in the first place requires looking not only at Washington's policy decisions, but at Havana's own.

The structure of events in 2026 is critical for understanding how media narratives can undermine analytical depth. Cuba's energy crisis is frequently framed in Western media as a consequence of U.S. sanctions or the blockade, an externally imposed emergency. However, as the evidence above demonstrates, the structural dependency on Venezuelan oil had been deteriorating for over a decade before the intervention, driven by Venezuela's own collapsing production capacity. The 2026 intervention did not construct Cuba's vulnerability; it instrumentalized it. This distinction is essential for any honest geopolitical analysis, because framing the crisis solely through the lens of the U.S. "blockade" risks downplaying the long-term structural fragility that made Cuba susceptible to this kind of external pressure in the first place.

Section 3: Applying IR Theories to Understand the Cuba–Venezuela Interdependency

When does solidarity become dependency, and when does dependency become a weapon?

This section of the analysis reads the evidence presented in the previous two sections through an International Relations theoretical lens. Rather than applying theories mechanically, the goal is to show how three complementary frameworks ; dependency theory, realism, and Marxist political economy, illuminate different dimensions of the same structural reality: a relationship that was never simply economic, and a crisis that was never simply the product of one actor's decisions.

3. 1. Dependency Theory

From an IR perspective, the Cuba–Venezuela relationship is perhaps most clearly explained through dependency theory, which argues that asymmetrical relationships between states create long-term structural reliance that is difficult to exit without systemic cost. In this case, the asymmetry was mutual but unequal: Cuba depended on Venezuelan oil to sustain its electricity system and transport infrastructure, while Venezuela relied on Cuban human capital, primarily medical personnel, to support its social programs and, increasingly, its internal security apparatus.

At its peak, Venezuela supplied around 100,000 barrels of oil per day to Cuba, making it the island's dominant external energy provider. This was not a market relationship that Cuba could easily replace; it was a deeply rooted dependency, where the functioning of the domestic energy system depended on the political stability of a foreign government. As Jorge Piñón, energy researcher at the University of Texas at Austin Energy Institute, explained in an interview with NPR, Venezuela was sending Cuba as much as 100,000 barrels a day between 2007 and 2015–2016, a figure that eventually fell to around 35,000 barrels a day as Venezuelan oil production began collapsing from within.

This progressive erosion, driven by Venezuela's own institutional failures rather than any external shock, illustrates the core logic of dependency theory: asymmetrical relationships do not simply break under sudden external pressure, they erode from within, as the stronger partner's capacity to sustain the arrangement diminishes. The 2026 U.S. intervention did not create Cuba's vulnerability; it exposed a condition that had been deepening for years. Cuba's decision to tie its energy security almost entirely to a single partner, one whose own economy was visibly deteriorating, was itself a political choice, and one whose consequences were foreseeable well before January 2026.

It is also worth noting that dependency theory, originally developed to critique Western economic dominance over the Global South, applies here with some irony: in this case, it is a

South-South relationship that produced the dependency, shaped not by colonial imposition but by a shared ideological project. This complicates simplistic narratives that frame Cuba's crisis solely as a product of U.S. imperialism.

3.2 Marxist Political Economy

If dependency theory explains the structural mechanics of the Cuba–Venezuela relationship, Marxist political economy helps explain the ideological logic behind it, and why that logic ultimately made the relationship more fragile, not less.

Marxist political economy examines how states organize their economies not only in response to market forces, but according to ideological visions of how resources and power should be distributed. From this perspective, economic arrangements between states are never purely technical, they reflect deeper political projects and competing visions of the international order.

Venezuela's nationalization of its oil industry and its redistribution of oil revenues through programs like Petrocaribe were rooted in a vision of socialist solidarity and anti-imperialist cooperation. This was not simply economic policy, it was a deliberate attempt to challenge the neoliberal model promoted by the United States. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Venezuela was not simply an ally of convenience for Cuba, but a partner with which it formed a "Bolivarian brotherhood" , central to Cuba's external survival strategy since the collapse of Soviet support in the early 1990s.

The structural dependency that followed was the intended outcome of an ideologically driven project, one that prioritized solidarity over resilience. Economic analyst Marc Vidal argues that the Cuban model was designed to survive crises through external subsidies rather than address its structural failures, first the Soviet Union, then Venezuela, and that the current energy collapse reflects fragility accumulated over decades. When the relationship collapsed, there was no market alternative and no contingency plan, because building one would have meant acknowledging the limits of the Bolivarian project itself.

3.3 Realist Theory

Realism offers a different but complementary reading of these events. From a realist perspective, states act primarily to protect their power and security, and strategic resources, like oil, are tools of foreign policy as much as sources of income. Under this lens, Venezuela's oil exports to Cuba were never purely economic. They were instruments of regional influence, used to build political alliances and project power across Latin America during the Chávez era.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Petrocaribe was not only an energy deal but a mechanism of geopolitical influence, where subsidized oil was exchanged for political support and regional alignment. In the case of Cuba, this was most visible: Venezuela supplied heavily subsidized oil while Cuba provided doctors, intelligence cooperation, and political support, a strategic exchange where energy worked as a political tool rather than a simple commercial product.

The realist logic becomes even clearer when looking at the U.S. side. On January 29, 2026, Executive Order 14380 was signed, declaring a national emergency and authorizing tariffs on any country that directly or indirectly supplied oil to Cuba. The United States confirmed that regime change in Cuba was a stated goal by the end of the year. This is realism in its most direct form, control over a strategic resource was converted into coercive leverage against a third state, without any direct military action on Cuban soil.

Fernando Ferreira, director of the geopolitical risk service at Rapidan Energy Group, captured this logic clearly in Fortune, arguing that the intervention in Venezuela produced "a very clear domino impact," given that Cuba had been largely dependent on Venezuela for both oil supplies and political cover.

The realist reading therefore reveals something that is often missing from media coverage of Cuba's crisis: the intervention in Venezuela was never exclusively about Venezuela. It was simultaneously a geopolitical move against Cuba, using energy as the instrument of pressure and structural dependency as the mechanism of coercion.

3.4. Synthesis

Taken together, these three frameworks reveal that Cuba's energy crisis is the product of overlapping causes operating at different levels.

At the structural level, dependency theory explains how decades of asymmetrical reliance on Venezuelan oil left Cuba without viable alternatives when that supply collapsed. At the ideological level, a Marxist political economy reading shows how this dependency was not accidental but the product of a deliberate, ideologically driven regional project, one that prioritized solidarity over resilience. And at the geopolitical level, realism shows how the same structural vulnerability was ultimately instrumentalized by an external power to achieve its strategic objectives.

No single theory is sufficient on its own. But together, they make one thing clear: Cuba's crisis was shaped as much by the choices made in Havana and Caracas over two decades as by the decisions made in Washington in early 2026.

Section 4: Media Framing, Bias, and Structural Silences

If the roots of Cuba's crisis go back decades, why does most coverage begin in 2026?

How a crisis is named shapes how it is understood. A clear example is international coverage of Cuba's energy collapse, where the choice of language, the selection of sources, and the emphasis placed on certain causes over others have produced a media narrative that is partially accurate but structurally incomplete. This section examines how Cuba's crisis has been framed across different media environments, why those frames tend to simplify a complex structural reality, and what gets lost when immediacy and emotion dominate over historical and geopolitical context.

4.1 How the Crisis Has Been Framed: The "Blockade" Narrative

The dominant framing in international media presents Cuba's energy crisis as a direct consequence of the U.S. "blockade," an externally imposed emergency with a clear aggressor and a clear victim. This framing is not without foundation: the U.S. intervention in Venezuela, Executive Order 14380, and the subsequent cutoff of oil shipments did dramatically worsen Cuba's energy situation. But the language used to describe these events carries significant weight beyond the facts themselves.

Al Jazeera's video coverage of the crisis uses the headline "How the US plunged Cuba into darkness," framing the blackouts as a direct and singular consequence of U.S. policy. Across multiple Al Jazeera reports, the phrase "US oil blockade" appears consistently in headlines and captions, establishing a clear causal chain: U.S. action, Cuban suffering. One report describes how "Cuba began efforts to restore power after its grid collapsed for the second time in a week amid a US oil blockade that has dealt a major blow to the island's ailing energy infrastructure." The word "blockade" itself is significant. It carries strong historical connotations, evoking siege warfare and total isolation, and amplifies the sense of urgency in a way that more technical terms like "sanctions" or "embargo" do not.

This is not unique to Al Jazeera. TeleSUR, the state-aligned Latin American broadcaster founded in 2005 by Venezuela, Cuba, and other left-leaning governments as an alternative to Western media, consistently frames the crisis through the lens of U.S. imperialism and regional sovereignty. A February 2026 TeleSUR report describes the crisis as caused by a "U.S. blockade on oil shipments," quoting Cuban President Diaz-Canel denouncing an "economic suffocation" strategy by Washington, with no mention of Venezuela's structural oil collapse or Cuba's pre-existing energy vulnerabilities. In this narrative, responsibility is entirely externalized and structural factors are rarely examined.

By contrast, independent Cuban outlets offer a more complicated picture. 14ymedio, a digital news outlet founded by Cuban blogger and dissident Yoani Sanchez, operating from outside Cuba due to government censorship, has consistently reported on how internal inefficiencies, government mismanagement, and the gradual reduction of Venezuelan oil shipments contributed to the crisis well before U.S. measures intensified. A November 2025 report by 14ymedio documented how Venezuela's oil deliveries to Cuba had already collapsed throughout the year, with Mexican shipments also falling 73% in the first ten months of 2025, well before the U.S. blockade came into force. This distinction between state-aligned and independent media is not incidental. It reflects deeper structural conditions in the information environment of the region.

4.2 Why the Framing Happens: Structural Constraints and Press Freedom

Understanding why media narratives simplify this crisis requires looking at the conditions under which journalism is produced. International outlets often rely on accessible sources, official statements, and rapidly available information, which naturally favors immediate and visible causes, like U.S. sanctions, over slower, less visible processes like long-term economic dependency or the gradual institutional collapse of PDVSA. Complexity is not always ignored deliberately. It is frequently filtered out by the practical constraints of news production: time pressure, limited access to data, and the dominance of politically visible events.

In Latin America, these constraints are compounded by severe restrictions on press freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders' 2025 World Press Freedom Index, Venezuela ranks 160th globally, remaining one of the worst-performing countries due to widespread censorship and judicial persecution of reporters, while Cuba ranks 165th, reflecting systematic government control over information, surveillance of journalists, and the near-total absence of independent reporting. In these environments, information about internal economic conditions, such as the deterioration of PDVSA, the mismanagement of energy infrastructure, or the structural causes of fuel shortages, is either suppressed, politically sensitive, or framed to align with official narratives.

Informational Asymmetry

When international media draw, directly or indirectly, on regional sources operating under these constrained conditions, the informational gaps in local reporting can shape global narratives. The result is not only ideological bias but what might be called informational asymmetry: certain types of knowledge, those that are more visible, more accessible, and more emotionally compelling, are more likely to be reproduced in global coverage. This helps explain why structural factors such as Venezuela's long-term oil decline or Cuba's import dependency tend to appear as secondary context rather than central causes in mainstream reporting, even though they are critical to understanding the crisis.

4.3 Ideological Orientation as a Framing Filter

Beyond structural constraints, there is a third factor that shapes how Cuba's crisis is covered internationally, and it is one that is rarely named directly: the ideological orientation of parts of the global media landscape. A significant portion of the outlets, platforms, and public figures that have covered Cuba's crisis most extensively in 2026 operate within an anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist framework, one that views U.S. foreign policy as the primary driver of suffering in the Global South, and socialist or left-leaning governments as legitimate targets of that aggression.

This ideological lens is not inherently wrong. U.S. foreign policy has historically caused real harm in Latin America, and the 2026 intervention in Venezuela is a genuine example of coercive geopolitical power. But when applied to Cuba's crisis, this framework produces a specific blind spot. Armando Chaguaceda, a Cuban political scientist and lead researcher at the Gobierno y Analisis AC think tank in Mexico, stated plainly in *The New Humanitarian* that "the situation in Cuba is, first and foremost, the responsibility of the Cuban government," adding that the international community has "tolerated the continuous deterioration" and thereby "contributed to the country's de-civilisation." Similarly, Ricardo Torres, a Cuban economist and research fellow at American University in Washington D.C., argued in *Time* that "Cuba faces a double crisis: an internal crisis of rules, incentives, and legitimacy, and an external crisis of dwindling support and harsher constraints," a framing that explicitly refuses to reduce the situation to external pressure alone.

Within an anti-imperialist narrative, however, attributing any part of Cuba's crisis to the Cuban government risks appearing to validate U.S. policy, and so that attribution tends to be avoided or minimized. *Socialist Alternative*, for instance, described Cuba's situation as "a manufactured crisis" of U.S. imperialism, framing the energy collapse exclusively as a product of Washington's aggression while defending the social gains of the Cuban Revolution against what it called U.S. efforts to restore capitalism.

This is worth examining not to dismiss the genuine humanitarian concern behind these positions, but because ideological framing, like any other framing filter, shapes what questions get asked and which causes get emphasized. According to media framing theory cited in *ScienceDirect*, a frame functions as "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration." When the central organizing idea is anti-imperialism, the selection and emphasis naturally foreground U.S. actions, while the exclusion and underemphasis fall on internal structural failures, regardless of how significant those failures actually are.

The result is a media environment in which the question "what caused Cuba's crisis?" tends to produce a single-cause answer, not because the evidence points exclusively in that direction, but because the ideological framework through which the evidence is interpreted does. Venezuela and Cuba are presented as countries that chose a different path and are being punished for it, rather than as countries whose own political choices also contributed to the fragility that external pressure has now made catastrophic.

4.4 The Flotilla as a Media Event

Perhaps the clearest illustration of how activism, journalism, and political communication can overlap to reinforce a simplified narrative is the Nuestra América Convoy, a humanitarian flotilla that arrived in Havana on March 21, 2026. Organized by Progressive International and CodePink, the convoy brought together over 600 delegates from 38 nations and 120 organizations, delivering approximately 20 tons of aid including food, medicine, solar panels, and bicycles.

The convoy was supported by high-profile figures including Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and U.S. congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, and was immediately decried by parts of the Cuban diaspora for failing to denounce Cuba's authoritarian regime. Critics also pointed to the fact that Mariela Castro, daughter of former president Raúl Castro, sits on Progressive International's advisory board as evidence that the flotilla lacked the independence associated with genuine humanitarian aid. Other prominent participants included British MP Jeremy Corbyn, Spanish politician Pablo Iglesias, American streamer Hasan Piker, Irish hip-hop group Kneecap, and U.S. union activist Chris Smalls, a mix of politicians, activists, and media influencers whose combined social media reach ensured the convoy generated significant international visibility.

The reaction from the Cuban diaspora was swift and sharp. Ramón Saúl Sánchez, president of Movimiento Democracia, a Cuban exile organization based in Miami, publicly denounced the flotilla at a press conference, stating: "The flotilla is organized by the daughter of Raúl Castro and groups that are supportive of the regime. And what are they going to do if they give it to the regime? The regime is going to sell it." Cuban activist Salome Garcia, writing from exile after being barred from returning to the island, also questioned the convoy's framing, pointing out the contradiction of international visitors being allowed entry while Cuban dissidents remain unable to return to their own country.

Even Basel Ramsis Labib, an Egyptian filmmaker with a long record of leftist activism and participation in the Gaza flotilla, broke with the convoy, writing on social media that "this flotilla, specifically 'Nuestra América', is ridiculous," arguing that it responded more to the political and media interests of its leaders than to a genuine commitment to the Cuban people.

The content produced during the convoy, meetings with Cuban officials, cultural events, and testimonials about blackouts and shortages, functioned as curated media content that reinforced the "blockade" framing at a massive scale. According to reporting by The New Humanitarian, a paediatric surgeon in Havana who refused to give her last name out of fear of government retaliation expressed her disbelief: "Are we ever going to see any of this aid? Are the people on that ship aware of everything we're going through? I don't think so." She added: "The flotilla members are staying in luxury hotels, a world away from the realities the people are facing." The New Humanitarian also reported that convoy participants stayed in five-star hotels that had electricity even during blackouts, and used electric buses while public transport across the country remained paralyzed.

Agenda-Setting

This dynamic illustrates what media scholars describe as agenda-setting through visibility: highly mediated events shape what audiences perceive as the central cause of a crisis. The convoy functioned not only as a political gesture but as a media event that reinforced a simplified causal chain of U.S. sanctions, humanitarian crisis, and Cuban suffering, while marginalizing the slower structural processes that preceded recent sanctions, including Venezuela's oil collapse and Cuba's decades-long import dependency.

4.5 Synthesis: What Gets Lost

The combined effect of these framing choices, the language of "blockade," the dominance of external causality, the informational asymmetry produced by restricted press freedom, and the ideological filter of anti-imperialist media, is that certain aspects of the crisis consistently receive less attention than they deserve.

What tends to be foregrounded: the immediacy of U.S. policy, its humanitarian consequences, and the moral narrative of a powerful country strangling a small island.

What tends to be backgrounded: the decade-long deterioration of Venezuelan oil production, Cuba's strategic decision to tie its energy security to a single ideological partner, the structural failures of the Cuban energy grid, and the role of domestic mismanagement in creating the conditions that made the island so vulnerable to external pressure.

None of this means that U.S. policy is not a significant cause of the current crisis, it clearly is. But a media environment that consistently foregrounds one cause while backgrounding others does not produce fuller understanding. It produces a partial picture that serves particular political narratives and makes it harder for audiences, policymakers, and analysts to engage with the full complexity of what is actually happening in Cuba. Honest analysis requires holding both things at once: acknowledging the real and severe consequences of U.S. pressure, while also refusing to let that acknowledgment become a reason to look away from the structural and ideological failures that made Cuba so exposed in the first place.

Section 5: Applying IR theories to Media framing

In the previous section, the goal was to analyze how Cuba's energy crisis is being framed in the media and why those frames tend to emerge. In this section, the same question is revisited through an International Relations theoretical lens, in order to uncover the power dynamics that sit behind those frames. For that purpose, this section introduces two new theoretical frameworks, constructivism and critical theory, alongside Marxist political economy, which was already applied in Section 3.

Together, these three approaches are the most appropriate tools for analyzing how meaning is produced, circulated, and contested in media coverage of the crisis. Each illuminates a different dimension of the same problem: not just what is being said about Cuba, but who gets to say it, under what conditions, and with what consequences for how the crisis is ultimately understood, and misunderstood.

5.1. Constructivism: Reality as a Narrative Contest

Constructivism in IR argues that international reality is not only shaped by material conditions; oil barrels, sanctions, blackouts, but also by how actors interpret and give meaning to those conditions. Facts do not speak for themselves; they are always filtered through language, framing, and social context.

The Cuban energy crisis is a clear example of this. The choice between the words "blockade" and "sanctions" to describe the same U.S. policy is not merely semantic, it is a construction of reality. "Blockade" evokes siege, isolation, and warfare, framing Cuba as a nation under attack. "Sanctions" implies a more targeted and legally grounded economic measure. Both words refer to the same executive orders and tariff threats, but they produce fundamentally different understandings of who is responsible and what the crisis means. Media outlets do not simply report facts, they actively participate in constructing the reality through which audiences understand what is happening.

This constructivist dynamic is visible across the entire media landscape analyzed in Section 4. Al Jazeera's repeated use of "US oil blockade" in headlines and captions, TeleSUR's framing of the crisis as U.S. imperialism in action, and the Nuestra América Convoy's self-description as a mission to "break the siege" all contribute to building and reinforcing a specific interpretation of the crisis, one centered on external causality and U.S. aggression. Through repetition and visibility, this interpretation becomes the dominant frame through which global audiences understand Cuba's situation, regardless of whether the structural evidence fully supports it.

Constructivism also helps explain the counter-narratives. Independent outlets like 14ymedio and analytical platforms like Havana Times construct a different reality, one in which internal mismanagement, structural dependency, and decades of policy failures are equally central to the story. The existence of these competing constructions is not simply a matter of different facts being reported; it is a contest over which version of reality becomes authoritative.

5.2. Critical Theory: Who Gets to Define the Crisis?

If constructivism asks how meaning is made, critical theory asks who has the power to make it. Critical theory in IR draws attention to the power dynamics embedded in knowledge production. Media coverage is not neutral. It reflects the interests, ideological positions, and institutional pressures of the actors who produce it. In the case of Cuba's energy crisis, different actors produce competing interpretations: the Cuban government frames the crisis as a product of U.S. aggression; left-leaning international media and activist organizations frame it as a humanitarian emergency caused by imperialism; independent Cuban journalists frame it as the result of both external pressure and internal failure; and U.S. officials like Secretary of State Marco Rubio frame it as the inevitable consequence of communist mismanagement.

None of these framings is entirely wrong, but none is complete. What critical theory reveals is that the dominance of any one frame is not determined by its accuracy alone, it is determined by the resources, reach, and institutional power of those who promote it. TeleSUR, backed by state resources across multiple Latin American governments, can amplify the "blockade" narrative to a regional audience of millions. Progressive International, with its network of politicians, academics, and influencers, can mobilize the Nuestra América Convoy into a globally visible media event. Independent Cuban journalists, operating under surveillance and without institutional backing, produce more nuanced reporting that reaches a far smaller audience.

This asymmetry in visibility is itself a form of power. It determines which causes of the crisis appear central and which appear marginal, not because of the weight of evidence, but because of who controls the channels through which the evidence is presented.

5.3. Marxist Political Economy: Structural Silences

A Marxist political economy reading adds a final layer by connecting media framing back to the material and structural conditions that underlie both the crisis and its representation. From this perspective, the patterns of coverage are not simply the result of individual ideological choices, they reflect deeper structural relationships between information, power, and economic interest.

The relative absence of Venezuela's structural collapse, PDVSA's institutional failure, and Cuba's long-term energy dependency from many mainstream narratives is not accidental. It reflects a broader pattern in how information is produced under conditions of political and economic constraint. In countries like Cuba and Venezuela, where press freedom is systematically suppressed, the information most available to international media is the information the state wants circulated, which tends to foreground external aggression and minimize internal failure. At the same time, in parts of the international left-leaning media landscape, an anti-capitalist ideological framework makes it structurally uncomfortable to acknowledge that socialist governance also contributed to the crisis, because doing so risks appearing to validate U.S. policy.

The result is what might be called systematic silences, not a conspiracy of omission, but a structural tendency for certain causes to be consistently underrepresented across multiple

media environments simultaneously. According to media framing theory, a framework works through "selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" , and it is precisely through the exclusion of structural context that the dominant narrative of Cuba's crisis has been constructed. Venezuela's decade-long oil production collapse, Cuba's decision to tie its energy security to a single ideological partner, and the gradual deterioration of the island's infrastructure are all real, documented, and analytically central, yet they consistently appear as background detail rather than primary causes in the dominant media narrative.

5.4. Synthesis

Together, these three theoretical frameworks reveal that Cuba's energy crisis operates simultaneously at two levels: the material level of oil barrels, blackouts, and sanctions, and the discursive level of competing narratives, ideological filters, and structural silences. Constructivism shows that the crisis is partly a construction of the frames through which it is reported. Critical theory shows that those frames reflect power asymmetries in who gets to define the story. And Marxist political economy shows that the silences in coverage are not random , they are structurally produced by the same conditions of constraint and ideological alignment that shaped the crisis itself.

Understanding Cuba's energy collapse therefore requires two simultaneous moves: analyzing the economic and geopolitical factors on the ground, and critically examining how narratives about those factors are constructed, circulated, and contested. Without both, any analysis, however well-intentioned, risks reproducing exactly the kind of partial picture that has defined mainstream coverage of this crisis from the beginning.

Conclusion

Cuba's energy crisis did not happen because of one decision made by one country. It built up over many years, through choices made by all three main actors: the United States, Cuba, and Venezuela. The United States carries serious responsibility, the military operation in January 2026, the seizure of oil shipments, and the executive order that turned energy into a political weapon made the crisis much worse, very fast. But stopping the analysis there means confusing the final blow with the root cause. The Cuban government is also responsible: for decades it refused to modernize its energy grid or find alternative energy sources, tying the island's survival to a single foreign ally. And Venezuela's governments are responsible for destroying PDVSA from the inside, through corruption, political interference, and neglect long before any U.S. blockade existed.

This crisis also shows why the world needs to pay closer attention to Latin America. This is a region where oil politics, ideological alliances, limited press freedom, and competition between global powers combine to create humanitarian disasters that rarely get the serious, in-depth coverage they deserve. Ordinary Cubans living through 20-hour blackouts, or Venezuelans who watched their country's oil wealth disappear into corruption and political games rather than national development, are the human face of failures that go far beyond any single news event. International audiences tend to notice Latin America only when a crisis explodes, and even then, they often receive a simplified version of events filtered through pre-existing political views. Paying real attention to this region, consistently and carefully, is not just an act of solidarity. It is a basic requirement for understanding how the world actually works.

The topic is urgent right now because several major global trends are colliding in one place. The United States, China, and Russia are all competing for influence in the Western Hemisphere, and energy access is one of their main tools. The 2026 intervention in Venezuela shows that controlling resources and removing unfriendly governments are still live options in U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, the crisis reveals how limited access to information, caused by press restrictions in Cuba and Venezuela, ideological bias in parts of the media, and the practical limits of journalism, can distort the global picture of what is really happening. At a time when misleading narratives and information warfare are recognized as serious problems in international politics, Cuba offers a clear, concrete example of how a partial truth, repeated often enough, becomes the version most people believe.

Coming back to the research question: media narratives around the U.S. "blockade" have shaped how the world understands Cuba's energy crisis by making the United States the beginning and end of the explanation. Media coverage has not simply downplayed Cuba's dependency on Venezuela, it has made it almost invisible. And in doing so, it has made it much harder for the public, for policymakers, and for analysts to fully understand a crisis whose causes are shared and whose responsibilities are multiple. What this crisis demands urgently, is not louder political messaging from any side, but a genuine commitment to honest political narratives: ones that name every cause, hold every actor accountable, and put the truth of what is happening above the comfort of ideology.

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