

**DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR
“U.S.–CUBA RELATIONS”
DR. ERNESTO DOMÍNGUEZ LÓPEZ**

**Organizing
Questions**

- Why has Cuba been so closely linked to major global powers since being colonized by Spain?
- Why have the United States and Cuba been so connected since the early 1800s?
- What factors led to the post-1959 freeze in U.S.–Cuba relations?

Summary

In December 2024, Dr. Ernesto Domínguez López, professor of history at the University of Havana, Cuba, and a Tinker Visiting Professor at Stanford University, recorded a 22-minute video about U.S.–Cuba relations. His remarks cover the history of relations between the United States and Cuba from the early 1800s until today, dividing it into several distinct periods. In this discussion guide, students prepare for the video by reviewing relevant historical documents and a map of Cuba. After watching the video, they research the eras of U.S.–Cuba relations that Dr. Domínguez López describes and share what they learned in small groups. The unit ends with a full-class debate on whether Cuba was wise to ally with the Soviet Union after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. This discussion guide is appropriate for advanced secondary students and university students.

Objectives

Through the course of this discussion guide, students will

- recognize the connection between Cuba’s location and open economy and its close relationship to major world powers;
- appreciate how tightly the United States and Cuba have been linked since the early 1800s; and
- understand why Cuba has traditionally been wary of the influence of the United States.

Materials

Handout 1, *Historical Document Review*

Handout 2, *Video Notes*

Handout 3, *U.S.–Cuba Relations by Time Period*

Handout 4, *Notes on Time Period Presentations*

Display 1, *Cuba’s Location*

Display 2, *Concluding Debate*

Answer Key 1, *Historical Document Review*

Answer Key 2, Video Notes

Answer Key 3, U.S.–Cuba Relations by Time Period

Answer Key 4, Sample Debate Arguments

Teacher Information, Video Transcript

Video, “U.S.–Cuba Relations” online at

<https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/us-cuba-relations>

Equipment

- Computer with Internet access and an HTML5-supported web browser
- Computer projector and screen

Teacher Preparation

Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
2. Preview Video, “U.S.–Cuba Relations” (running time: 22 minutes). You can use Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*, as a reference for the video content.
3. Become familiar with the content of the handouts, displays, and answer keys.
4. Set up and test your class computer and projector before starting the lesson.
5. Communicate your expectations around whether or how students can use large language models (LLMs) and other forms of generative artificial intelligence to complete the assignments in this unit.

Time

Three 50-minute class periods, plus homework before each class period

Procedures Day One

1. Inform students that over the next few class periods they will learn how and why U.S. and Cuban history have intertwined since the early 19th century.
2. Show Display 1, *Cuba’s Location*, on the projector. Ask the class, “What about Cuba’s location do you think made it important to the United States in the early 1800s?” Take responses from several students. Potential answers include:
 - Cuba was the most convenient transit point between Spain and its colonies in North and Central America
 - Ships moving between Louisiana (controlled by France until 1803, then part of the United States) and the United States, Europe, or the Caribbean had to pass by Cuba
 - Cuban forces could easily impede travel between Louisiana and the original 13 colonies of the United States
3. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, *Historical Document Review*, to each student. Assign students to work in pairs on the assignment for 30 minutes.

4. Reconvene the class and ask students to share their responses. Use Answer Key 1, *Historical Document Review*, to guide the discussion.
5. Before the end of the class period, collect Handout 1, *Historical Document Review*, from each student for assessment.
6. Distribute one copy of Handout 2, *Video Notes*, to each student. Instruct students to watch the video “U.S.–Cuba Relations” and complete Handout 2 before the next class period.

Before Day Two Students watch the video and complete Handout 2, *Video Notes*. Tell students to reserve 60 minutes to watch the video and finish the handout.

Day Two

1. Ask students to share their responses to the questions on Handout 2, *Video Notes*. Use Answer Key 2, *Video Notes*, to guide the discussion.
2. Collect Handout 2 from each student for assessment.
3. Organize the class into groups of five students each.
4. Distribute one copy of Handout 3, *U.S.–Cuba Relations by Time Period*, to each student.
5. Allow groups the remainder of the class period to complete Handout 3 in their groups. At your discretion, use Answer Key 3, *U.S.–Cuba Relations by Time Period*, to assist students.

Before Day Three Students continue researching their assigned time period and preparing to present what they learned to their classmates per the instructions on Handout 3, *U.S.–Cuba Relations by Time Period*.

Day Three

1. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, *Notes on Time Period Presentations*, to each student. Instruct students to work in their small groups to share their research on their time period while other students take notes in the table on Handout 4.
2. Collect Handout 4, *Notes on Time Period Presentations*, from each student for assessment.
3. If time allows, show Display 2, *Concluding Debate*, on the projector. Inform the class that they will take part in a debate to answer this question. Assign three groups to argue for the statement, and the other three groups to argue against it.
4. Allow groups time to research and prepare their arguments. Circulate throughout the class to answer questions. At your discretion, use Answer Key 4, *Sample Debate Arguments*, to help students prepare for the debate.
5. Facilitate the debate per the instructions on Display 2.
6. After the debate, ask the class to vote for which argument they personally believed to be more persuasive.

Extension

- Ask students to conduct deeper research on one of the six turning points in Cuban history that Professor Domínguez López mentioned and then share what they learned through a poster, website, podcast, or blog post.
- Assign students an essay in response to one of the following two prompts:
 - Based only on what you learned in this unit, write a one-page response to this prompt:

In the video, Professor Domínguez López stated that “U.S.–Cuba relations are important to the whole Western Hemisphere.” To what extent do you agree with him? Why?
 - Write a 2–4 page research report in response to the following prompt. Incorporate evidence from the video, primary sources, and class discussion to bolster your conclusion.

To what extent did the United States treat Cuba as a colony between 1898 and 1959?

Assessment

The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this lesson:

- Evaluate student responses to Handout 1, *Historical Document Review*, based on Answer Key 1, *Historical Document Review*.
- Evaluate student responses to Handout 2, *Video Notes*, based on Answer Key 2, *Video Notes*.
- Evaluate student responses to Handout 4, *Notes on Time Period Presentations*, based on Answer Key 3, *U.S.–Cuba Relations by Time Period*, and the quality of the sources cited.
- Use Answer Key 4, *Sample Debate Arguments*, to evaluate the quality and accuracy of students' arguments during the debate.
- Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
 - clearly state their opinions, questions, and / or answers;
 - provide thoughtful answers;
 - exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
 - respect and acknowledge other students' comments; and
 - ask relevant and insightful questions.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT REVIEW

In the video, Dr. Domínguez López refers to three documents from the 19th century that establish U.S. policy toward Cuba and other countries in the Western Hemisphere: the **“Ripe Fruit” letter (1823)**, the **Monroe Doctrine speech (1823)**, and the **Manifest Destiny essay (1845)**.

As Dr. Domínguez López mentions, these documents are critical to understanding how the United States saw its relationship with Cuba particularly and Latin America in general in the 19th century. To better understand the video, work in pairs to review the content of these key documents, then complete the table at the end of the handout. Your teacher will collect your response for assessment.

DOCUMENT 1: “Ripe Fruit” letter (1823)

A letter that Secretary of State John Quincy Adams wrote in 1823 to Hugh Nelson, U.S. Minister to Spain, on the importance of annexing Cuba contained the following excerpt:

“...if an apple severed by its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union.”

Source: <https://www.jstor.org/cuba-annexation-nation/>

DOCUMENT 2: Monroe Doctrine speech (1823)

The Monroe Doctrine is a portion of President James Monroe’s Seventh Annual Message to the U.S. Congress (now called the “State of the Union Address”) on 2 December 1823. The speech was written by John Quincy Adams, who became U.S. President after Monroe.

“... In the discussions to which this interest has given rise and in the arrangements by which they may terminate the occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers...

... In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so. It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced that we resent injuries or make preparation for our defense. With the movements in this hemisphere we are of necessity more immediately connected, and by causes which must be obvious to all enlightened and impartial observers ...

... We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward

the United States. In the war between those new Governments and Spain we declared our neutrality at the time of their recognition, and to this we have adhered, and shall continue to adhere, provided no change shall occur which, in the judgement of the competent authorities of this Government, shall make a corresponding change on the part of the United States indispensable to their security. ...

Source: <https://www.oas.org/sap/peacefund/VirtualLibrary/MonroeDoctrine/Treaty/MonroeDoctrine.pdf>

DOCUMENT 3: Manifest Destiny essay (1845)

The term “manifest destiny” comes from an influential 1845 essay titled “Annexation” by popular editor and columnist John O’Sullivan in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. In the essay, O’Sullivan starts by advocating for Texas to join the United States. He goes on to articulate his belief in the God-given mission of the United States to lead the world in the transition to democracy. He called this America’s “manifest destiny,” a concept that motivated American expansion throughout the 19th century.

“Texas is now ours... Her star and her stripe may already be said to have taken their place in the glorious blazon of our common nationality; and the sweep of our eagle’s wing already includes within its circuit the wide extent of her fair and fertile land. She is no longer to us a mere geographical space—a certain combination of coast, plain, mountain, valley, forest and stream. She is no longer to us a mere country on the map. She comes within the dear and sacred designation of Our Country ...

... California will, probably, next fall away from the loose adhesion which, in such a country as Mexico, holds a remote province in a slight equivocal kind of dependence on the metropolis. Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country. ...

... Away, then, with all idle French talk of *balances of power* on the American Continent. There is no growth in Spanish America! Whatever progress of population there may be in the British Canadas, is only for their own early severance of their present colonial relation to the little island three thousand miles across the Atlantic; soon to be followed by Annexation, and destined to swell the still accumulating momentum of our progress. And whosoever may hold the balance, though they should cast into the opposite scale all the bayonets and cannon, not only of France and England, but of Europe entire, how would it kick the beam against the simple, solid weight of the two hundred and fifty, or three hundred millions—and American millions—destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stripes and stars, in the fast hastening year of the Lord 1945!”

Source: <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Annexation>

	“Ripe Fruit” letter	Monroe Doctrine speech	Manifest Destiny essay
What assumptions does this document make about U.S. power in the Americas?			
What implication does this have for Cuba?			

VIDEO NOTES

You are about to view a 22-minute video of remarks from Dr. Ernesto Domínguez López, professor of history at the University of Havana, Cuba, and a Tinker Visiting Professor at Stanford University. Dr. Domínguez López discusses the history of relations between the United States and Cuba from the early 1800s until today. He covers key turning points in Cuban history and explains how the United States has taken a keen interest in Cuba almost since its founding. This interest led to heavy U.S. involvement in Cuba after it won its independence from Spain in 1898 until the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The two countries have been in conflict since then, though Dr. Domínguez López maintains that they retain close cultural ties.

Use the space below to answer each question. You may want to take notes on another sheet of paper as you watch the video.

1. According to the video, which four factors most influenced Cuban history after the arrival of the Spanish in 1492?
2. What six major turning points in Cuba's history does Dr. Domínguez López name?
3. What three documents from the early 19th century outline U.S. policy toward Latin America and Cuba? What were the implications for Cuba?
4. What factors characterized the relationship between the United States and Cuba from 1789 to 1898?

5. What examples does Dr. Domínguez López give of U.S. influence on Cuba between 1898 and 1959?

6. According to the video, why did the Cuban Revolution of 1959 so deeply rupture relations between Cuba and the United States?

KEY TERMS (in order of mention)

Haitian Revolution (1791–1804)—series of conflicts between 1791 and 1804 between Haitian slaves, colonists, the armies of the British and French colonizers, and other parties. The Haitian people ultimately won independence from France, becoming the first country to be founded by former slaves.

Cuban independence wars—series of armed conflicts fought by Cubans to gain independence from Spanish colonial rule. These spanned from 1868 to 1878 and then again from 1895 to 1898.

Monroe Doctrine—a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy enunciated by President James Monroe in his annual message to Congress in 1823. The policy warned European nations not to colonize or interfere in the Americas, saying any attempt would be seen as a threat.

Manifest Destiny—the U.S. belief in the 1800s that it had the right and duty to expand westward across North America, spreading its culture and government to the Pacific and beyond

protectorate—relationship between two states in which one exercises some decisive control over the other. The degree of control may vary from a situation in which the protecting state guarantees and protects the safety of the other to one that is a masked form of annexation.

colony—a territory controlled and governed by a foreign country that often uses the colony's resources and people for its own benefit, limiting the colony's independence and ability to make decisions

1933 Cuban Revolution—coup d'état that occurred in Cuba in September 1933. It began as a revolt of sergeants and enlisted men in the military, who allied with student activists to depose the president and install a new government.

handout 2

neocolony—a country that is officially independent but is still heavily influenced or controlled by a more powerful country, often through economic pressure, political influence, or cultural dominance, instead of direct military or political rule

proxy—someone who is authorized to act on behalf of another person, or to serve as a representative for them

Cuban Missile Crisis—tense 1962 standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union after the USSR put nuclear missiles in Cuba. It nearly led to direct war between the two superpowers but ended peacefully when the missiles were removed.

modus vivendi—an arrangement or agreement allowing conflicting parties to coexist peacefully

U.S.–CUBA RELATIONS BY TIME PERIOD

In the video, Dr. Domínguez López divides U.S.–Cuba relations into several time periods. Each member of your small group will research one of these periods and then share what they learned with the other members of your group.

Step 1: Choose your time period

First, assign one of the five time periods listed below to someone in your group. Enter the name of who's assigned to each time period in the right column of the table.

Time Period	Name of Assigned Student
Spanish colony (1789–1898)	
Protectorate (1899–1930s)	
Neocolony (1930s–1958)	
Cold War (1959–1989)	
Post-Cold War (1989–now)	

Step 2: Conduct research and prepare to share what you learned

Work individually to research your assigned time period. Use the questions below to guide your research:

- What were the key events in the bilateral relationship during this time period?
- How would you characterize the relationship between Cuba and the United States?
- How did the United States view Cuba, and how did Cuba view the United States?

Document your responses and bring them to the next class period, where you will have three to five minutes to share what you learned with the other members of your group. Remember to use reliable sources and list them along with your answers; your teacher will evaluate the quality of your sources.

NOTES ON TIME PERIOD PRESENTATIONS

Use the table on the following pages to take notes on your groupmates' presentations. Your teacher will collect this handout for assessment.

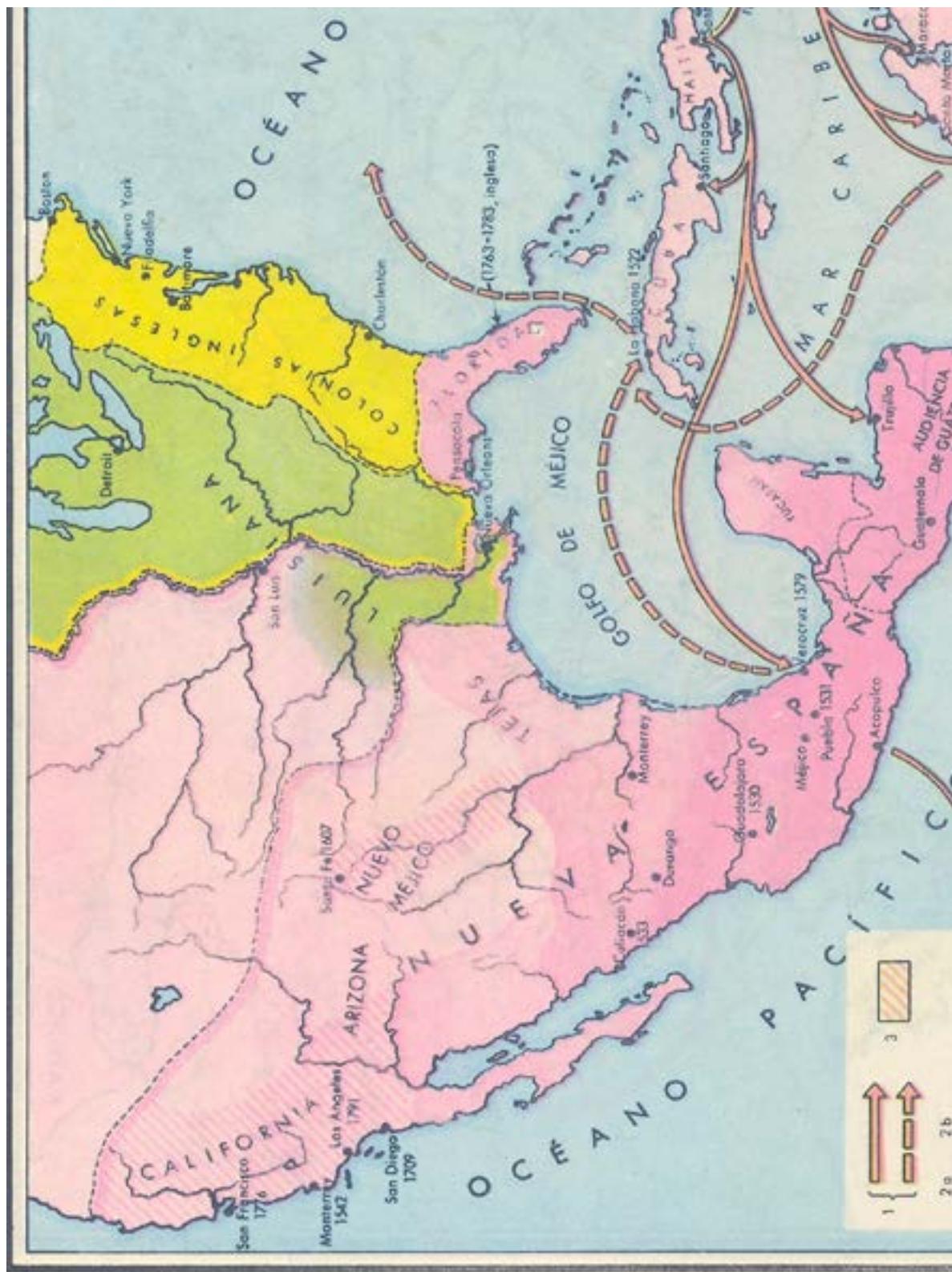
Time Period	SPANISH COLONY (1789–1898)
Presenting Student	
NOTES	

Time Period	PROTECTORATE (1899–1930s)
Presenting Student	
NOTES	
Time Period	NEOCOLONY (1930s–1958)
Presenting Student	
NOTES	

handout 4

Time Period	COLD WAR (1959–1989)
Presenting Student	
NOTES	
Time Period	POST-COLD WAR (1989–now)
Presenting Student	
NOTES	

Cuba's Location



Spanish map from early 1800s, supplied by Dr. Domínguez López for video and discussion guide

Concluding Debate

Statement to debate

“Given the history of U.S.–Cuba relations, it was wise for Cuba to seek an alliance with the USSR after the 1959 Cuban Revolution.”

Debate Instructions

1. At random, the teacher will select one of the three groups arguing **against** this proposition to make its argument.
2. That group has up to five minutes to state its argument. Each member of the group can speak for up to one minute. After the first speaker’s minute is over (or they finish making their point), the speaker must “tag” another member of their team to continue making their case. Any other team member can raise their hand to be tagged.
3. After the “against” group is done, the teacher will randomly call on one of the three groups arguing **for** the proposition to make its argument. This group has five minutes to make its points, using the same tag protocol described above.
4. Next, any other person assigned to argue the **against** side can add to that side’s argument. As above, each person has only one minute to speak until five minutes have passed.
5. Finally, any other person assigned to argue the **for** side can add to that side’s argument. Again, each person has only one minute to speak; this continues for up to five minutes.
6. At this point, the debate will be over and the class will vote on which of the two sides they found more persuasive.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT REVIEW

Students' responses should reflect the sample responses below.

1. "Ripe Fruit" letter (1823)

- What assumptions does this document make about U.S. power in the Americas?

The letter reflects a belief that U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere is natural and inevitable, and that Cuba is unable to prevent being someday subsumed into the United States.

- What implication does this have for Cuba?

It implies that Cuba is destined to be a territory that larger powers will claim and dominate rather than an independent state that controls its own future.

2. Monroe Doctrine speech (1823)

- What assumptions does this document make about U.S. power in the Americas?

The Monroe Doctrine assumes that the United States can repel future European attempts at colonization, and that it has the authority and even the moral responsibility to protect the Western Hemisphere from interference by outside powers. It reflects the growing confidence of the United States and its ambition to become a dominant power in the hemisphere, perhaps even surpassing European colonial powers.

- What implication does this have for Cuba?

The Monroe Doctrine claims to protect the Americas from European domination, but it also places the United States as the protector of all countries in the Western Hemisphere. Since Cuba was a Spanish colony at the time, the Monroe Doctrine makes it clear that the United States prefers for Cuba to someday be free from Spanish rule but does not necessarily rule out the possibility of the United States itself controlling or even annexing Cuba.

3. Manifest Destiny essay (1845)

- What assumptions does this document make about U.S. power in the Americas?

The essay communicates a belief that the United States has both a divine right and a moral duty to expand its territory across the continent of the Americas and potentially beyond. It portrays U.S. values, institutions, and political systems as superior to the others in the Americas and therefore destined to spread far and wide, even if that means displacing other peoples. The spread of U.S. power is seen as benevolent, beneficial, and inevitable.

- What implication does this have for Cuba?

Manifest Destiny suggests that the United States will inevitably control or annex Cuba, since the island is one of the closest neighbors to the United States and could benefit from the democracy and values of the United States.

VIDEO NOTES

1. According to the video, which four factors most influenced Cuban history after the arrival of the Spanish in 1492?

Dr. Domínguez López highlights these four factors:

- **Geographical location:** *Besides being located right off the coast of the United States, Cuba marks the eastern edge of the Caribbean Sea, making it one of the first points of land in North America that ships traveling west from Europe or Africa reach. This has placed it at the center of major global trade routes since the early 1500s (more than 500 years).*
- **Open economy:** *Partly due to its location at the center of these trade routes, Cuba has had an open economy dependent on trade since Spain colonized it.*
- **Intense relation with major powers:** *Cuba's strategic location and open economy have linked it to major global powers starting with Spain. It later became a major interest of the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union.*
- **Migration:** *Cuba's population is the product of voluntary migration from Spain and many other countries in Europe and the Americas and even China, alongside the import of enslaved people from Africa.*

2. What six major turning points in Cuba's history does Dr. Domínguez López name?

Dr. Domínguez López mentions the following six turning points:

- **Colonization by Spain (1492, 1510–1515):** *arrival of the first Europeans, then conquest and colonization by Spain*
- **Revolution in Haiti (1791):** *created a global vacuum in sugar exports and resulted in Cuba becoming the world's largest producer and exporter of sugar*
- **Cuban Independence Wars (1868–1898):** *Cuba fought for independence from Spain twice. The first attempt started in 1868 and was unsuccessful, but Cuba gained independence from Spain in 1898 with the help of the United States.*
- **Cuban Revolution of 1933:** *a popular revolution that overthrew President Gerardo Machado and eventually, with U.S. support, led to the emergence of Fulgencio Batista as the new leader of Cuba*
- **Cuban Revolution of 1959:** *revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro overthrew the Batista government and sought to make Cuba a communist nation*
- **Collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (1989–1991):** *the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union and other members of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe led to an acute economic crisis in Cuba*

3. What three documents from the early 19th century outline U.S. policy toward Latin America and Cuba? What were the implications for Cuba?

- *In 1823, President James Monroe proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine (which was actually written by John Quincy Adams), declaring the United States the defender of the Western Hemisphere and warning powers outside the hemisphere from interfering.*
- *While non-official, John O'Sullivan's 1845 articulation of Manifest Destiny defended the idea that the United States was destined to control the Western Hemisphere because it had the most civilized people in the hemisphere.*

- *Most specific to Cuba, John Quincy Adams postulated the “ripe-fruit theory” in 1823. He stated that Cuba would fall into the lap of the United States just as naturally as a ripe fruit falls from a tree because of the laws of political gravity. This provided a quasi-scientific basis for the idea that the United States would control Cuba in the future.*

Taken together, these documents implied that the United States was destined to someday control Cuba.

4. What factors characterized the relationship between the United States and Cuba from 1789 to 1898?

The slide visible in the video lists the following factors:

- *Marked interest in Cuba (including Founding Fathers)*
- *Attempts to buy Cuba from Spain*
- *Increasing economic ties (trade and investment)*
- *Support for Spain during the first Cuban independence war (1868–1878)*
- *PR campaign during the second Cuban independence war (1895–1898)*
- *Military intervention: Spanish–(Cuban–Filipino–)American War (1898)*

5. What examples does Dr. Domínguez López give of U.S. influence on Cuba between 1898 and 1959?

- *Cuba’s Capitol Building, which was modeled after the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC*
- *Many Cuban elites sent their children to study in the United States*
- *Significant Cuban–American communities emerged in Tampa, Key West, Miami (all in Florida) and in New York City*
- *Architecture and urban design in some neighborhoods of Havana mirror that of typical U.S. cities in the 1940s and 1950s, with tall buildings on wide avenues with wide sidewalks, trees, and parks*

6. According to the video, why did the Cuban Revolution of 1959 so deeply rupture relations between Cuba and the United States?

The Cuban Revolution upset the long-held U.S. notion that it could and should control the territories near it, as per the Monroe Doctrine and the other documents from the 19th century. At the time of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the United States had closely influenced, and often directly controlled, what happened in Cuba for more than 60 years.

Cuba’s decision to ally with the Soviet Union meant not only could the United States no longer influence its neighbor, but that its most bitter rival was now on its doorstep. The United States thus saw the alliance as a threat to its national security and did what it could do overthrow Fidel Castro and the new government of Cuba.

U.S.–CUBA RELATIONS BY TIME PERIOD

Check students' responses to see if they broadly reflect elements of the sample responses below. Ensure that students list their sources and that their sources are reliable.

1. Spanish colony (1789–1898)

Almost immediately after winning independence, the United States expressed strong interest in Cuba due to its strategic location and economic potential. In the 1820s, the Monroe Doctrine warned European powers against interfering in the Western Hemisphere, with Cuba seen as a likely future U.S. acquisition. The United States made multiple offers to buy Cuba from Spain, including one for \$100 million in the 1850s.

Although Cuba was a Spanish colony, the United States saw Cuba as a natural extension of its influence in the Caribbean. Cuba's close proximity to Florida, its strategic position in Caribbean trade routes, and its economic importance in sugar and slavery drew strong interest. The rise of ideas like Manifest Destiny made U.S. leaders see Cuba as part of their sphere of influence. Meanwhile, Spain's weakening colonial grip and repeated Cuban independence efforts created instability.

During this time period, Cuba became economically dependent on the United States, especially for sugar exports, even as Spain maintained formal political control. U.S. politicians debated whether Cuba should be annexed or simply influenced, often describing it as a "ripe fruit" that would eventually fall into U.S. hands. Throughout this time period, the U.S. attitude toward Cuba could be described as broadly paternalistic and expansionist.

During Cuba's first war for independence, from 1868 to 1878, the United States remained officially neutral but feared that the United Kingdom and other European powers would control Cuba if it won its war against Spain. After Cuba went to war again in 1895, sensationalist journalism and the sinking of the USS Maine in 1898 prompted the United States to declare war on Spain. With the help of the United States, Cuba gained its independence only to come under significant U.S. influence.

2. Protectorate (1899–1930s)

After Spain was defeated in 1898, Cuba became a U.S. military-occupied territory from 1899 to 1902. The 1901 Platt Amendment to Cuba's constitution gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and to lease land for naval bases, including Guantánamo Bay, marking an infringement on Cuba's sovereignty. Cuba gained formal independence in 1902, but U.S. companies increasingly came to dominate sectors of the Cuban economy, especially sugar. U.S. businesses became deeply involved in land ownership and trade, and the United States intervened militarily multiple times to protect its economic interests in Cuba during this time period.

Many historians label the relationship between the two countries during this time as that of a protectorate: the United States used its military and economic power and legal agreements to guide Cuban domestic and foreign policy. Many Cubans elites resented U.S. influence and interference, leading to growing Cuban nationalism.

3. Neocolony (1930s–1958)

U.S. economic interests in sugar, land, and tourism continued to drive the bilateral relationship during this time period. In 1933, a popular revolution in Cuba overthrew President Gerardo Machado and led to a period of political instability. The United States backed Fulgencio Batista, a military figure who became the dominant political force in Cuba for much of the next 25 years. Batista's willingness to protect U.S. investments made him a favored partner, even when his rule was authoritarian and corrupt.

The Platt Amendment was repealed in 1934, ending the formal right of U.S. intervention and marking the transition from Cuba as a U.S. protectorate to a “neocolony.” The United States no longer had legal authority to intervene in Cuba but maintained significant influence by supporting regimes that protected U.S. interests, particularly sugar and tourism. Many Cubans grew disillusioned with U.S.-backed dictatorships and unequal wealth distribution. Cuban elites often benefited from U.S. domination, while many ordinary Cubans faced poverty, inequality, and repression.

Fulgencio Batista returned to power in a 1952 coup and ruled as a dictator with continued U.S. support, sparking growing tensions in Cuba and eventually leading to the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

4. Cold War (1959–1989)

When Fidel Castro’s revolutionaries overthrew Batista in 1959, relations between the United States and Cuba quickly deteriorated. The self-proclaimed communist government nationalized U.S. business, and the United States responded by imposing an economic embargo on Cuba. Castro viewed the United States as an imperial power bent on its destruction. Diplomatic ties were severed, and both nations backed opposing sides in international conflicts. While there were occasional efforts at dialogue, mistrust and ideological conflict defined their interactions for three decades.

Desperate for a strong ally, Cuba aligned with the Soviet Union, which made it a Cold War rival of the United States. In 1961, the CIA backed the failed Bay of Pigs invasion aimed to remove Castro. Tensions peaked in 1962 with the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, nearly triggering nuclear war.

During the Cold War, Cuba continued to support communist movements abroad, often putting it directly at odds with U.S. interests. The United States maintained its embargo and carried out covert operations intended to assassinate Castro or replace the Cuban communist government, hardening Cuba’s resistance. Each country used the other to rally domestic and international support, framing their conflict as part of the larger global struggle between capitalism and communism. This prolonged hostility kept relations frozen until the end of the Cold War.

5. Post-Cold War (1989–now)

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cuba entered a deep economic crisis Cubans call the “Special Period.” With Cuba economically vulnerable, U.S. leaders saw an opportunity to push for democratic reform by tightening its embargo on Cuba. However, the Cuban government resisted political change and blamed the embargo for its hardships.

The relationship has been uneven and politically charged, with brief moments of improvement followed by renewed tension. The United States has mostly maintained a strong economic embargo, while Cuba remains under one-party rule. Over time, more Americans have supported improved ties with Cuba, but concerns over Cuba’s authoritarianism and human rights abuses, as well as the political influence of Cuban Americans in Florida, continue to strain the relationship.

In 2015, President Obama restored diplomatic relations with Cuba, reopening embassies and easing travel restrictions. However, the Trump administration reversed many of those openings in 2017, reimposing sanctions and designating Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism. Relations between the two countries remain fragile and unresolved. In some ways, the U.S.–Cuba relationship remains stuck in a Cold War-era framework.

SAMPLE DEBATE ARGUMENTS

Potential arguments for and against the debate statement are listed below. Use these examples to help groups prepare for the debate and to debrief the debate. These are suggestions rather than a definitive list of all relevant arguments; students may make other arguments that are persuasive.

Potential Arguments in Favor of the Debate Statement

- The U.S. government saw Fidel Castro as a threat to U.S. business interests in Cuba and started acting to destabilize and replace the new Cuban government. This meant that Cuba needed an ally powerful enough to counteract the United States, and the only country of comparable power at the time was the Soviet Union.
- Without a new trading partner, Cuba's economy would have collapsed under U.S. sanctions. The Soviet Union's willingness to buy Cuba's sugar at above-market prices allowed Cuba to survive economically despite the loss of access to the U.S. market.
- Given the U.S. government's willingness to invade Cuba and oust the new government, the USSR was the only government that could provide a security guarantee against U.S. aggression.
- The Castro government's support for land reform and socialism made it a natural ideological ally of the USSR.
- Besides the United States, the USSR was the only country with true global influence, so by allying with the Soviet Union, Cuba gained access to the entire Soviet/socialist bloc.

Potential Arguments Against the Debate Statement

- Allying with the chief enemy of the United States made it inevitable that Cuba would become a Cold War flashpoint, as happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 that nearly led to nuclear war.
- Losing access to the U.S. economy made Cuba overly dependent on the USSR for aid and trade; it simply traded dependence on one superpower (the United States) for another (the Soviet Union). Indeed, Cuba lost 80 percent of its trade and plunged into deep economic crisis when the USSR collapsed in 1991.
- Cuba's dependence on the Soviet bloc meant it had to follow the USSR's economic models and foreign policy priorities, so still did not have complete control over its sovereignty.
- Many countries in Latin America were afraid of communist influence or were under pressure from the United States to break ties with Cuba, so the alliance with the USSR isolated Cuba from many of its longstanding allies in Latin America.
- Rather than allying with the Soviet bloc, Cuba could have tried to join the Non-Aligned Movement, which avoided siding with either superpower. If successful, Cuba could have had more control over its economy and foreign policy and may have been able to avoid confrontation with the United States.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

“U.S.–Cuba Relations”
Dr. Ernesto Domínguez López
Recorded 12 December 2024

Hello, my name is Ernesto Domínguez López. I’m a professor of history at the University of Havana, Cuba, and a Tinker Visiting Professor at Stanford University. One of my lines of research, one that is actually very important for me, my country, but also for the United States and for the whole of the Americas, is the relationship between the United States and Cuba, a relationship that has been going on for about 200 years or more, and that has had a number of ups and downs and that has a very critical nature. So I’m going to be talking about this in the hope that we get to a better understanding of what the relationship is, what it is, the way in which it is, and to figure out a way to move forward in this with something that could be helpful for all of you at some points.

The most important starting point to understand Cuba–U.S. relations has to do with where Cuba is. In a map you can see very easily how close Cuba is to the shore of the United States and how well located it is in an area that is extremely important, historically speaking. And something that happens to be the first of the key factors that are needed to understand the history of Cuba and that are critical to understand the history of Cuba’s relations, that geographical location. Also the fact that the Cuban economy is largely dependent on its foreign trade, foreign investment, the relationship with other actors around the world, what is called an open economy in that sense. Also, these two things have led Cuba to have a very intense relationship with global powers in different moments in history.

That goes all the way back to the Spanish colonial time. It was a colony of Spain for about 400 years, to the United States when it became a global power, but also other major powers in history: the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union when it started to have a presence in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War years. All of that has been major parts of Cuban history as it is a movement of people that I encapsulate in the word migration, but in fact encompasses a number of things, including very importantly, the import of enslaved people from Africa that made a significant part of the Cuban population until today, their descendants make a significant part of the Cuban population until today. So Cuban history has to be understood considering all of these factors.

We are talking about the geographical location, the open economy, all of that translates into Cuba being at the very center of a very dense network of trade that was critical during colonial times. It was the key position in the Spanish colonial empire, especially to its location as the hub of Spanish colonial trade. A reality that even when changed due to the changes in the global geopolitics, the global maps have changed significantly, still Cuba is located at the very center of a very dense network of trade, as can be seen in modern maps that track these trade routes and the way in which they operate. The most intense ones, many of them are around Cuba in what is called the American Mediterranean.

So on that basis, Cuban history has gone through a number of major turning points. From the discovery—because there was people living in Cuba, so discovery not so much—but the arrival of the Spaniards in 1492 and the subsequent conquest and colonization. The Haitian Revolution that did not happen in Cuba but had a huge impact in the country because, of course, it made

Cuba ... it created a vacuum in the sugar markets in the world and allowed Cuba to become the biggest producer and exporter of sugar in the world, which is something that shaped Cuban history ever since. The Cuban independence wars itself, and a couple of revolutions that happened in the country, one in 1933 and one in 1959—that is the best known of the events in Cuban history, the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

And a later event that didn't happen in Cuba either but was very impactful: the collapse of socialism—as it's actually called, not communism—socialism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, all of that eventually produced major change, major shifts in Cuban history.

When you compare that to U.S. history, because we have two countries here, we have to look, to go through different turning points in U.S. history, its own colonization by the Brits, although the colonization started before by the Spaniards, and there were a number of people living in what is now the United States. But as the United States emerged from the British colonies, we are talking about early 1600s, from that moment on, the independence of the United States, then territorial expansion, the Civil War, and then all the developments in late 1800s ending in the 1900s and the early 21st century with the projection of the United States as a global power.

One of the big components in U.S. history have been this idea of having a foreign policy that is based on some foundations, that have a couple documents that actually show the relevance and the orientation of that foreign policy. For example, the Monroe Doctrine from 1823, written by John Quincy Adams, although announced by President James Monroe in that year in the Massachusetts Congress, which is the State of the Union Address. Currently it's called the State of the Union Address. And something that is not an official document but effectively provided an ideological framework for this foreign policy, which is the Manifest Destiny by John O'Sullivan in 1845. When both of these documents were talking about not only the projection of the United States as the main power in the Western Hemisphere, but declaring its right to control the hemisphere as a way to bring progress to the land, but also the right provided by destiny, by providence, of controlling the region because of the reason of being the most civilized people in the whole hemisphere, in the whole continent. That's a very simplified way of putting this, [there's] more to it, but it's very important to understand because that means that anybody surrounding the United States will be a target for this kind of idea, for this kind of potential expansion.

Regarding Cuba in particular, there is something that is called the “ripe-fruit theory” by John Quincy Adams himself. He was talking that Cuba will fall in the lap of the United States as a ripe fruit will fall from the tree because of the laws of political gravity, something like that. Pretty much providing sort of a scientific basis for the idea of the United States being potentially in control of Cuba in the future.

All of those ideas eventually translated into the expansion of the United States all the way from the east coast, the east coast to the Pacific, to the conquest of the Mexican territories in the 1840s, to the acquisition of Louisiana in 1803, the acquisition of Alaska, the annexation of Hawaii.

And in those very same years, the United States demonstrated a very intense, very important interest in acquiring Cuba that is present even in the writings and the speeches of the Founding Fathers. They were talking about Cuba as the most interesting acquisition that the new republic could have or a necessary condition for the survival of the United States—in the context of heightened tensions in the early times of the United States as an independent country—in the relationship with the Brits in particular, or the attempts to buy Cuba from Spain. The actual United States offered up to \$300 million dollars gold in the 1800s, which is about 20 times as

much as they paid, in fact, for the whole Louisiana territory, which is not the current Louisiana, it's all the Mississippi Valley. It's a big chunk of land. And yet Cuba was a much smaller land, much smaller territory, was offered 20 times as much in the time in which the value of the currency didn't change that much. So that is telling in itself how important, how interesting, how attractive Cuba was for these elites.

Which also was reinforced by the fact that especially in the 1800s when the Cuban sugar industry began to boom, the two countries entered in a very intense and growing economic relationship based on trade with the Cuban sugar coming, flowing mostly into the United States to the point in which it went up to 90 percent to the United States, and also with investment coming the other way around: American businesspersons coming to Cuba, some of them settling in Cuba, trying to expand their presence in the country.

And all of that was at the very basis of United States projection and interest in Cuba. That's why its subsequent policies during the Cuban independence wars is so interesting. Because initially the United States decided not to support the Cuban attempt to get its independence. This happened in 1868 through 1878, because they were afraid and there are speeches that demonstrate this. The government of the United States was afraid that an independent Cuba without the immediate control of the United States itself or without the control of Spain will fall into the hands of Great Britain. And that will be so much [more] difficult for the U.S., then, to make its inroads and get to control the country [of Cuba].

That changed by 1895, when the last Cuban independence war started. And they orchestrated a significant, I mean some important journalists like William Randolph Hearst, orchestrated a massive PR campaign, one of the very first of these types in history, to generate support for an intervention that eventually happened and led to the so-called Spanish-American War that in fact involved Cubans and Filipinos that were fighting for independence for years. In which I like to call the "Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War." It's a more accurate term, if you want. That intervention essentially combined with these independence wars for the case of Cuba, brought with it two very different ways of approaching the reality.

On the one hand, in the Cuban side, you see that the independence war is considered the very basis and the starting point of Cuban national identity and the glorious past of the fighters who fought and died for independence, as you can see in some of the paintings and the pictures of the time, there is a heroic vision of that. Whereas on the American side, at the very same time, the idea was that Cuba was at the time, the feminization of country meant saying that the country was weak and in need of protection. The idea of Cuba as a damsel in distress vis-a-vis the Spanish bandit, criminal, then the U.S. as essentially the knight in shining armor that had to step in and protect Cuba. That was the way in which it was presented and that supported the intervention and the creation of what effectively became a protectorate. Protectorate, why? Because there was not only military occupation at the beginning, but a legal framework that established that the U.S. had the right to intervene in Cuba, militarily speaking, and actually happened quite a few times, but also had economic control and overall political control in the country in exchange for protection from external threats. That is a textbook case of a protectorate, which is in fact a form of colony.

So all the way since early 1900s, I will say 1899, when the occupation started, to the 1930s, Cuba was, in effect, a colony of the United States, which at the time had a few other colonies, still has a couple of them around like the overseas territories. But at the time, Cuba was one of those even when in a very specific condition that changed in the 1930s, not before leaving some marks in Cuba.

You can go around Cuba and you can see, for example, what is called the Capitol Building. Pretty much like the one in Washington, inspired by the one in Washington. A little bit smaller building, but taller. That's very important. It's two feet taller on the needle on top of the main dome. It is truly two feet taller, the building, which was the site of the Cuban Congress and was built in 1929 as an expression of the influence of the United States in Cuban culture, an influence that have been going on for many, many years because the children of the Cuban elites have been coming to the United States to study. And there have been this exchange for all of this time. So we can see not only the economic and political interests, but also these cultural ties that were built at the time.

And also we can see how many of the people who led the Cuban independence effort lived in the United States for a while and created organizations and gathered resources to support, therefore, for independence here in the States. For example, in Key West, for example, in Tampa. And a significant group in Miami, including the biggest leader of the Cuban independence war, Jose Martí, who lived for 15 years in New York, that was a very important imprint.

But all of that meant at the time that Cuba was not independent. And the Cuban history is essentially a history of building an independent nation. The whole idea is that. That's why in the 1930s there was another revolution that incorporated not only, of course, the problem of sovereignty, but also domestic issues. There was a dictatorship in Cuba, and there was a significant historical process known as the 1930s revolution in Cuba. In the context also of the Great Depression, by the way, which impacted Cuba directly. So the consequence of this for the relationship between Cuba and the United States was a change, a significant change, in the nature of that when it went from being a protectorate to being what is called a neocolony. Neocolony now is a new form of control that doesn't include a legal framework that supports political control. There is economic control, but there is then indirect control through the means of using local proxies. In the Cuban case, for example, as was very common, the military served as that proxy, and some of the political leaders served as those proxies.

The United States supported several dictatorships at the time in the 1930s, and then in 1952, another one. And this eventually meant that Cuba remained, even when no longer a colony, it remained not fully sovereign and still accumulating a number of social issues.

All of this led to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which, by the way, came in the heels of a significant, still important and growing and ongoing presence of United States culture and its impact on Cuba that you can see inside the neighborhoods in Havana until today. Havana, the Cuban capital, which you can see the urbanistic developments and the architecture that was typical of the 1940s and 50s in modern cities in the United States. With a twist: it's a tropical country, different conditions, but still you can see tall buildings, wide avenues with wide sidewalks with trees and parks. All of that that was part of the modernization of the city under the influence of the United States.

But the Cuban Revolution was not against that, it was against the lack of sovereignty and of course, against the questions like huge inequalities, a massive dictatorship or a dictatorship in power at the time. And the Cuban Revolution also had a huge geopolitical connotation. Why? Because it essentially, let's say, opened a crack in the U.S. regional structure that supported the global power. U.S. needed what is called national security, which is not necessarily the protection of the people and the territory, but the protection of the interests. And that required the control of territories in the region as per the Monroe Doctrine and all these foundational documents. The Cuban Revolution opened a hole in that, in that structure, and that happened in the midst of the Cold War.

So the reaction against this on the American side will have been hostile nonetheless in any conditions, but when you add to the mix the Cold War, the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union, then it became even more clear that reaction will be hostile no matter what. That's why U.S. policy towards Cuba during those years became one of hostility and conflict, as at the same time the USSR found, the Soviet Union found, an opportunity and Cuba in the context in which it experienced, for example, almost from the get-go, increasing economic pressure, sanctions, cutting economic ties with the United States, an economy that depending on that, which were crafted with the idea of creating discontent among the Cuban population based on the lack of resources, on economic hardship. All of that, as have been written in documents that are available online, by the way, as of now.

That forced the Cuban hand in looking for other alternatives that were not in the United States. And that cemented the relationship with the Soviet Union at the same time that the United States was implementing this hostile policy and a number of actions, many of which will be labeled now as terrorism at the time, were not used and was not classified in that way. But there is no way around along with military threats and all of that.

In fact, one of the major events in this history, which is the Missile Crisis from 1962, is not the starting point of anything, but a consequence of the increasing hostility and the increasing conflictive nature of the relationship and the threat that Cuba felt that was the United States and trying to find a way to protect itself. I'm not saying it's the right decision, it actually opened the door to many other things, but was part of that logic.

When the Soviet Union disappeared and things in the world changed so quickly because actually in two years, it's nothing. Cuba faced again the situation, the reality of being without trade partners, without political supporters, without allies, with very little in the sense of economic relations outside, at the time, the socialist bloc, because the U.S. sanctions remained in place. The U.S. had the opportunity to change things a little bit and find a modus vivendi. But in fact the U.S. doubled down, increasing sanctions and forcing Cuba to adapt. For example, to create urban farms as a way to cope with the lack of imports of food, for example at different moments, to try to figure out ways to reorganize its economy while also trying to diversify its foreign relations.

And that was met with new and new and new sanctions. As we can see every year, every year that we have actually tracked, there are more studies ongoing, but we can actually confidently say that they have been the case for the better of at least 50 years. But so far, what we have tracked with all the numbers we have for more than 20 years since the 1990s onwards, new sanctions every year with some moments in which some of the sanctions have been scrapped, but those have been the ones that no longer make any sense, or just in one moment with President Obama in which he actually tried to change this policy a little bit. But the fact of the matter is that the relationship has remained a conflictive one. And the reality of it is that it's not—I don't think there is a future, immediate future in which the relationship won't be conflictive.

That being said, we still remain very close culturally speaking. We are two of the people that can actually understand each other when we get along. Because many parts of Cuban history, of the Cuban culture, the Cuban identity, have been forged in the relationship with the United States. Whether for separating ourselves from the United States or whether due to the influence being part of the habits and the practice that we have every day, from the time in which we eat or the way in which we call things, we take American expressions and make them into Spanish words.

teacher information

And that's how we call a lot of things. That's why we have a different way of speaking Spanish than Mexicans, for example, or South Americans. That is a large part of it.

So you have a very complex system in which you have this history of conflict coupled with this history of interactions that go beyond the conflict to create ties that are not easily broken in the process. So the future is still unknown, but in my view, these two things will keep on going.