Clashes in the Caribbean

By David Bensoussan
The author is a professor of science at the Université du Québec

The planned — and later postponed — meetings between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin reveal a troubling geopolitical reality: peace in Ukraine remains an uncertain prospect. Despite heavy military, economic, and human losses, Russia shows no willingness to scale back its ambitions. With millions of reservists at its disposal, Moscow appears ready to pursue the conflict, whatever the cost.

In response to Russia's intransigence, President Trump has brandished the threat of supplying Ukraine with Tomahawk missiles capable of reaching Moscow. Russia, for its part, has tightened its military ties with Cuba, rekindling the haunting memory of the 1962 missile crisis. Back then, Soviet missiles were withdrawn from Cuba only after President Kennedy ordered an attack that was halted at the last minute. Notably, several thousand Cuban mercenaries are now reportedly fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine. Russia has also wiped out Cuba's $32-billion debt and pledged to invest another billion in its struggling economy.

Yet Cuba is but one piece on a much larger chessboard.

During the Cold War, Moscow backed leftist revolutionary movements across Central and South America, while Washington — faithful to the Monroe Doctrine — sought to prevent any lasting foreign foothold in its continent. The U.S. embargo on Cuba, briefly eased by Barack Obama, was reinstated with force by Donald Trump, reigniting regional tensions. Under U.S. law, Trump could authorize an attack on Venezuela, an action that could only be stopped if two-thirds of Congress opposed it — a near-impossible threshold to meet.

Since the era of Hugo Chávez, Venezuela has adopted a staunchly anti-American stance and drawn closer to Russia. In the country, alliances between Hezbollah and drug cartels form a volatile mix — a strategic nightmare for North American security officials. The porous, transnational

networks of narcotrafficking could serve as conduits for terrorist movements, particularly as uncontrolled immigration has exposed weaknesses in America's security apparatus.

Recent attacks on ships operated by Venezuelan groups described as *narcoterrorists* have heightened tensions across the Caribbean. In October 2025, a strategic partnership between Russia and Venezuela was formally ratified. The Gulf of Mexico — which Donald Trump has symbolically renamed the "Gulf of America" — has become a focal point of U.S. economic and military concern. More than half of U.S. maritime trade passes through its waters, via the strategic ports of Texas and Louisiana. A reinforced American military presence, north and south of Cuba, now aims to block any projection of Russian power in the region.

In this charged climate, Trump has openly called for the ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. The embattled leader, fearful and contested, has surrounded himself with a human shield, while much of the population — exhausted and disillusioned — demands his departure and denounces rigged elections. Facing him stands the charismatic opposition figure María Corina Machado, recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, who has come to embody the hope of democratic renewal.

Beneath it all lies a striking parallel: Russia, fearing encirclement by the West through Ukraine, and the United States, unwilling to tolerate a hostile presence near its shores in the Caribbean.

The old reflexes of the Cold War are resurfacing. But the tropical setting should not obscure the gravity of the moment: the world may be witnessing the reconfiguration of a global balance — unstable, volatile, and all the more dangerous for being rooted in the enduring legacy of East-West confrontation.