

## Hotels raise the bar with signature spirits

**H**OTELS are increasingly offering guests exclusive in-house spirits and wines through partnerships with distilleries and wineries, adding a stronger aura of exclusivity to their brands.

Global hotel chains are moving beyond traditional food and beverage models by launching proprietary and private-label spirits. Driven by growing demand for hyper-local experiences in 2026, luxury properties and hospitality groups are creating bespoke single malts, custom botanical gins and regional rums that are served exclusively at their bars and restaurants. Global hotels are launching proprietary spirits and immersive bar partnerships to replace traditional F&B models, driving foot traffic and offering guests hyper-local, exclusive tasting experiences.

These exclusive labels and immersive bar collaborations are helping hotels drive footfall, strengthen brand identity and offer travellers a more memorable experience. In many cases, guests can even take home a part of the destination's culture through specially curated bottles.

In India, Sheraton Grand Bengaluru Whitefield Hotel partnered with Amrut Distilleries to create "Zarf", a signature single malt whisky matured for over six years in refill virgin American oak barrels. The whisky is served exclusively at the hotel's restaurant. International hospitality and travel operator Tallink Silja Line has expanded beyond conventional cruise retail by launching exclusive private-label wine and beer collections for its hotels and fleets, sourcing products globally.

Meanwhile, Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts has expanded its highly acclaimed bar programs—such as those recognized in the global Drinks International Cocktail Report—to new properties, featuring custom, terroir-driven spirit cocktails.

Nyx Hotels collaborated with on-demand spirits platform Distil to create a bespoke London-inspired gin, featured on signature menus and also offered in miniature bottles for suite guests to take home.

Hotels are increasingly highlighting local ingredients and regional dis-

tillation techniques in their signature cocktails. Non-alcoholic spirits and craft mocktails are no longer confined to separate menu sections but are now integrated into mainstream luxury bar experiences. Boutique craft alcohol brands, including small-batch bourbons and agave-based spirits, are also gaining prominence among identity-driven travellers.

In a major global beverage activation, Fairmont partnered with PATRÓN Tequila for a record-breaking celebration on World Paloma Day, featuring bespoke regional Paloma menus centred around additive-free tequila. India's Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), which owns the Taj Hotels brand, partnered with AB InBev to roll out 7Rivers brewpubs inside luxury Taj properties, beginning with Bengaluru.

In California, guests at Belmond El Encanto receive a bottle of exclusively blended Summerland wine upon arrival, allowing them to experience local wine culture without visiting Santa Barbara's Urban Wine Trail.

Similarly, The Connaught and its famed Connaught Bar collaborated with The Dalmore to create The Connaught Cask, an exclusive Highland single malt inspired by the iconic Mayfair hotel. The whisky features a complex maturation process involving Cabernet Sauvignon barrels, Port pipes and traditional sherry butts. A key takeaway from this evolving hospitality trend is the growing emphasis on simplifying F&B operations to improve efficiency and profitability. Overly complex cocktails and extensive menus often raise operational costs and slow service, ultimately limiting repeat consumption.

By focusing on high-quality, easy-to-prepare offerings, hotels can improve service speed, increase order frequency and optimise margins. Simplicity, in this context, is emerging as a strategic advantage rather than a compromise.

For hotels willing to rethink traditional hospitality models and embrace evolving beverage trends, food and beverage programmes are becoming a significant driver of both revenue growth and guest engagement in an increasingly competitive landscape.



# From revolution to indictment: Why Raul Castro is back in US crosshairs

## Case linked to Cold War-era tensions, exile politics and regime pressure

**A**FTER a week of speculation, the US Department of Justice has officially indicted Raul Castro, the 94-year-old ex-president of Cuba. The charges relate to a 1996 incident in which the Cuban military allegedly shot down two unarmed civilian planes operated by Brothers to the Rescue. The news comes amid mounting US pressure on the ailing Cuban Republic to change its system of government after 67 years of revolutionary rule. So why did the United States act now, and what will happen next?

### Who is Raul Castro?

Raul Castro is the younger brother of Cuban revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro. He joined Fidel's movement to overthrow the authoritarian US ally, Fulgencio Batista, starting in 1952. He participated in the assault on the Moncada Barracks on July 26 1953, becoming a founding member of the M-26-7 guerrilla movement, the leading organisation in the Cuban revolution.

In 1958, he rose to the rank of comandante of the Second Eastern Front. He came to Washington's attention in June when he kidnapped a group of 50 US Marines to prevent the continued aerial bombardment of his troops and local villagers.

This was a pivotal moment when Raul became more than Fidel's brother—he was now a key leader of the revolution. By late 1958, Raul Castro's army had liberated much of eastern Cuba from the Batista regime and began marching on Havana to conclude the revolution.

From January 1959, Castro became the defence minister at a time when fighting was ongoing. For decades, he was the face of Cuba's military and the island's defence.

When, in April 1961, a group of 1,400 Cuban exiles, supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), attacked Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, Castro's military secured a famous victory against the exiles, and the US. He would also rise



through the civilian and party ranks in Cuba. From 1976, he served as vice president and then succeeded his ageing brother as president from 2008, a position he would hold until 2019.

Raul Castro remained atop the Communist Party until 2021 and is still viewed as influential in Cuba's politics. Castro is a soldier, a politician and, above all, a revolutionary who toppled a pivotal US ally and resisted US pressure for decades. However, Cuba is an authoritarian state that does not tolerate dissent. In 2003, Fidel Castro's government, of which Raul Castro was apart, detained dozens of pro-democracy advocates in an event dubbed the "black spring". One of those detained, Jose Daniel Ferrer, founder of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, called on the US to stand with the opposition forces in 2025.

### What is he accused of doing?

Cuba has been subject to a blockade by the US since 1960. It was also subject to an embargo by the members of the Organisation of American States (OAS), which includes almost all the countries in the Western Hemisphere, between 1964 and 2009. The economic survival of Cuba has always

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been dependent on the support of a large nation willing to supply it with fuel.

During the Cold War, that was the Soviet Union, whose 1991 collapse was devastating for Cuba and its government. The "Special Period" following 1991 saw fuel shortages, declining food production, social unrest and large-scale emigration from Cuba. Cuban exiles boarded unstable flotillas in their tens of thousands, hoping to join other exiles in Florida. The Clinton administration in the US eventually allowed for mass migration and the US Coast Guard was regularly helping to save stranded Cubans. Despite this, dozens of people drowned at sea.

A group of Cuban exiles, led by self-declared "Bay of Pigs veteran", Jose Basulto, flew reconnaissance flights and reported the location of stranded Cubans to the Coast Guard.

But the flights had other motives. On several occasions, the planes flew into Cuban air-

space, ignored warnings and dropped propaganda designed to trigger anti-government activity.

Records made public by William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, authors of a book on the topic, reveal the US knew of these operations and feared Cuba would eventually shoot down the planes, creating an international incident. On February 24 1996, the Cuban military indeed shot down two planes, killing all four people on board. Now, 30 years later, the US Department of Justice alleges that Castro, the then-defence minister, and six others are criminally responsible for the murders of the four men, three of whom were US citizens. The US attorney for the Southern District of Florida, Jason A Reding Quiñones, said "this passage of time does not erase murder".

### Why is the US acting now?

Cuba is again suffering under a US blockade, this time

initiated following the removal of its fuel guarantor, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in January. New Venezuelan President Delcy Rodriguez was pressured into ending oil shipments to the island, as were Mexico and other regional partners under the threat of crippling tariffs. Cuba declared last Thursday it had no fuel or diesel remaining at all.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian conditions worsen. Amnesty International reported in 2025 that most Cubans were struggling to find sufficient food and medicine. In a historic visit in recent days, CIA Director John Ratcliffe spoke with members of the Cuban government in a sign of potential regime change. President Donald Trump has also highlighted his motives on Cuba this week, saying "to a lot of people it's going to be one of the most important things, they've been looking for this moment for 65 years".

Cuban-Americans have indeed been pushing for the removal of the Castros since the 1960s. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, himself a Cuban-American, commemorated Cuba's 1902 Independence Day by delivering the following message to the Cuban people, in Spanish: "...and I want to tell you that we, in the US, are offering to help you not only to alleviate the current crisis but also to build a better future."

The message condemned the Cuban government, and Raul Castro, as corrupt. He called for regime change, referring to the current Cuban president, Miguel Diaz-Canel. The indictment of Castro is about more than justice for one man. It's about Cuban-American politics in Florida, and it's about the looming potential of regime change in Cuba, America's primary regional foe for the past 67 years.

*(The writer is an Associate Lecturer in History, Politics and International Relations at Western Sydney University (WSU), Australia)*

# India's rail renaissance fuels economic growth

## Infra push is turning rail network into a faster, safer and greener engine of national development

VINCENT FERNANDES

**I**NDIA's railways, the lifeline for more than 20 million daily passengers, have undergone a quiet but consequential transformation over the past decade. Since 2014, nearly 55,000 km of tracks have been renewed, the machine fleet has more than doubled, and ultrasonic testing has reduced rail failures by almost 90 per cent. The share of tracks capable of supporting speeds of 110 kmph or more has risen from 40 per cent to 80 per cent, enabling faster and smoother services such as the Vande Bharat Express.

The story of Indian Railways today is one of sustained modernization, steadily transforming an ageing network into a safer, faster and more reliable transportation system that is increasingly becoming a driver of economic growth.

The modernization strategy is moving beyond basic connectivity towards comfort, speed and efficiency, with a clear focus on attracting middle-class travellers through premium coach designs and better passenger amenities. Indigenous manufacturing remains central to this strategy, helping reduce costs while offering world-class features such as vacuum toilets, GPS-enabled passenger systems and upgraded interiors.

The expansion of the Vande Bharat and Amrit Bharat fleets is decentralizing luxury travel and making semi-high-speed rail a viable alternative to air travel for short-to-medium distances. The operational bottleneck caused by mixed traffic on shared lines is being resolved through massive dedicated infrastructure, allowing for faster turnaround times. By separating freight, the rail-



ways are significantly improving the "Ease of Doing Business" and lowering logistics costs for core industries like steel and cement. The completion of Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs) is the single largest factor in doubling freight capacity and ensuring that goods trains maintain high average speeds without being sidelined.

The 1,506-km Western DFC was fully completed in March 2026, and total freight loading reached a record 1,670 Million Tonnes during the 2025-26 period. Safety has moved from manual inspections to automated, real-time protection systems to eliminate the risk of human error in high-density corridors. The focus is on creating a "fail-safe" ecosystem that can support the high-speed requirements of modern trains like the Vande Bharat 4.0.

The indigenous Kavach 4.0 safety system has already been deployed across key sections of the Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Howrah corridors, marking a shift from reactive safety management to predictive and preventive monitoring. Consequential railway accidents dropped to just 11 in 2025-26, supported by a safety allocation exceeding Rs1.17 lakh crore during the fiscal year.

Indian Railways is positioning itself as the world's first "Net Zero" large-scale railway network by replacing fossil fuel dependency with renewable en-

ergy. Nearly complete electrification and large-scale adoption of renewable energy are reducing dependence on imported fossil fuels, lowering operational costs and insulating the railways from global oil price volatility.

As of late 2025, electrification had reached 99.2 per cent of the network, covering 69,427 route kilometres, while solar capacity rose to 898 MW, powering stations and traction systems across multiple zones.

CAPEX-Led Infrastructure and Regional Integration: The government has maintained a consistent and unprecedented capital expenditure (CAPEX) push to bridge regional connectivity gaps, especially in the North-East and hilly terrains.

Gati Shakti Cargo Terminals (GCT) and Value-Addition Hubs: The railway is evolving from a simple transporter to a comprehensive logistics partner by integrating processing units directly within terminal premises.

This shift eliminates first-and-last-mile inefficiencies by allowing activities like food grain processing, de-stuffing, and value-addition to occur at the railhead itself. Indian Railways is aggressively piloting hydrogen-powered traction to eliminate carbon footprints on ecologically sensitive and heritage routes where electrification is difficult. In March 2026, India's first hydrogen train successfully completed trials be-

tween Jind and Sonapat. With its introduction into commercial service, India will join an elite global league of countries including Germany, Sweden, Japan and China, that operate hydrogen-powered trains. Modern rail management has shifted from periodic manual inspections to real-time, sensor-based health monitoring of tracks and rolling stock. By utilizing AI and IoT, the railways can now predict equipment failures before they occur, significantly reducing unplanned downtime and enhancing the operational lifespan of high-value assets. IR has adopted advanced/improved technologies like Online Monitoring of Rolling Stock System (OMRS), Wheel Impact Load Detector (WILD) for predictive maintenance of Rolling Stock. The integration of AI-enabled predictive tools is fundamentally altering the "Operating Ratio" by shifting maintenance from reactive "break-fix" cycles to proactive, data-driven interventions. AI applications are now projected to reduce unplanned downtime by 30-40%, supported by a safety and tech-upgradation budget. The "Metro-ization" of Indian cities is evolving from a transport project into a catalyst for urban rejuvenation and household financial resilience by reducing private vehicle dependency. This expansion is characterized by a "Hub-and-Spoke" model where metro lines act as the primary spine, integrated with electric feeder buses and last-mile para-transit. Rapid commissioning across 26 cities has positioned India as the world's third-largest operational metro network, fundamentally altering city economies by increasing land value and labor mobility.

# Why plastics, chemicals and construction complicate net zero

## Experts warn that eliminating fossil fuels alone will not solve climate change

MUHAMMAD IMRAN

**W**ALK into any supermarket and you are surrounded by carbon. Not the kind measured in parts per million in climate reports, but carbon in its most tangible form: the polymer shell of a shampoo bottle, the insulation behind the ceiling tiles, the synthetic fibres in the bag hanging from your wrist.

These are not accidental byproducts of the fossil fuel era. They are its second act, less visible than combustion but no less consequential.

The global conversation about net zero has been almost entirely about energy. This framing is essential, but it rests on an assumption so embedded it rarely gets examined: that the only thing fossil fuels give us worth worrying about is the energy released when we burn them.

Roughly 15-20% of all fossil fuel consumption is never burned at all. It is transformed into the physical fabric of modern life: plastics, polymers, fertilisers, adhesives, solvents and synthetic textiles.

When these products are eventually incinerated, degraded or discarded, their carbon returns to the atmosphere, a contribution to global warming that is real, growing and almost entirely absent from mainstream net zero accounting. As well as a green energy transition, the material transition needs to be sustainable. But three industries at the heart of this problem are often overlooked: chemical manufacturing, plastic polymers and construction.

The chemical industry is the upstream engine of many modern materials, using about 14% of global oil demand and 8% of global gas demand. Much of that is used as a raw material rather than fuel.

Ammonia, made from natural gas via a century-old process known as Haber-Bosch, underpins the fertilisers that feed roughly half the world's population. Ethylene, derived from crude oil, is the starting point for an enormous range of plastics, solvents



and coatings. Processing carbon is a fundamental part of this industry.

The world produces approximately 400 million tonnes of plastic every year, almost all from fossil feedstocks. Only around 9% is ever recycled. The rest is incinerated, landfilled or lost to the environment. Each pathway returns fossil carbon to the atmosphere at varying speeds.

Construction offers more promise. Buildings can stand for 50 to 100 years, so the carbon contained in their materials can remain locked away for decades. Take timber: trees absorb carbon dioxide as they grow and store that carbon in wood. But the same idea can be extended to engineered materials. Agricultural and forestry residues (such as crop cuttings, twigs and leaves) can be turned into biochar, a stable charcoal-like form of carbon, and used to make aggregates or concrete.

Carbon dioxide can be captured using technologies and then converted into construction products, including insulation materials. In each case, carbon is not simply treated as waste; it becomes part of long-lived buildings and infrastructure. The solution is not to eliminate carbon from industry altogether, but to stop treating fossil carbon as the default raw material.

Chemicals, plastics and construction products will still need carbon, but that carbon does not always have to come from oil, gas or coal. It can come from plant-based sources or waste products from farming or forestry plus other forms of sustainably sourced plant material. It can also come from carbon dioxide captured from industrial processes before it

escapes into the atmosphere. Used carefully, these carbon sources can help replace fossil fuel-based carbon in polymers, construction products, insulation materials and chemicals.

Careful assessment of these alternatives will ensure they genuinely reduce emissions across a product's full life cycle. That includes where the carbon came from, how much energy was used to extract it, whether environmental damage to land was avoided, how long the carbon remains in the product, and what happens when the product reaches the end of its life.

A related question is how captured carbon should be managed. Permanently burying captured carbon in underground rocks or the deep ocean removes those atoms from the accessible cycle for millennia, progressively depleting the surface carbon pool on which agriculture and industry both depend.

### Moving together

Making this transition work requires six things to move together. New materials must genuinely perform as well as the fossil ones they replace. Sustainable carbon supplies must be mapped honestly, because biogenic carbon (carbon derived from recently living organisms such as plants or algae) is limited so choices about allocation will have to be made. Policy must reward circular carbon through procurement rules, carbon pricing and regulation. Rigorous life-cycle assessments can verify that new materials are genuinely better, not merely different.

*(The writer is an Associate Professor, Mechanical Engineering, Aston University, Birmingham, England)*