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Reflections on U.S.-Cuba Military-to-Military Contacts

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About the Author

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Key Points

- ◆ President Barack Obama's visit to Cuba in March 2016 opened up the possibility of strategic benefits for both nations. Well after over 50 years of hostility, however, it will not be easy to keep this nascent relationship on track.
- ◆ Avoiding missteps requires a deep knowledge of Cuba and particularly its Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, or FAR). The FAR are a complex and powerful institution that enjoys great public respect—more so than Cuba's Communist Party—and remain central to the functioning of the Cuban economy and state. Broadening rapprochement without the support of the FAR is inconceivable.
- ◆ To build on the historic opening in diplomatic relations, both sides need a better appreciation of the other's institutional norms and some clear "rules of the road" to guide the relationship.
- ◆ This paper offers insights concerning the FAR. It argues that it will be important to expand cooperation in the right areas and that it will be important to start small, go slow, build trust, consult early and often, let Cuba take the lead, and avoid imposing or reflecting a U.S.-centric view of civil-military relations.

Reflections on U.S.-Cuba Military-to-Military Contacts

by Hal Klepak

The strategic import of U.S.-Cuba relations was underscored by President Barack Obama's historic visit to Cuba from March 20–22, 2016, and his comment that he had come to Cuba "to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the Americas." Geography also reinforces the strategic importance of both countries to one another. Cuba sits astride the intersection of the three large bodies of water dominating the approaches to the southern United States. The large island nation is in a position to block, complicate, or facilitate U.S. border control efforts in many ways. Partnering with Cuba also might allow the United States to benefit from Cuba's notable record of using soft power effectively in the Western Hemisphere and beyond.

But the reasons that Cuba needs good relations with its powerful and technologically advanced neighbor are even more evident. Besides its attractiveness as a trade partner, the United States has financial, military, logistical, medical research, and development capabilities; permanent physical presence; and strategic reach well beyond those of any other nation or even group of nations. Good relations with the United States would free up Cuban resources for economic development that have long been devoted to security preparedness.

The natural and perhaps mandatory place to broaden U.S.-Cuba rapprochement is to build on small military-to-military cooperation arrangements already in place. The Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, or FAR) of Cuba are the central institution of the state and far more capable and prestigious than Cuba's Communist Party. The FAR are loyal, proud of their performance in the survival of the revolution, and reform-minded, believing that their own flexibility and penchant for reform have played a pivotal role in that survival. Its senior ranks are men personally chosen by Raúl Castro over several decades who share their leader's sense of urgency about the need for reform. They



Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available at <www.cia.gov>.

are nationalists first and foremost, but their loyalty to the revolutionary process is not in doubt. Thus they are open to reform, including more cooperation with the United States, but not at the risk of compromising or abandoning their revolutionary ethos or what they view as the impressive achievements of the revolution.

Given that the FAR's role in Cuba's future will be pivotal, understanding and knowing how to interact with them to the mutual advantage of both countries is a critical strategic requirement for U.S. forces in the Western Hemisphere. However, more than half a century of hostility and mutual distrust will make it difficult to keep U.S.-Cuba military relations on track and moving forward. Military-to-military cooperation cannot greatly exceed general progress on bilateral relations, but it could pave the way for better relations if managed well. In the case of Cuba, that requires a deep appreciation for the FAR's institutional ethos, which is rooted in the FAR's historical experience.

Cuban Military Tradition

Cuban history is, in the main, a military history. Strategic considerations have dominated the island's past as they do its present. Cuba's strategic location astride trade routes and its magnificent harbor in Havana made it an ideal base for expansion into the Americas. For nearly four centuries Cuba served as the linchpin of Spain's imperial defense system in the Western Hemisphere, governed by military officials often down to the level of mayors. Spain put down a massive insurrection during Cuba's first war for independence, the Ten Years' War (1868–1878). Another major rebellion broke out in 1895 with a second *Ejército Libertador* (Liberation Army) fighting the Spanish with considerable success until 1898, when the United States intervened and brought about a quick victory against the decrepit Spanish empire.

Washington heavily influenced Cuban political, economic, and, especially, military life between 1898 and 1902, when Cuba's independence was formally proclaimed and U.S. forces left (except for those stationed

at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base) until 1959, when two columns of Fidel Castro's *Ejército Rebelde* (Rebel Army) took Havana and overthrew the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Within less than a decade Cuban military uniforms, rank structures, saluting, equipment, logistics, weapons, vehicles, and tactical and strategic doctrine based on the U.S. model were replaced with the Soviet one. Cuban military intelligence borrowed techniques used by East Germany, but otherwise the influence of the Soviet Union dominated.

During the 2-year war in the Sierra Maestra and other parts of the country, Fidel molded a revolutionary army. A central part of the organization's ethos was the belief that the FAR were the direct inheritor of the tradition of the *mambi*, the soldiers of the two 19th-century

given that the FAR's role in Cuba's future will be pivotal, understanding and knowing how to interact with them is a critical strategic requirement

uprisings against Spain, and that the goal of total independence had been thwarted by the U.S. intervention. From recruit to *comandante*, the entire institution was imbued with the idea that its mission was to complete and secure national independence.

Following his victory, Fidel initially planned on a force of about 16,000 men. However, it soon became apparent that this figure was unrealistic. The Agrarian Reform, already in place in the early spring of 1959, was rejected by the great landowners of the country, a group that included many U.S. citizens. Rental and utility reforms also struck at the interests of the wealthy as well as U.S. companies and investors. The reaction was swift. A tit-for-tat series of moves by the U.S. and Cuban governments added an international dimension to the new government's revolutionary struggle. By the end of September 1959, the new armed services were

restructured, and Castro's brother, Raúl, was appointed minister over them.

The Ejército Rebelde was given a large role in the economy—including management of the Agrarian Reform—to compensate for the flight of most of the bourgeoisie and bureaucracy of the old regime. Now the renamed FAR were asked to do even more to anchor the revolution and its rapidly leftward reforms, while also defending it from external aggression and internal subversion. Even so, Fidel and Raúl did not then consider a large professional army; they could not afford such a military model, and it did not fit well with the Cuban military's ethos. Instead, they organized a massive reserve army to counter growing dissatisfaction at home and the increasingly menacing posture of the United States. By early 1961, diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed.

Cuba reacted to these challenges with the largest program of reserve formation in the history of Latin

military-to-military cooperation cannot greatly exceed general progress on bilateral relations

America. The FAR quickly grew to over 100,000 men and the reserves to more than double that figure. Conscription was established, eventually for 3 years of compulsory service for male youth, and membership of reserve and militia organizations was highly encouraged, including for young women. The strategy, called *Guerra del Todo del Pueblo* (War of All the People), which persists to this day, was to make attacking Cuba so costly that any possible benefits from taking the island would pale by comparison. To implement the strategy, Castro needed material, financial, and technical assistance. The first Warsaw Pact and Chinese weapons began arriving to arm the new Cuban forces in late 1960. Soon after, Cuban officers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were sent to communist countries to learn how to use them. At the same time, a "vigilance system" was

set up to report on domestic dissent, and it soon proved its utility.

The FAR's Reputation Grows

In 1961, a U.S. plan to unseat the Castro government was to be spearheaded by an invasion force of anti-Castro Cubans who were paid, armed, trained, and organized by the U.S. Government. The hope was that the force would seize a town and airport, declare itself the new Cuban government, and demonstrate enough legitimacy to justify a U.S. intervention to overturn Castro's revolution. The dramatic failure of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion advanced the revolution and allowed the fledgling government to proclaim "Imperialism's First Defeat in the Americas." The FAR's prestige soared, and particularly their militia, which had done well in the early hours of the fighting. The struggle against "banditry" (actually, resistance to the revolution) took longer. Opposition groups were not eliminated by militia operations until 1965, but once this success was secured it added to the FAR's reputation.

Along with Soviet assistance came the professionalization of the FAR along entirely Soviet lines. By the mid-1970s the institution appeared to be modeled after the Soviet system. Yet strong Cuban cultural norms ensured that the FAR remained intrinsically Cuban in their ethos. In addition, Havana was not always following Moscow's lead in foreign and defense policy. Cuba often deviated from Moscow's preferences during its "export of the revolution" phase when it set out to unseat many Latin American governments friendly to the United States and cooperating in plans to end the revolution. This phase of Cuban foreign policy ended with the death of Ernesto "Che" Guevara in 1967, but Cuba continued to support revolutionary movements abroad. From the Middle East to Africa to southern South America, the Castro government offered FAR training and low-level support to fellow revolutionaries, including the dispatch of full-fledged Cuban expeditionary forces to Angola and the Horn of Africa. Alongside the FAR went Cuban doctors, nurses, teachers, and sports

instructors, and they were popular with the rebel movements they aided and the governments the FAR sometimes formed.

The Cuban public did not attribute the costs or occasional failure of overseas endeavors to the FAR. Instead, the FAR's prestige only seemed to grow along with the force itself, which increased to nearly 300,000 regulars and more than 800,000 reservists in the 1970s. The economic costs of overseas expeditions were heavy, but Cuba earned kudos from and influence within many developing countries and international forums. The FAR were eventually credited with a central role in the defeat of Apartheid in South Africa by Nelson Mandela himself—and in a venue as striking as the steps of the White House.¹ Cuba, thanks in large part to the FAR, was “punching above its weight” in international contests.

Summer 1990: The Special Period

Cuba received a “body blow” in the summer of 1990 following the collapse of the Soviet system. With Soviet support gone, Fidel announced the arrival of the “Special Period in Time of Peace,” which included the greatest austerity the country had known since independence. In fact, the belt-tightening was much more severe than the effects caused by the U.S. Great Depression of the 1930s. The Cuban economy went into a tailspin. The economic deprivation in Cuba was not accompanied by widespread violence, but there were public protests accompanied by rioting on at least three occasions in the early to mid-1990s, the last of these being the 1994 protests known as the *Habanazo*.

Unrest was not contained by armed force. The conviction that the army does not fire on the people (*el ejército no tira contra el pueblo*) is so anchored in the moral code and self-image of the FAR that using it then to suppress unrest was inconceivable. That left only economic options. Fidel's slogan of *valen tanto los frijoles como los cañones* (beans are as valuable as cannons) was quickly replaced by Raúl's reinforced message: *valen más los frijoles que los cañones* (beans are worth *more* than can-

nons). In other words, the FAR would have to further expand their role in the Cuban economy.

The FAR shouldered more than their share of the austerity measures. Their budget fell by almost 60 percent from nearly \$1.15 billion in 1990 to \$496.7 million 6 years later. This amounted to a virtual budgetary freefall given that the value of the peso went through the floor over the same period of time. FAR end-strength fell from nearly 300,000 to around 60,000 during the same period. Military hospitals took in 60 percent of their patients from the civilian sector, thousands of soft-skinned vehicles ranging from jeeps to tank transporters were transferred for civilian use, and the military's major effort turned from training to feeding itself and helping to feed the population at large.

Training virtually stopped, especially unit training. Postings abroad with foreign armed forces dried up. Technical, tactical, intelligence, joint operations,

amid this wholesale decline in resources, the FAR were asked to do *more*, not less

and even senior command courses in Russia and other former Warsaw Pact nations ended. Defense attaché positions abroad, vital for Cuba to retain its impressive intelligence-gathering system, were reduced to nine. Widespread cannibalization of equipment and weapon systems was used to keep a small amount of the most important stocks functioning. Fuel for training and operations fell by at least 70 percent—even for immediate reaction divisions—and by 90 percent for some others.

Yet amid this wholesale decline in resources, the FAR were asked to do *more*, not less. They took on a central role in agricultural production through the use of their manpower and training areas to grow crops and provided trained managers for much of the rest of the island's economy. The FAR's role was especially pronounced in fields that earned vital foreign currency such

as mining, tourism, biomedicine, and tobacco exports. The FAR were also asked to increase security activities such as anti-illegal immigration and anti-drugs operations, which would be appreciated by the United States, and to further improve their ability to respond to national disasters.

Tens of thousands of officers and other personnel were released from the services, and bottlenecks for promotion became the norm. The time for conscripted service fell from 3 years to 2, and even then many young men who previously would have seen considerable military training to prepare them for popular resistance received little or none. The revolutionary ethos lived on, but it steadily frayed under the reality the FAR were experiencing. At a time when other militaries were incorporating advanced information-age technologies to enable new

the armed forces are seen as the most effective institution in the country and the one to which the state always turns when it must prevail

capabilities and operations, the FAR and their personnel with combat experience were aging and being starved of resources. Cuban military readiness plummeted.

Surprisingly to most observers, the FAR responded to these challenges with good morale and a sense of pride. The institution believes that its devotion and flexibility allowed the revolution to survive. While the FAR are significantly less impressive than they were before 1990, they have remained a force capable of substantial defensive operations. In 2006, for instance, the FAR demonstrated their capacity to mobilize a major part of national manpower for defense when Fidel fell ill.

The FAR Today²

In addition to Cuba's three military services oriented toward land, sea, and air, the FAR have a large service

dedicated to agricultural production: the Youth Labor Army (Ejército Juvenil de Trabajo, or EJT). It numbers up to 100,000 conscripts—with minimal military training—whose task is solely to produce food for the FAR and the general population. The FAR also maintain a rather bewildering number of reserve force organizations, ranging from the relatively well-organized pre-1980 militia services to the truly massive (at least on paper): the Territorial Troops Militia (Milicias de Tropas Territoriales) and the Defense and Production Brigades (Brigadas de Defensa y Producción). In an emergency, the Defense and Production Brigades, which are trade union or workplace-based bodies, play a role in local defense or internal order. In addition, since 1960 there has been a network of Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución) working with state security and police to keep an eye out for counter-revolutionary activities. However, the FAR have distanced themselves from formal internal security duties even as the police and Ministry of the Interior forces have been reinforced.

The country is divided into three major zones, each of which has its own army, attached air elements, and naval forces. These are the Western, Central, and Eastern armies. Each army is responsible for defense preparation in several provinces. In keeping with the Soviet system, the forces are divided into A, B, and C divisions reflecting readiness levels. The majority of units are no longer frontline formations (A) but merely cadres around which mobilization can take place (C).

In some respects, the army has suffered least from austerity because it was less dependent on high-tech weapons and equipment and the training courses that supported them. Cannibalization of equipment allows it to keep more platforms running than the other services, but it is no longer a heavily armored strike force. Instead it concentrates on countering beach, parachute, and helicopter landing threats. The army, and especially the reserve elements, has a major role in counternarcotics. It often conducts major labor-intensive sweeps of coastlines and islands when a *bombardeo* (bombardment—dropping drugs from aircraft or boats fearful of interception)

takes place near Cuban territory. Even though the army has most of the manpower, installations, popular roles such as natural disaster preparation, and management of much of the economy, the fierce interservice rivalry often seen elsewhere is almost nonexistent in Cuba.

The navy has returned to its traditional coastal service status. For the time being it concentrates on anti-illegal immigration and anti-drug operations to build community with the United States. One or two larger ships are still in service for mine-laying and limited transport roles, but the navy is now essentially a patrol boat force closely connected with support of the Frontier Guard Troops (Tropas Guardafronteras) of the Ministry of the Interior that work closely with the U.S. Coast Guard, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, and other Caribbean security services on countering drug and immigrant trafficking.

Like its sister services, the air force was greatly reduced from its status in the 1970s when it operated many first-line reconnaissance, light bombardment, and fighter ground-attack aircraft. Replacement purchases are unaffordable and even spare parts are a luxury. The air force still operates a small number of vintage 1980s fighters, mostly in support of the other services in the counter-trafficking roles already mentioned. It monitors the few drug-carrying aircraft foolish enough to enter Cuban airspace and advises either U.S. officials through the British (who have a large anti-drugs training program with Cuba) or other informal channels regarding the aircraft's location and likely heading north.

Despite its much reduced operational status the FAR remain the central institution of the state and the nation. They outstrip the party in so many ways that it is difficult to imagine a future where the FAR's role would not be pivotal. The FAR are widely distributed throughout the country, disciplined, accustomed to hierarchy, prestigious, tasked with the state's most popular activities, and have access to hard currency through their own efforts and position in the economy. Unlike the party, which has a reputation for inefficiency as well as an ineffective political, economic, and social philosophy, the FAR does not carry the stigma of being outdated. On the

contrary, the armed forces are seen as the most effective institution in the country and the one to which the state always turns when it must prevail. This does not mean that the FAR and the party have a contentious relationship; the party remains ubiquitous in Cuban national life. Even though membership does not carry the privileges it once did, almost all senior military officers remain party members. All military units still have a political officer to ensure that a local nexus exists between the party and the FAR. Constant declarations of loyalty to the party still form part of the FAR's daily institutional discourse.

There is little doubt that the FAR have every intention of outlasting the party, if need be, especially if the national transition takes a more dramatic turn. They are rich in leadership and management skills, victorious in war and counterinsurgency at home, and the principal architect of national independence and dignity. More

the FAR now have a hand in the administration of perhaps 60 percent of the active economy

importantly, the FAR are recognized as the primary advocate of reform over the last 30 years. The military is, in general, forward-looking and flexible in its approach to the challenges of the day—exactly the opposite of the party. Also in stark contrast to the party, the FAR already have a low-profile relationship with the United States and could serve as a bridge between the two countries if asked to do so. A final key point, however obvious it may seem, is that the armed forces are both *available* and *armed*.

The most unusual attribute of the FAR is their nontraditional role in the government's highly centralized economy. Yet it is important to understand that the institution itself considers its nontraditional roles consistent with its revolutionary status. From its earliest days fighting in the Sierras from 1956–1959, the army took on tasks as varied as producing weapons and

equipment, building and even teaching in rural schools, working in agriculture to feed the force, and providing medical care for both troops and the local population. After military victory was secured and nonmilitary crises arose, the armed forces were asked to take on nontraditional missions not because they were the most efficient instrument but because they were the most loyal. As the military professionalized during the 1970s and 1980s, the FAR's nontraditional roles were less common even though their role in agricultural production grew after the creation of the Youth Labor Army in 1973.

When the Cuban economy stalled in the mid-1980s, Raúl, as defense minister, turned to the FAR again to revitalize industries suffering from worker sloppiness and absenteeism. A group of officers was sent abroad, especially to Spain and Latin American countries, to learn modern business management practices. These officers received jobs of great importance in the economy to improve the performance of key industries. Then, when the economy suffered severely from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the FAR were asked to further expand their role in managing the economy because they were perceived as both loyal and competent. In the summer of 1990, the FAR's roles were redefined and persist to this day as follows:

- ◆ continue with the defense of the country and the revolution, and deter any attack coming from abroad
- ◆ continue to support the Ministry of the Interior and National Revolutionary Police Force in defeating subversion at home
- ◆ engage further in security activities such as anti-illegal immigration and anti-drugs, which may be looked on favorably by the United States
- ◆ continue to provide the organization, manpower, and structures for effective natural disaster preparation and relief
- ◆ feed themselves and assist in feeding the population
- ◆ assist where appropriate in the management of key sectors of the economy.

FAR officers were asked to apply modern management methods in the economy's more dynamic sectors such as tourism, and to some extent biomedical, mining, and cigar manufacturing. The FAR's economic roles became so important that all majors who wished to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel were asked to learn business and agricultural management techniques. This universal requirement reflects not only the invaluable need for properly prepared business managers but also the desire to avoid splitting the officer corps into two classes: those with economic experience and those with more traditional military career paths. However, over time a group of officers with long periods away from traditional military duties has developed, and this is a worry to senior FAR leaders because of perceptions of unfair advantage to those with access to economic assets.

In summary, the FAR now have a hand in the administration of perhaps 60 percent of the active economy, especially the foreign currency-earning sectors. Given their prestige, large role in the economy, monopoly on the use of armed force, and administration of vast swaths of Cuban national life, it would be easy to argue that Cuba is a military dictatorship. But that would be a mistake. The unique Cuban military experience defies common terminology. *Military industry*, *military control*, and similar expressions do not adequately convey the level of military involvement in Cuba. For example, analysts have applied the same term *military industry* to everything from the fundamentally military enterprises of the Unión de Industrias Militares, which use military personnel to produce equipment and weapons, to businesses where there is only one serving or retired officer at the head of the enterprise or in a key position. Lumping all such businesses together is misleading and exaggerates the FAR's already impressive presence throughout the economy.

There is another point regarding business profits. There is no audit system for the armed forces external to the institution itself. The amount and use of business profits remain entirely unknown outside the most senior ranks of the military. This lack of transparency

inevitably raises questions about misuse of funds. In general, given the prestige of the institution, there is little public distrust on this score. But no one knows how profits are used. The amount of resources currently spent on national infrastructural repair, investment in tourism, and general recovery suggests business profits are, in a general sense, being spent properly, but there is no way of knowing for sure.

Challenges

The Cuban armed forces face many challenges, many of which, such as recapitalization, depend on Cuba's economic progress. There are several particularly noteworthy issues, however, confronting the FAR that they could address more directly with leadership and management initiatives.

Officer Corps Division. Potentially the most divisive impact of Cuba's heightened austerity is the division of the officer corps into those with traditional military leadership duties, such as unit command and control, training, and similar activities, and those involved in the direct management of business enterprises. The longstanding intention of FAR leaders was that no such divisions should be allowed to surface. Raúl directed that a large pool of potential business managers be developed in part so that those assigned such duties would not have to stay away from traditional military matters for excessive periods. The reality is that it has not proved easy to separate effective managers from their important jobs just so their military careers can progress in a fairly normal pattern. Instead, a significant number of officers have remained for several, or even many, years involved with industrial and agricultural pursuits far removed from traditional military activities. Officers in these attractive business posts enjoy privileges not available to their colleagues serving in the field. Resentment is muted because most officers in line positions still believe that the country is faced with a national crisis that demands the best officers serve in high priority areas that will assist economic recovery. However, the situation remains a concern, and FAR leaders have sought means to address it.

Corruption. Such a large role in the economy provides opportunities for corruption since officers are dealing with large amounts of money in a society suffering from long-term scarcity. To suggest that there is no corruption under these circumstances would be to ignore the findings of innumerable studies of similar circumstances elsewhere around the world. The FAR's response to date has primarily relied on education—a range of courses, lectures, and moral admonishments calling for resistance to such temptations. However, the FAR have also used severe means of deterrence by jailing, publicly dismissing, and otherwise castigating those found guilty of corruption. Even so, there have been several major cases of senior officer corruption, and a special branch has been set up within the FAR counter-intelligence apparatus to search out corruption in the higher ranks, especially among those with international business connections. Lower rank corruption is also a concern. The FAR's place in the economy places many junior and senior NCOs in positions where the temptations of corruption are many and constant. The “it fell off the back of a truck” phenomenon, well known in the logistics systems of many countries' armies, is also prevalent in the FAR and their many business enterprises.

Race. The traditional sources for most of the FAR's membership are blacks, racially mixed people, and lower-class whites. Until recently, blacks and racially mixed people often avoided migrating to the United States because its reputation for the treatment of those groups, perceived rightly or wrongly, was poor. Thus these social groups rarely receive the remittances from abroad and cannot afford the startup capital for small businesses that have benefited from recent economic reforms. Consequently, the lower-class groups that most heartily support the revolution and supply such a large percentage of its military and police personnel are least able to capitalize on recent economic liberalization. For serving personnel the situation is particularly bleak; existing regulations do not allow them to accept remittances even if they are available from family or friends abroad. The FAR are trying to compensate these personnel with new, albeit small,

perks including improved barracks, better NCO housing, repairs to recreational facilities, better leave conditions, slightly improved salaries, and other inventive ways of rewarding loyalty. But the situation bears watching.

Age. The FAR have long been concerned about the country's demographics, worrying that Cuba's aging population was not producing sufficient recruits for future forces. Yet the current small size of the regular FAR forces, estimated at around 50,000,³ means that it does not need many new recruits each year except for the agricultural labor force. Retention is stated to be quite good as well, with three guaranteed meals a day, reasonable accommodation, uniforms, improved conditions of service, a prestigious job, and better pay. Demographic trends affect the reserves

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more directly. As the population ages, including current active-duty commanders with combat experience, the "nation in arms" concept is eroding.

Suggested Areas for Greater Cooperation

There is already a history of low-profile but effective bilateral military cooperation between Cuba and the United States. Overflight issues related to disaster relief in the Caribbean have obliged the two countries to work together many times. The operations of the Guantánamo Naval Base also require cooperation on a wide range of issues, including health cooperation, fire brigade exercises, and so forth. For many years the U.S. base commander has had immediate access to his Cuban counterpart in the Frontier Guard Troops. There are scheduled monthly meetings between them, and either commander can ask for a special meeting at any time. When the base needed more Cuban airspace for modern aircraft to land safely,

the requisite permissions were quickly given by the Cuban authorities. More recently the two countries worked together smoothly to provide medical assistance to Haiti. Some limited cooperation in natural disasters forecasting also has apparently taken place. Better known is the wide-ranging anti-illegal immigration collaboration between Cuba's Ministry of the Interior (and indirectly the Cuban navy) and the U.S. Coast Guard. There is a U.S. Coast Guard lieutenant commander posted to the U.S. Embassy in Havana to facilitate cooperation, which is direct, daily, and ongoing.

Expanding on the current low-level, low-key foundation of cooperation is easy to imagine, but it does require some careful choices about fruitful areas for contact and also some attention to how the relationship is developed. Admittedly, Washington and Havana would have to overcome past adversarial patterns with major political commitments by both governments, but the following areas of potential collaboration should be considered.

Military Medical Health. Cooperation on military medical and health interventions would allow both sides to partner, contribute, and establish trust during popular and noncontroversial activities. Military medical collaboration during disaster relief operations makes the most sense, but because such operations are time sensitive and require some existing understanding of interoperability requirements, it also makes sense to partner in non-emergency humanitarian health operations. Given the strong link between health issues and international security,⁴ the gains from such engagement would also have a clear security dimension for both Cuba and the United States. Extending the impact of Cuban doctors and nurses willing to do good work abroad with the financial resources and logistical reach of U.S. forces could generate much goodwill and mutual respect.

Military History. Perhaps counterintuitively, exchanging guest speakers in military educational institutions could pay dividends as it would inform the U.S. military, whose little knowledge of Cuba and its military stems from confrontations during the Cold War. Similarly, Cuban military personnel have long seen the

United States as the behemoth that thwarted true independence in 1898. Yet Cuba and the United States share many more years of cooperation than of rancor. Cuban military historians are often officers in FAR uniform, and as such are in a position to expand the public's general understanding of U.S.-Cuba relations. Military history is an important topic in both U.S. and Cuban military establishments. Students could be introduced to the two countries' longer history of collaboration. They would discover that troops from the Thirteen American Colonies accompanied the British forces that took Havana in 1762, an event considered a positive development by Cubans to this day. Troops and ships from Cuba assisted the American Colonies to break away from Great Britain two decades later when they cooperated with the Congressional Army and Navy during campaigns in Louisiana, Florida, and Georgia, as well as in the seizure of the Bahamas from the British. Although international law obliged the United States to intercept expeditions organized on U.S. soil aimed at bringing arms and men to liberate Cuba from Spain during the 19th-century uprisings, U.S. public opinion was strongly pro-Cuban and assisted greatly in bringing the United States into the war on the side of the insurgents. While an unequal relationship evolved from that intervention, the connection was nonetheless a close one and brought Cuba into both world wars on the side of the United States.⁵

Peacekeeping. Another area for engagement that might seem unlikely at first is international peacekeeping. Neither the United States nor Cuba makes this type of military operation a priority. In the past, Cuban offers to join peacekeeping operations with the United Nations (UN) were rare since Cuban involvement would mean the United States would not support the operation. The United States often participates in UN peacekeeping with logistics support but typically does not like its forces saddled with such commitments. However, if the two countries could agree on a peacekeeping mission where both have larger humanitarian than geopolitical concerns, their partnership would make a good deal of sense. U.S. financial and logistical support could enable

Cuba, which is respected in many developing countries, to contribute much needed discipline and propriety to UN peacekeeping efforts, whose reputation has been tarnished in recent decades.⁶

Natural Disasters. Cuba's reputation is impressive when it comes to natural disaster preparedness and relief. The FAR are central to this effort and have an accumulated experience second to none in this field.⁷ There has been some increased cooperation between the two countries' systems of weather watching and surely more could be done given the priority Cuba assigns the matter because of its vulnerable position in the path of so much tempestuous weather. The combination of Cuban knowledge and experience with U.S. resources could provide for mutually beneficial collaboration. For

Cuba's reputation is impressive when it comes to natural disaster preparedness and relief

example, natural disasters, particularly hurricanes, have been sharply felt in the United States in recent years, and there is much that could be learned at the state level in terms of how best to use the National Guard and other military resources during such emergencies.

Illegal Immigration. One of the few areas where formal contact currently is permitted and encouraged is interdiction of illegal immigration. The formal accords between Washington and Havana, arrived at in the context of the *balseros* (rafters) crisis in the mid-1990s,⁸ are now two-decades old and have shown that the two sides work well together. The mutual cooperation has demonstrated the seriousness, professionalism, efficiency, and energy of both nations' armed forces and generated trust and goodwill. It would not be difficult to find ways to make this already successful area of cooperation more efficient and more widespread.

Drugs. The international illegal narcotics trade is of great concern to both nations, especially the security forces

of both countries. The United States and most of the hemisphere have been plagued by citizen drug abuse. In contrast, Cuba has been spared this problem to a great degree due to a combination of educational programs, good health treatment in the face of the scourge, a highly effective deterrence approach to drug-trafficking trade in such items, and a major deployment of security and defense resources to fight against drugs. The Ministry of the Interior and the FAR, and the Cuban government more generally, are anxious to have a formal counternarcotics cooperation agreement with the United States to mirror the positive results from cooperation on illegal immigration.⁹

Terrorism. Cuba and the United States differ substantially in their preferred approaches to terrorism. Cuba emphasizes addressing root causes while the United States argues for immediate military and diplomatic efforts directed against the perpetrators of these crimes. Despite differences over means, both Washington and Havana

Washington and Havana agree on the need to end terrorism

agree on the need to end terrorism and have little use for those who promote it. Fidel distanced himself early on from the use of terrorism for political aims, arguing that such indiscriminate acts hurt the very people the movement was aiming to assist and only brought opprobrium to the movements that used them. Counterterrorism is yet another area where combining Cuban legitimacy in the developing world with U.S. resources could produce some intriguing options for collaboration.

Mexico. The Mexican Armed Forces share with the FAR a revolutionary tradition that, if not so visible in some day-to-day matters, still reflects the institution's self-image in major ways. Cubans and Mexicans do not have a problematic history to contend with and, in fact, often have worked together on many security matters with great ease. In addition, U.S.-Mexico military relations have quietly intensified in recent years. So for areas of particular sensitivity, these three countries, which to-

gether dominate the Gulf of Mexico, could explore cooperation together in ways that might be less politically charged than a bilateral context. The Cubans could note that the Mexicans thought trilateral cooperation worthwhile, and vice versa, and the United States could state both the Cubans and Mexicans wanted it, so it made sense. Politically, trilateral engagement might be easier to sell to all elements of public opinion than a series of bilateral agreements. This proved the case for Mexican participation in the U.S. Joint Interagency Task Force-South counterdrug operations. The participation of other Latin American countries made it easier for Mexican military leaders to argue that the cooperation was in Mexico's best interests rather than a "command performance" for the United States.

Hemispheric Defense Institutions. It will be some time before Cuba is ready to take a full part in hemispheric defense institutions, and those bodies might have to change significantly before Havana finds membership in them of great interest. However, it is possible to imagine multilateral training in several areas of possible collaboration. Cuba and the United States could offer training to some regional forces in roles as diverse as controlling illegal migration, interdicting drug shipments, preparing for natural disasters and their relief, search and rescue, medical health, and other fields.

Search and Rescue. The bulk of the FAR's activity in the field of search and rescue is undertaken under the special circumstances of illegal migration, for which there is already a good record of working together over many years. Even though formal bilateral relations outside the scope of illegal immigration have not moved forward, it easily could. Given the heavy commercial and private boat and aircraft traffic across the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, search and rescue operations is a natural area for greater engagement.

Some Suggested "Rules of the Game"

There are some well-established principles for military-to-military contact, especially between countries

with a history of enmity. Start slow, demonstrate respect, and build trust all come to mind. In the case of U.S.-Cuba military relations, these general rules should be enshrined as foundational. Most militaries tend to teach what they know and have a difficult time adapting their approaches to foreign circumstances. U.S. security programs often go awry as a result, as proved true in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example.¹⁰ Given the history and ethos of the FAR, taking a similar egocentric nationalistic approach to budding U.S.-Cuba military-to-military contact would be disastrous. Thus the rules of the game for U.S. officials to keep in mind are not unusual, but rather unusually important.

The first rule is the “go slow” principle. Throughout the island one hears the remark these days of the vital need to “*tener la guardia en alto*” (keep one’s guard up) in the negotiations for the future relationship with the United States. Despite how much Cubans want a better relationship with the United States, they remain suspicious after so many decades of hostility. In a sense, the FAR are uncertain about improved relations with the United States, and thus skittish if not unpredictable.

On the one hand, the armed forces know they can work with U.S. counterparts better than party officials, whose beliefs are considered anathema by U.S. officials. This is another FAR advantage over the party, and they are pleased to already have longstanding relationships with the U.S. military that are unthinkable for the party. Since rapprochement with the United States is widely considered essential for Cuban national recovery, these relations further boost the FAR’s already strong position in the state. FAR leaders are realists who know the revolution’s achievements, especially in public health and education, national dignity and independence, and racial and gender equality, are not easily guaranteed if the state is bankrupt. They know Cuban financial woes preclude the FAR taking part in the global military changes stimulated by the information revolution. They realize that only deep economic reform and further insertion into the international economy could preserve past progress and open future opportunities for the Cuban military.

On the other hand, the officer corps is still imprinted with its role as guardian of the revolution and continues to take devotion to the revolution seriously. The FAR will be dubious about U.S. intentions in broadening rapprochement. They carefully consider Washington’s policy pronouncements on Cuba, especially those that state the U.S. objective of regime change has not changed during recent moves toward closer relations (even while noting the caveat that regime change does not necessarily mean regime replacement). The FAR are sensitive to their own reduced capabilities. They would not want to showcase these weaknesses to a nation whose official policy is still the overthrow of its political, economic, and social system, even though formal diplomatic relations are now in place and a more optimistic prognostication of future cross-straits relations is widely embraced. Thus the FAR will not open up

moving slowly, taking small but cumulative steps, and letting the FAR set the pace will be critically important

to foreign (essentially U.S.) “inspection” before they have recovered further from the disaster of the “Special Period.” They will not want foreign officers lecturing their troops, visiting their installations for extended periods, or participating in any uncontrolled arrangements.

The best prediction, therefore, is that the FAR will be wary of a U.S. rush to move too far too fast and will prefer a slow evolution that permits both U.S. actions and words to be carefully assessed. Ironically, any U.S. attempt to hasten rapprochement will likely retard it. It would be safer and more efficacious to let the Cubans set the pace. Once it is clear to the FAR that enhanced contact is not a danger to the revolution, they will generally be keen on relations with the U.S. Armed Forces, which they admire as well armed and professional. They will see advantages from such cooperation for Cuba, for

their forces, and conceivably in the future, for themselves personally in such areas as assignments overseas, education and training opportunities, and a chance to work with more modern equipment.

Starting small is a corollary to going slow. After building confidence in a step-by-step process, it will be easier to move on to wider cooperation. The small initial steps will demonstrate that it is possible for a small and ill-equipped force and the world's largest, best equipped, and most powerful force to cooperate to mutual benefit. Small projects should thus be the rule in the early days of building expanded military-to-military contact. Moving slowly, taking small but cumulative steps, and letting the FAR set the pace will be critically important.

A natural consequence of letting the Cubans set the pace is to avoid approaching military-to-military contact as a *fait accompli*. Part of what makes U.S. forces so professional is their disciplined approach to working problems, making plans, and moving forward with purposeful effort. However, it will be vital to have the Cubans involved from the start with any planning for expanded relations. Presenting fully formed proposals as "package deals" will simply increase Cuban suspicions.

U.S. officers also must appreciate the entirely different conception of civil-military relations that marks the Cuban experience. There will be no point in thinking, saying, or acting as if the Cuban military could make more progress if it was more transparent with financial matters and generally less involved in economic and political matters. U.S. military personnel will naturally be inclined

to see the FAR's performance in nontraditional missions as inappropriate and transgressing its own civil-military norms. The FAR see their performance in nontraditional missions as evidence that their revolutionary ethos, connection with the public, efficiency and effectiveness, flexibility, and reform are secure.

Finally, thinking in terms of what the Cubans *must* do is simply the kiss of death when dealing with them. Spain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, each in its time, attempted to dictate what the Cubans must do. It tended not to work well for any of these parties, and it certainly will not work well for expanded U.S.-Cuba military contact given the FAR's attributes and historical experiences. U.S. interlocutors should explore possible enhanced engagement in a much more circumspect and contingent manner.

Conclusion

Cuba and the United States will differ on a range of issues for some time. Havana still believes that only a major and profound restructuring of the international order can bring about lasting solutions to illegal immigration, drug-trafficking, terrorism, climate change, and international insecurity in general. Washington is of the view that a functioning free enterprise system, essentially in today's form, will bring about a better world through innovation and better standards of living for the largest number of people. This deep philosophical difference will not just vanish. In addition, a half-century of enmity, vastly different institutional experiences, and leery publics are further

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impediments to expanded cooperation. Yet the geographic and strategic logic for both Cuba and the United States will inevitably incline leaders in both countries to explore deeper contact. Moving forward, it will be critically important to start small, go slow, build trust, consult early and often, let Cuba take the lead, and avoid imposing or reflecting a U.S.-centric view of civil-military relations. If this happens, it is altogether possible to imagine the two countries building bilateral current security relations to their mutual benefit, and sooner rather than later.

Notes

¹ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Ends: Washington and Havana in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 457.

² More detail is available in Hal Klepak, *Cuba's Military 1990–2005: Revolutionary Soldiers During Counter-Revolutionary Times* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 71–73.

³ *The Military Balance 2016* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016), 392; *A Comparative Atlas of Defense in Latin America and Caribbean* (Buenos Aires: Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina, 2014), 176.

⁴ “Foreign Policy and Health Security,” World Health Organization, available at <www.who.int/trade/glossary/story030/en/>; Ted Kim and Santiago Otero-Ortiz, “Behind the Scenes: Defense Attachés’ Contributions to Cuban Diplomatic Engagement in Haiti,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 16, 2016, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/behind-the-scenes-defense-attachés-contribute-to-cuban-diplomatic-engagement-in-haiti>>.

⁵ The two navies cooperated in the sinking of a German U-boat at one stage of World War II, a struggle often known in Cuba as the Great War against Fascism.

⁶ Yves Engler, “MINUSTAH’s Filthy Record in Haiti,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2011, available at <www.theguardian.com/commentsfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/11/haiti-unitednations-minustah-cholera>.

⁷ Interestingly, Cuban weather watchers accurately predicted the course of the worst natural disaster ever to hit the United States—the 1900 hurricane that inundated Galveston, Texas—and offered warnings that tragically were ignored. See Al Roker, *The Storm of the Century: Tragedy, Heroism, Survival, and the Epic True Story of America’s Deadliest Natural Disaster: The Great Gulf Hurricane of 1900* (New York: William Morrow, 2015).

⁸ Klepak, 124–127.

⁹ A step in this direction was taken on April 21, 2016, when a delegation of Cuban government national security officials toured Joint Interagency Task Force–South in Key West, Florida, at the invitation of U.S. Southern Command. The task force plays an important role in the detection, monitoring, and interdiction of drug-trafficking in the Caribbean. While there, the Cubans met with representatives of 18 countries assigned to the task force. See Carol Rosenberg, “Cuban Security Officials Toured Key West Drug-War Center,” *Miami Herald*, May 5, 2016, A6.

¹⁰ A major study of the Afghan and Iraq wars by National Defense University scholars concluded that the Department of Defense made the mistake of “trying to create forces that mirror-imaged those of the West” (335) in those conflicts. It “developed ministries and military forces modeled on U.S. institutions” (330), and failed to make the effort “‘transactional’ and ‘conditional,’ based on shared objectives and situational variables” (16). See Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015).

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