

# CUBA & THE CARIBBEAN

by Irving Louis Horowitz

Since Fidel Castro came to power nearly a quarter-century ago, diplomats from Latin America, politicians from North America, and academics from both hemispheres have been asking how to involve Cuba in the Caribbean peacemaking process. More often than may be warranted by evidence, they have assumed that Cuban interests are consonant with those of the other states of the Caribbean region. Any objection to the word *interests* as being too strong is met by a barrage of rhetorical arguments purporting to demonstrate that, at the very least, a *modus vivendi* is possible. But Cuban communism is a sore thumb and not easily disposed of by appeals to use the opposite hand.

From the outset of its revolution, Cuba viewed itself not only as the messenger of truth and hope to the hemisphere but as a revolutionary vanguard to be emulated. In the postrevolutionary phase of the early 1960s, Venezuela and Guatemala were rocked by Cuban "warrior-proletarian" insurgency movements. Even giants like Brazil, during the final gasp of the Goulart regime, found themselves warmly embracing the causes and purposes of the Cuban Revolution. Nations as remote as Chile and Bolivia flirted with the Cuban model of revolution, meekly in some instances and boldly in others. But for all the enthrallment with the Cuban Revolution and the charisma of Fidel, the successes during the Revolution's first twenty years were rather meager: Promissory notes were issued without fulfillment, elites led without mass support, *foco* groups existed without grounded support. In the aftermath of the Bolivian adventure of the mid-1960s and the shattering defeat and death of Ernesto "Che" Guevara in the Bolivian interior, the model itself was finally called into question.

The second phase, which occupied most of the 1970s, witnessed the growing internationalization of Cuban foreign policy. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, referring to Cuba's willingness to fight in such faraway places as Africa and the Middle East, called its troops the "Gurkhas of the Russian Empire." At the diplomatic level, Cuba took a central role in the various summit meetings of the nonaligned nations. On the economic front, Cuba pushed demands for a New International Economic Order, arguing that there is a natural alliance between the Third World and the Communist camp—and an equally natural antagonism

between the Third World and the West. But this strategy found its limits when the Cuban stalking horse isolated itself from Third World condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a situation crystallized by Cuba's failure to win support in its bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

This, in turn, set the stage for a third phase in the 1980s, one in which the Cuban praetorian guard shifted its geographical focus away from Africa and the Middle East and toward the Caribbean Basin. Military adventurism was replaced by Cuban developmental aid programs; and where once Cuba had trained its eye on Latin America as a whole, now it zeroed in on critical events in Central America. The Cuban vanguard began to develop a serpentine tail: The Sandinista uprising in Nicaragua, however indigenous in origin, soon took on Cuban features—from the organization of the military to the foreign policy of its leaders. This was also true on the small island of Grenada—now in the headlines—where an indigenous change of regime rapidly evolved into a government with a powerful identification with Cuba as its center. The scenario was expected to be similar in El Salvador, but its people and politicians foiled the designs of history and chose the path of democratic realignment, however imperfectly carried out.

What we have witnessed in the Caribbean is the evolution of a grand strategy by the USSR, with Cuba its willing and enthusiastic executor. The revolutions in the area force us not simply to make changes in our foreign policy but also in our assessment of regional realities.

The wide level of tactical maneuverability granted Cuba by the Soviet Union has given it a latitude of operations that can easily be misinterpreted as autonomy. Cuban latitude, its seeming indifference to the tactical styles of the USSR, is what diplomats, politicians, and academics are responding to when they speak so casually of bringing Cuba into the Caribbean peacemaking process. Cuban tactics are often pragmatic and home grown, but Cuban strategies are very definitely imported from the Soviets. The island is a weathervane of the Caribbean's long-range potential for the Soviet Union; how Cuba can fit into the Caribbean peace process depends heavily on the Soviet Union's immediate sense of its limits.

## MILITARY, ECONOMY, POLITY

The issue of Cuba's autonomy and authenticity is not only a factor in the island's foreign policy commitment to the

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Soviet Union but also in its ability to participate in a Caribbean-wide initiative. In fact, the very structure of Cuban national life limits sharply any such participation. As one informed figure, Carlos Alberto Montaner, has pointed out, the dorsal spine of Cuban society is its armed forces. Since the mid-1970s, when Cuba intervened in Angola on a large scale and the Soviet Union began to modernize Cuba's armed forces, the Cuban military has evolved from a predominantly home defense force into a formidable power relative to its Latin American neighbors. The cost of Soviet arms delivered to Castro since 1960 exceeds \$2.5 billion. These arms deliveries, plus the annual \$3 billion economic subsidy, are tied to Cuba's ongoing military and political role abroad in support of Soviet objectives. Cuba's armed forces total 225,000—200,000 Army, 15,000 Air Force/air defense, and 10,000 Navy—including those on active duty either in Cuba or overseas and those belonging to the reserves, subject to immediate mobilization. With a population of just under 10 million, Cuba has the largest military force in the Caribbean Basin and the second largest in Latin America after Brazil, whose population is more than 120 million. More than 2 per cent of the Cuban population belongs to the active-duty military and ready reserves, compared with an average of less than 0.4 per cent in other countries in the Caribbean Basin. In addition, Cuba's large paramilitary organizations and reserves provide considerable internal support to the military.

The structure of the Cuban economy further militates against easy participation in Caribbean regional planning. The Cuban economy is highly dependent on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which account for some 85-90 per cent of its trade. True, Cuba shares many of the problems of the Caribbean region: a single-crop economy, relatively low levels of agrarian production, the absence of accumulated savings and wealth, and, like the rest of the region, is outside the market economy and inside the planning economy. But the Cuban economy remains heavily determined by outside forces over which its national leaders have no significant control. The Soviet Union basically has the power to set prices, grant subsidies, and extend credit. A small part of Cuba's trade is still with market economies, so that the island is not totally removed from the price fluctuations of the international market and the need for credit. But Cuba remains a single-crop economy that exports a few raw materials to the Soviet Union and buys from it most of its intermediate and capital goods. The island has been unable to accumulate enough capital from domestic resources, has made little progress in expanding the capital goods sector, and has been incapable of self-sustained economic growth. To keep its economy running, Cuba has had to borrow heavily and with ever-greater frequency from the Soviets and from other socialist

and market economies, thus dramatically increasing its foreign debt.

As with its economy, Cuba's polity and politics are at variance with the rest of the Caribbean region. The island boasts a single Communist party apparatus, its social life is depoliticized, its ideology is routinized and ritualized, and the same family has been in power since the onset of the Revolution. Cuba shares many of the worst features of authoritarian regimes in the Caribbean, past and present. One finds in Cuba the routinization of a revolution without its institutionalization. Conspicuously absent are the devices that ensure legitimacy: elections, oppositional parties, a free press. What *has* been institutionalized is single-party rule and vanguard political domination. What *has* been routinized is professions of faith and loyalty to the Revolution. Neither friends nor foes of the regime deny this. Explanations are another matter. At this level, incongruities show: Cuba is a country small in size and large in pretenses. It plays a considerable role in hemispheric affairs, Caribbean affairs, and even Third World affairs. Cuba considers itself the leader of a hemispheric revolt against "Yankee imperialism"—a never-ending holy war of an island David with the mainland Goliath—while it has tremendous difficulty coping with its own quotidian problems.

#### STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

The routinization of the Cuban Revolution is scarcely the same as asserting its normalization. And what has been routinized is not only an authoritarian substance but also a paranoid style. This is not meant invidiously; Richard Hofstadter was able to write one of his most brilliant essays on "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Still, a sense of frenetic, ceremonial mobilization, combined with a peculiar inability to act on the presumption that Cuba may not always be at the center of world events (a malady suffered by other small nations likewise on a permanent war footing), is easily fed by random remarks. When Senator Barry Goldwater announced that Cuba would be best off as the fifty-first state in the Union, the response of the Cuban Communist party was emblazoned across the banner of *Granma*: "Whoever tries to conquer Cuba will gain nothing but the dust of her bloodsoaked soil—if he doesn't perish in the struggle first!" There have been threats, to be sure, but their quality is uniformly misread and misunderstood. Subtlety and humor have, like so much else, fallen victim to a revolution that feeds on its own slogans.

The political functions of the paranoid style are numerous and complex, but above all they are best viewed as the essential mechanism of mass mobilization. Where Stalin had his doctrine of capitalist encirclement, Castro is able to present Cuba as an island of socialist probity in a hemisphere of imperialist aggression. Whatever the truth of such a definition, it has the effect of maintaining the Cuban people in a state of high military and paramilitary alert, providing a practical role for vanguard groups and a touchstone of regime loyalty. The danger with the constant pumping of the external-threat syndrome is similar to the problem of apocalyptic religious cults: When the cataclysmic event fails to materialize, questions of the soundness of the leadership are raised among some (while some others band even more tightly about their leader), followed by a cynical withdrawal from the political pro-

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cess. In the absence of market incentives and consumption rewards, the regime is compelled to manufacture escalated threats of disaster and destruction.

Cuba's foreign policy demands too, while quite real, are of course developed within the larger context of Soviet policy requirements. On the basis of current Cuban policy materials, five key points emerge:

1. Complete acceptance by the Caribbean region, above all by the United States, of the Sandinistas as the rightful exclusive rulers of Nicaragua.

2. Complete acceptance of the demands of the Farabundo group in El Salvador and the dismantling of the present regime—in short, an El Salvador that would put the guerrillas in power and provide them with a military and political monopoly.

3. Removal of the U.S. military presence in the area, starting with Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba and including all U.S. troops, advisors, and other paramilitary elements.

4. Free and unimpeded passage of weapons and hardware from the Soviet Union to Cuba and, if necessary, from Cuba to other parts of the Caribbean region currently in the throes of insurgent struggles.

5. Acceptance of guerrilla movements and Communist party groups as legitimate heirs to Caribbean rule, especially in Guatemala, which the Cubans perceive as the more immediately vulnerable Central American nation.

Only if the United States is willing to pay such a price or is able to coexist with such demands could Cuba be brought into the peace process.

### RISKY CONCLUSIONS

The key issue in Central America is not war or peace, nor is it a struggle between free market systems on one hand and planning systems on the other. Certainly we know enough to realize that nearly every nation, large or small, nominally Communist or capitalist, has a whole range of mixes within its economic grasp, that these are constantly shifted about, and that no economic mix need be fearsome. The key issue is whether the forms and varieties of democratic rule will prevail over the singular form of totalitarian communism. The United States should be capable of living with a whole variety of economic systems, but thus far it has found itself less able to deal with a decline in the variety of *political* systems.

Policy operations must be framed in a flexible manner, one that both respects the tolerance of hemispheric differences and recognizes the firm commitment of the region's people to democratic values and sovereign rights. The policy sector of the United States would be well advised to support popular movements for democracy wherever and whenever possible in the Caribbean. The touchstone of these regimes ought not to be the specifics of their economic production cycles but, rather, whether their commitment is to a democratic shift on the one hand or a totalitarian effort on the other.

Given the intricate network of foreign policy considerations, it is naive to presume that Cuba can be dealt with by the United States strictly within the context of multi-lateral regional negotiations. While, in the abstract, such an approach is preferable to the big stick of a big brother, the presence of a Soviet surrogate introduces big-power

bilateral considerations through the proverbial back door. Any solution to U.S. participation in the stabilization of El Salvador—or the destabilization of Nicaragua, for that matter—must entail the resolution of a long-standing Soviet presence in terms of large-scale military manpower and hardware in Cuban life. The search for future autonomous forms of political organization and social systems should not be confused with present dependencies. Big-power interests are real and will continue to come into play so long as new guerrilla insurgencies threaten to enhance Soviet power in the Caribbean.

There are two uncomfortable and quite risky policy conclusions that follow from these remarks: first, that the Soviet Union, since it is evidently part of the problem, must become part of any Caribbean peace process; second, that the United States avoid mechanistic parallels with post-World War II Europe, thus overcoming the notion that a Marshall Plan for Central America is a political cure-all.

Many people feel that if the Soviet Union were to join a Caribbean peace process, the United States would be legitimating a role for the Russians in the region and, by so doing, handing them an easy victory. While this argument has some merit, it fails to confront the empirical evidence that the Soviets have already made a significant penetration of the region through Cuba and Nicaragua. The Contadora Group—Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Panama—takes another position: It is “undesirable for Caribbean conflicts to be incorporated into the context of the East-West confrontation.” However, since a key source of the present structures and processes in the region derive from that conflict, Contadora has been unable to extract anything but a general commitment to peace. Having lauded Cuba out of consideration, Contadora can, in effect, negotiate only a diminution of United States influence in the region; the Soviet role remains conspicuously unexamined or unexplained. Thus, by an act of sheer omission, the Contadora Group would conduct negotiations as if Cuba has neither a role to play nor losses to suffer in the event of an overall settlement. To bring the Russians into the negotiating process is to permit a serious policy discussion between the contending parties—making clear that the massive Soviet presence in Cuba is at least as much an agenda item as the modest U.S. presence in El Salvador.

Whatever specific policy options emerge from current United States reconsiderations of Central America, they will be wiser, more prudent, and, above all, more successful if the Soviet master and the Cuban proxy are factored in at all levels of analysis. Caribbean pacification clearly rests, first, on a cease-and-desist in the export of armed revolution and counterrevolution; second, on the elimination of barriers to the free flow of peoples and ideas in the region; and third, on respect for the autonomy and territorial integrity of all nations in the region. The limit of such premises, and of policy itself, is that these cornerstones do not necessarily fit tightly. Hence, building upon them becomes either an exercise in futility or an excruciatingly painful series of choices among worthy alternatives that involve, more often than not, draconian consequences. Yet the goal of Caribbean pacification is now of such significance that, contradictory elements notwithstanding, the struggle for a policy consensus within the context of new regional realities must go forward.