

Cuban Armed Forces and the Soviet Military Presence



Cover: Soviet Mi-24 HIND helicopter gunship,
1982 addition to Cuban arsenal.

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Summary

Cuba has by far the most formidable military force in the Caribbean basin with the single exception of the United States. In terms of size, its forces are larger than any other Central American or Caribbean nation. In all of Latin America, only Brazil—a country with a population 12 times that of Cuba—has a larger military establishment. The quantitative and qualitative improvement of the armed forces and increasing Soviet-Cuban military ties have enabled Cuba to assume a far more influential role on the world scene than its size and resources would otherwise dictate.

Since 1975 the USSR has undertaken a major modernization of all branches of the Cuban military, transforming it from a home-defense force into the best equipped military establishment in Latin America, one with significant offensive capabilities. Equipment delivered to the ground forces has enhanced both its mobility and firepower. The Air Force now is probably the best equipped in Latin America, possessing some 200 Soviet-supplied MiG jet fighters. The Navy has acquired two torpedo attack submarines and a Koni-class frigate, all of which will be able to sustain operations throughout the Caribbean Basin and will enable Cuba to project power far beyond its shores, posing a threat to shipping in the Caribbean as well as intimidating and threatening neighbors.

As a result of this modernization program and Cuba's combat experience in Angola and Ethiopia, the Castro regime possesses a significant regional intervention capability. Havana has increased the size of its airborne-trained forces to a current level of some 3,000 to 4,000 troops, and has significantly improved its airlift and sealift capability as well. Although this capability is modest by Western standards, it is impressive in the Central American or Caribbean context. This capability would be most effectively employed in aiding an ally in the region against an external invasion or in the suppression of internal conflict. Cuba does not have the wherewithal to conduct an outright invasion of another nation in the region except for the Caribbean micro-states. Havana does not have sufficient amphibious assault landing craft or aircraft capable of transporting heavy equipment.

Cuba has on occasion demonstrated some recklessness in the utilization of its capabilities. The most recent example occurred May 10, 1980, when Cuban Air Force jet fighters attacked and sank a clearly marked Bahamian patrol vessel inside Bahamian territorial waters in broad daylight. Four crewmembers died in the attack. The following day, Cuban MiGs buzzed for a prolonged period a populated island belonging to the Bahamas. In addition, a Cuban helicopter carrying Cuban troops landed on the same island in pursuit of the surviving crewmembers of the sunken patrol vessel.

The Cuban Military

Since the mid-1970's, when Cuba intervened in Angola on a large scale and the Soviet Union began to modernize Cuba's armed forces with new equipment, the Cuban military has changed from a predominantly home-defense force into a formidable power relative to its Latin American neighbors. The deliveries of Soviet military equipment that have taken place in recent months are the latest in a surge of deliveries to Cuba over the past year. During 1981, Soviet merchant ships delivered some 66,000 tons of military equipment, as compared with the previous 10-year annual average of 15,000 tons. The large amount of weapons delivered in 1981 represents the most significant Soviet military supply effort to Cuba since a record quarter of a million tons was shipped in 1962 (see chart 1 in appendix).

There are several reasons for this increase:

- the beginning of a new five-year upgrading and replacement cycle;
- additional arms to equip the new Cuban territorial militia, which Cuba claims to be 500,000 strong but which Cuba expects to reach 1 million;
- increasing military stockpiles, part of which is passed to Nicaragua;
- a convincing demonstration of Moscow's continuing support for the Havana regime.

In addition to major weapons systems, large quantities of ammunition, small arms, spares and support equipment probably were delivered. Cuba's armed forces cur-

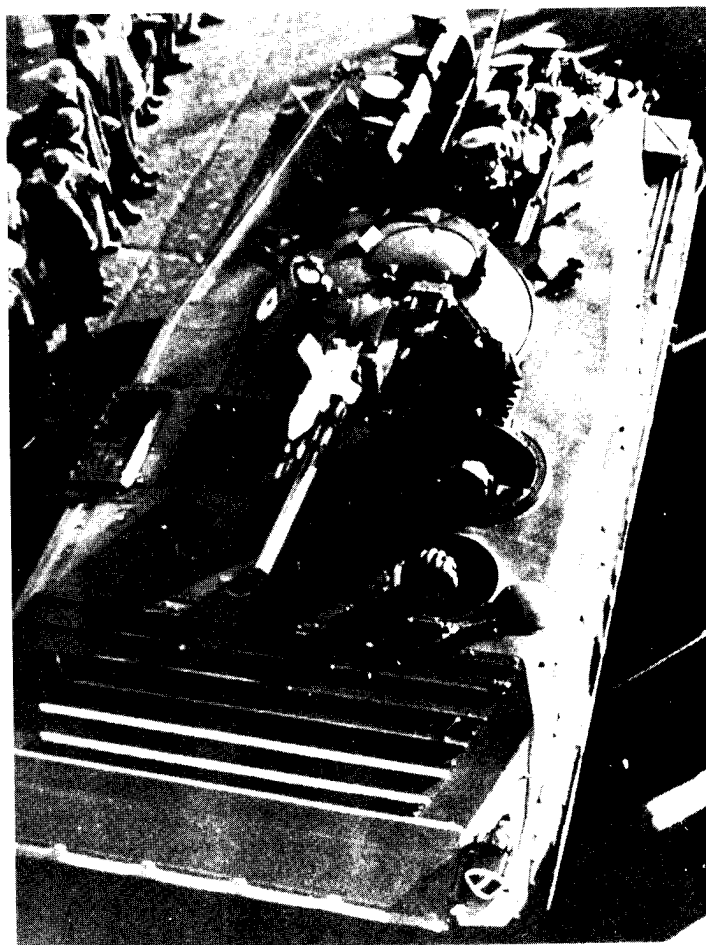
rently total more than 225,000 personnel—200,000 Army, 15,000 Air Force and Air Defense, and 10,000 Navy—including both those on active duty either in Cuba or overseas and those belonging to the ready reserves, subject to immediate mobilization. With a population of just under ten million, Cuba has by far the largest military force in the Caribbean Basin and the second largest in Latin America after Brazil, which has a population of more than 120 million. More than 2 percent of the Cuban population belongs to the active-duty military and ready reserves, compared with an average of under 0.4 percent in other countries in the Caribbean basin (see charts 2 and 3). In addition, Cuba's large paramilitary organizations and reserves would be available to support the military internally.

The quantitative and qualitative upgrading of the armed forces since the mid-1970's, and their recent combat experience in Angola and Ethiopia, give the Cuban military definite advantages over its neighbors in Latin America. Cuba is the only country in Latin America to have undertaken a major military effort abroad since World War II, giving both Army and Air Force personnel recent combat experience in operating many of the weapons currently in their inventories. About 70 percent of Cuban troops that have served in Africa have been reservists who were called to active duty. Cuban reservists generally spend about 45 days per year on active duty and can be readily integrated into the armed forces. Cuba has effectively used its civilian enterprises, such as Cubana Airlines and the merchant marine, to support military operations. Havana has dedicated significant resources to modernize and professionalize its armed forces and to maintain a well-prepared reserve. Cuba has demonstrated that, when supported by the Soviet Union logistically, it has both the capability and the will to deploy large numbers of troops, and can be expected to do so whenever the Castro government believes it to be in Cuba's best interest.

The cost of Soviet arms delivered to Cuba since 1960 exceeds \$2.5 thousand million, and all of the deliveries have taken place on a grant basis. Soviet arms deliveries, plus Cuba's \$3 thousand-million annual Soviet economic subsidy, are tied to Cuba's ongoing military and political role abroad in support of Soviet objectives.

Equipment delivered to the Army since the mid-1970's, such as T-62 tanks, BMP infantry combat vehicles, BRDM armored reconnaissance vehicles, anti-tank guns, towed field guns, BM-21 multiple rocket launchers and ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, have begun to alleviate earlier deficiencies in Cuba's mechanized capability, as well as providing increased firepower. In addition to its qualitative advantage, the Cuban Army has an overwhelming numerical superiority in weapons over all of its Latin American neighbors.

The Cuban Air Force is one of the largest and probably the best equipped in all Latin America. Its inventory includes some 200 Soviet-supplied MiG jet fighters, with two squadrons of FLOGGERS (exact model of second squadron recently delivered is not yet determined). The MiG-23s have the capability to reach portions of the southeastern United States, most of Central America and most Caribbean nations (see chart 4). Cuban-based aircraft, however, would be capable of conducting only limited air en-

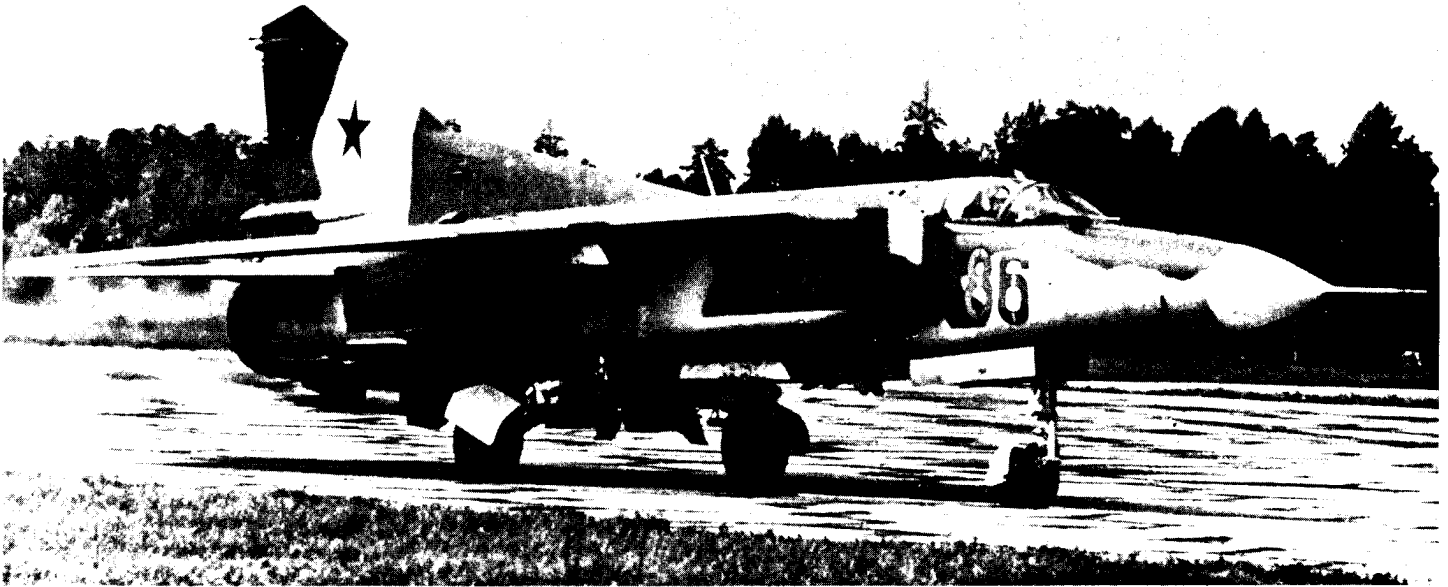


BMP infantry combat vehicle.

agements in Central America on a round-trip mission. Cuba's fighter aircraft could be effectively employed in either a ground-attack or air superiority role, however, if based on Central American soil—a feasible option given the closeness of Cuban-Nicaraguan relations. A similar arrangement would be possible in Grenada once Cuban workers complete the construction of an airfield with a 2,700-meter runway there. If the MiG-23s were based in Nicaragua and Grenada, their combat radius would be expanded to include all of Central America, including the northern tier of South America.

Cuban defenses have been strengthened by the additions of mobile SA-6 missile launchers and radars for that air defense missile, additional SA-2 transporters, SA-2 missile cannisters, new early warning and height-finding radar stations, and electronic warfare vans.

The Cuban Navy, with a strength of about 10,000 personnel, remains essentially a defensive force, although its two recently acquired FOXTROT-class submarines and single Koni-class frigate, once fully integrated into the operational force, will be able to sustain operations throughout the Caribbean Basin, the Gulf of Mexico, and, to a limited extent, the Atlantic. The Koni, for example, has an operating range of 2,000 nautical miles without refuel-



MiG-23, shown here shortly before shipment to Cuba, is one of some 200 Mig jet fighters supplied to Cuba by the Soviet Union.

ing or replenishment. The FOXTROTS have a range of 9,000 nautical miles at seven knots per hour and a patrol duration of 70 days.

The primary vessels for carrying out the Navy's defensive missions are Osa- and Komar-class missile attack boats whose range can extend well into the Caribbean. They are armed with SS-N-2 STYX ship-to-ship missiles (see chart 5). Cuba has received, in addition, Turya-class hydrofoil torpedo boats, Yevgenya-class inshore minesweepers and a Sonya-class minesweeper. Although not equipped for sustained operations away from its main bases, the Cuban Navy could conduct limited interdiction missions in the Caribbean. In addition to the Navy, Cuba has a 3,000-man coast guard organization.

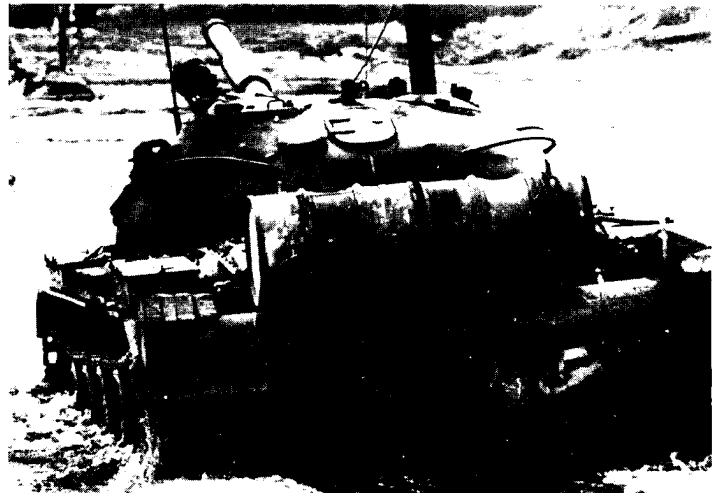
Cuba's capability to intervene in a hostile environment using its indigenous transport assets is modest by Western standards, but considerably more formidable in the Central American context. As in 1975, when a single battalion of Cuban airborne troops airlifted to Luanda at a critical moment played a role far out of proportion to its size, a battle-tested Cuban force injected quickly into a combat situation in Central America could prove a decisive factor. Moreover, since the Angolan experience, Havana has increased the training of airborne-qualified forces, which now number some 3,000 to 4,000 troops and consist of a Special Troops Contingent and a Landing and Assault Brigade. In addition, Cuba has improved its airlift and sealift capability.

Cuba continues to lack sufficient transport aircraft that can support long-range, large-scale troop movements and would have to turn to the Soviets to achieve such a capability. Cuba does have the ability to transport large numbers of troops and supplies within the Caribbean region, however, using its military and civilian aircraft. Since 1975, the Cuban commercial air fleet has acquired seven IL-62 long-range jet transport aircraft and some TU-154 medium-to-long-range transport aircraft, each capable of

carrying 150 to 200 combat-equipped troops. (By comparison, Cuba conducted the airlift to Luanda in 1975 with only five medium-range aircraft, each having a maximum capacity of 100 troops.) Cuba has recently acquired the AN-26 short-range transport. The most effective use of this aircraft from Cuban bases would be in transporting troops or supplies to a friendly country, but it is capable, with full payload, of airdropping troops on portions of Florida, Belize, Jamaica, Haiti, the Bahamas, and most of the Dominican Republic (see chart 6). If based in Nicaragua, however, the AN-26s would be capable of reaching virtually all of Central America in either role. In addition, more than 30 smaller military and civilian transport planes, including the aircraft of the Angola conflict, also could be used to fly troops and munitions to Central America.

Introduction of sophisticated Soviet weapons geared toward mobility and offensive missions has improved Cu-

Soviet T-62 tanks, shown here during Warsaw Pact maneuvers.





Koni-class frigate.

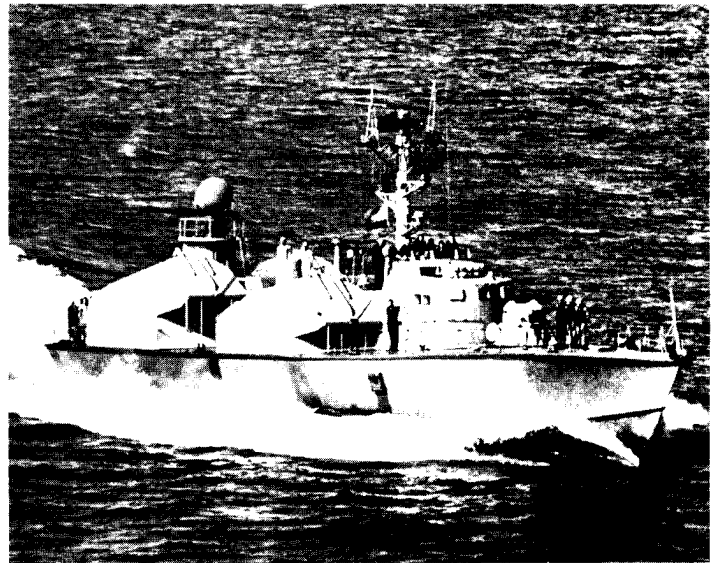
ban ability to conduct military operations off the island. The recent Soviet military deliveries, specifically, could improve the effectiveness of Cuban forces already abroad. In Angola the mobile SA-6 surface-to-air missile system operated by Cubans could provide a valuable complement to other less effective air defense systems. They also would enable Havana to continue assistance to Nicaragua. The MiG-23 and MiG-21 fighters probably would be most effective in aiding the Sandinista regime. The deployment of a few dozen MiGs would not seriously reduce Cuba's defenses, and Cuban-piloted MiGs would enable Nicaragua to counter virtually any threat from within the region.

In early 1982 Cuba received some Mi-24 HIND-D helicopters. This is the first true assault helicopter in Cuba's inventory, although Cuba also has Mi-8 helicopters. Primarily a gunship, the Mi-24 is also designed to carry a combat squad of eight men. It is armed with a 57 mm cannon, mini-gun and rocket pods. It will provide Cuba with improved ground support and offensive combat operations capabilities.

Cuba's ability to mount an amphibious assault is constrained both by the small number of naval infantry personnel and by a dearth of suitable landing craft. Cuba would, however, be capable of transporting significant numbers of troops and supplies—using ships belonging to the merchant marine and navy—to ports secured by friendly forces if the United States did not become involved.

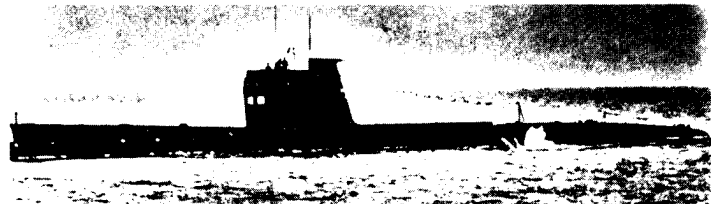
Cuba's Paramilitary Organizations

Cuba's several paramilitary organizations involve hundreds of thousands of civilian personnel during peacetime who would be available to support the military during times of crisis. Although these groups would be far less combat-capable than any segment of the military, they do provide at least rudimentary military training and disci-



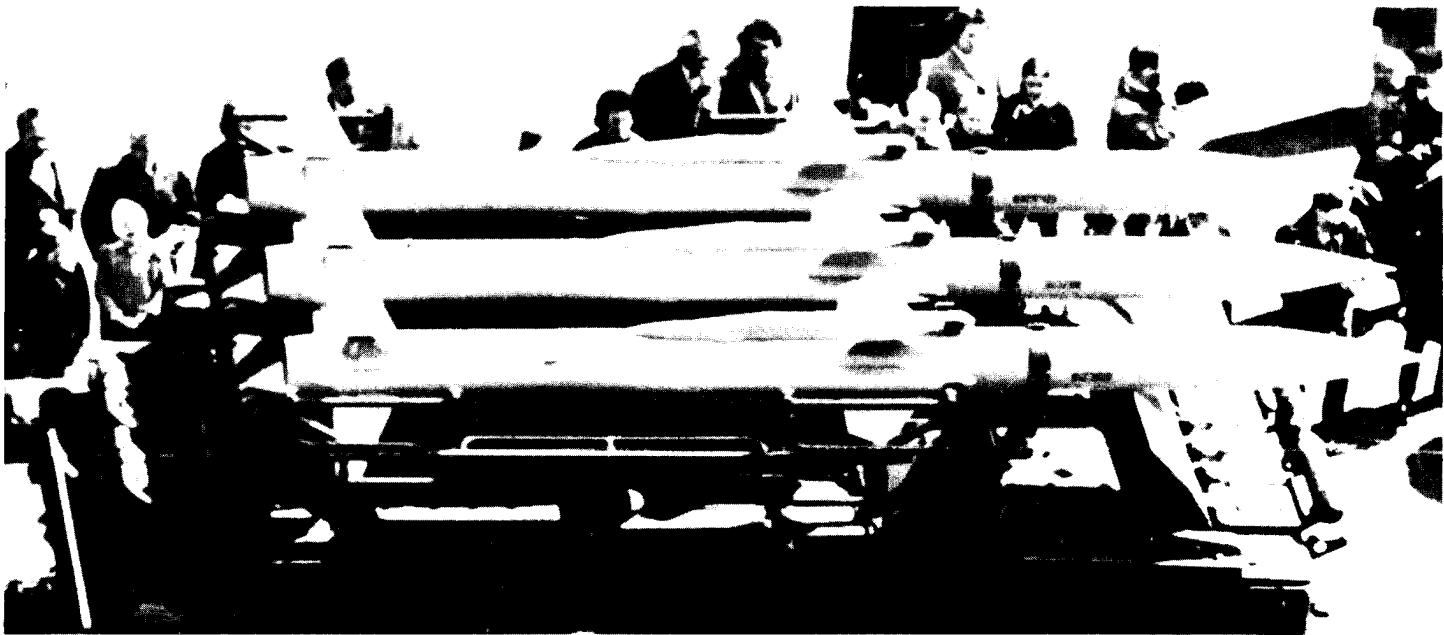
Osa-class missile attack boat.

FOXTROT-class submarine.



pline to the civilian population. The primary orientation of these paramilitary organizations is internal security and local defense (see chart 7).

The extent to which the military is involved in the civilian sector is further reflected by its activity within the economic sphere. In addition to uniformed personnel, the



SA-6 surface-to-air missiles on display.

Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) has over 30,000 civilian workers employed in factories and repair facilities in Cuba and in building roads and airfields in Africa. Many are employees of MINFAR's Central Directorate for Housing and Construction which, in addition to military construction, builds housing and apartment complexes for military and civilian personnel of both MINFAR and the Ministry of the Interior. The Youth Labor Army also contributes to economic development by engaging in agricultural, industrial and construction projects.

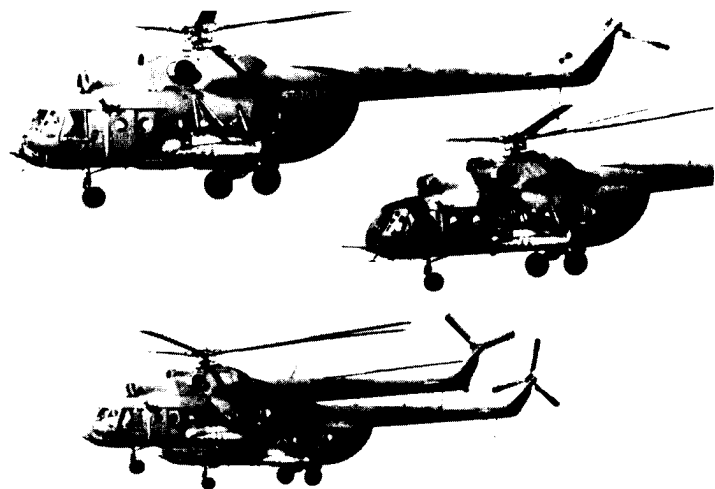
The Soviet Presence

The Soviet military presence in Cuba includes a ground forces brigade, a military advisory group and an intelligence collection facility. There are 6,000 to 8,000 Soviet civilian advisors and 2,000 Soviet military advisors in Cuba. Military deployments to Cuba consist of periodic visits by naval reconnaissance aircraft and task groups.

The ground forces brigade, located near Havana, has approximately 2,600 men and consists of one tank and three motorized rifle battalions, plus various combat and service support units. Soviet ground forces have been present in Cuba since shortly before the missile crisis in 1962.

Likely missions of the brigade include providing a small symbolic Soviet commitment to Castro, implying a readiness to defend Cuba and his regime, and probably providing security for Soviet personnel and key Soviet facilities, particularly for the Soviets' large intelligence collection operation. The brigade almost certainly would not have a role as an intervention force, although it is capable of tactical defense and offensive operations in Cuba. Unlike such units as airborne divisions, the brigade is not structured for rapid deployment, and no transport aircraft capable of carrying its armed vehicles and heavy equipment are stationed in Cuba.

The Soviet Military Advisory Group in Cuba con-



The Mi-8 helicopter, shown here during 1980 Warsaw Pact maneuvers.

sists of at least 2,000 military personnel, who provide technical advice in support of weapons such as the MiGs, surface-to-air missiles, and the FOXTROT submarines; some are also attached to Cuban ground units. The Soviets' intelligence collection facility—their largest outside the USSR—monitors U.S. military and civilian communications.

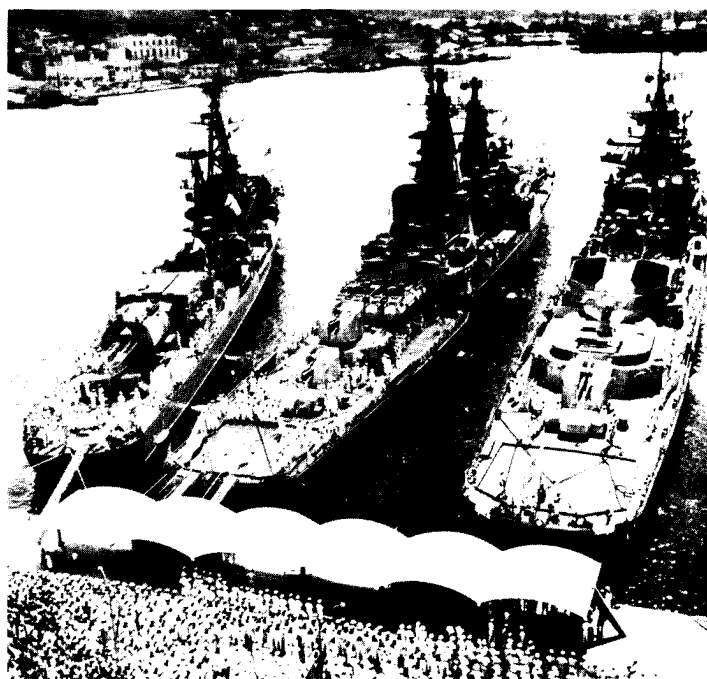
Since the naval ship visit program began in 1969, 21 Soviet task groups have been deployed to the Caribbean, virtually all of them visiting Cuban ports. The most recent visit occurred in April and May 1981 and included the first by a Kara-class cruiser—the largest Soviet combat ship to have ever visited the island. Soviet intelligence collection ships operating off the U.S. East Coast regularly call at Cuba during their patrols, as do hydrographic research and space-program support ships operating in the region. In addition, the Soviet Navy keeps a salvage and rescue ship in Havana for emergency operations.



Cubans in Africa: Top, Cuban artillery unit in front-line position in Ethiopia. Below, Soviet-built tank manned by Cuban troops guards road junction in Luanda, Angola, during civil war in 1976.



Soviet TU-95 Bear D reconnaissance aircraft have been deployed periodically to Cuba since 1975. These aircraft are deployed in pairs and stay in Cuba for several weeks. The flights use Cuban airfields to support Soviet reconnaissance missions and naval maneuvers in the Atlantic, and to observe U.S. and NATO naval maneuvers and



Soviet naval visits to Cuba began in 1969. Here, from left, a Kildin-class guided-missile destroyer, a Kynda-class guided-missile cruiser and a Kashin-class guided-missile destroyer at port in Havana.

sea trials. The flights have historically been associated with periods of increased international tension, such as the Angolan and Ethiopian wars.

The Soviets apparently sent a significant number of pilots to augment Cuba's air defense during two periods—early 1976 and during 1978—when Cuban pilots were sent to Angola and Ethiopia. The Soviet pilots filled in for Cuban pilots deployed abroad, and provided the Cuban Air Force with enough personnel to perform its primary mission of air defense of the island.

Threat to Hemispheric Strategic Defense

Cuban military ties with the Soviet Union, the Soviet presence in Cuba, including the presence of a large Soviet intelligence-gathering facility, and the periodic Soviet air and naval presence pose significant military threats to U.S. security interests in the Hemisphere. Because of Cuba's proximity to vital sea lanes of communication, the Soviets or Cubans, in wartime, could attempt to interdict the movement of troops, supplies and raw materials in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea, and could strike key military and civilian facilities in the area. ■

Chart 1

USSR: Seaborne Military Deliveries to Cuba

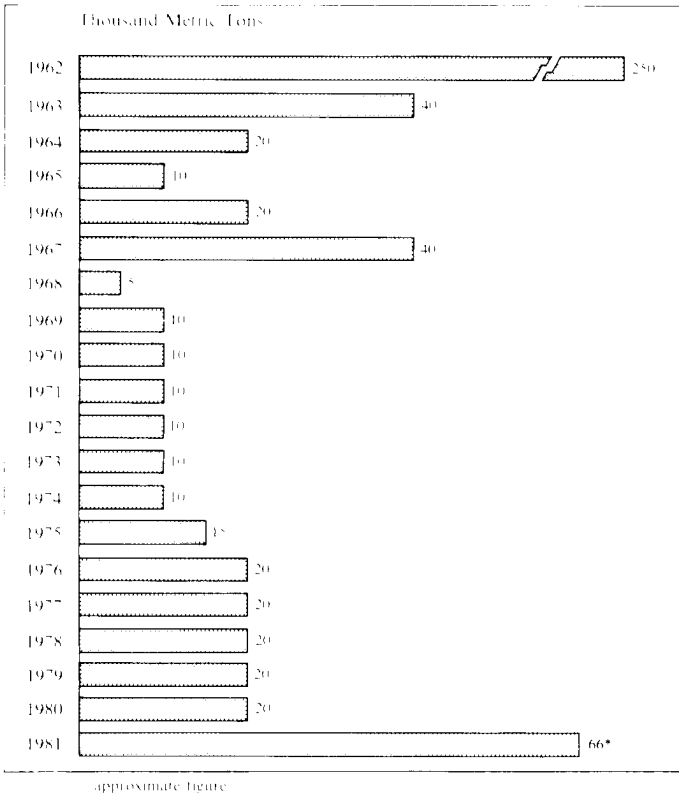


Chart 2

For Selected Latin American Countries*

| Country | Population (in thousands) | People in Military (in thousands) | Percentage of Population in Military |
|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Cuba | 9,900 | 226.5 | 2.29 |
| Argentina | 27,000 | 139.5 | .51 |
| Bolivia | 5,285 | 23.8 | .45 |
| Brazil | 126,000 | 272.55 | .22 |
| Chile | 11,200 | 88.0 | .79 |
| Colombia | 26,520 | 65.8 | .25 |
| Ecuador | 7,900 | 38.8 | .49 |
| Paraguay | 3,300 | 16.0 | .48 |
| Peru | 17,400 | 95.5 | .55 |
| Uruguay | 3,300 | 30.0 | .91 |
| Venezuela | 15,400 | 40.5 | .26 |
| Dominican Rep. | 5,620 | 19.0 | .34 |
| Guatemala | 6,950 | 14.9 | .21 |
| Honduras | 3,700 | 11.3 | .31 |
| Mexico | 71,500 | 107.0 | .15 |

* Data is from *Military Balance, 1980-81*.

Chart 3

Relative Military Strength of Selected Caribbean Basin Nations

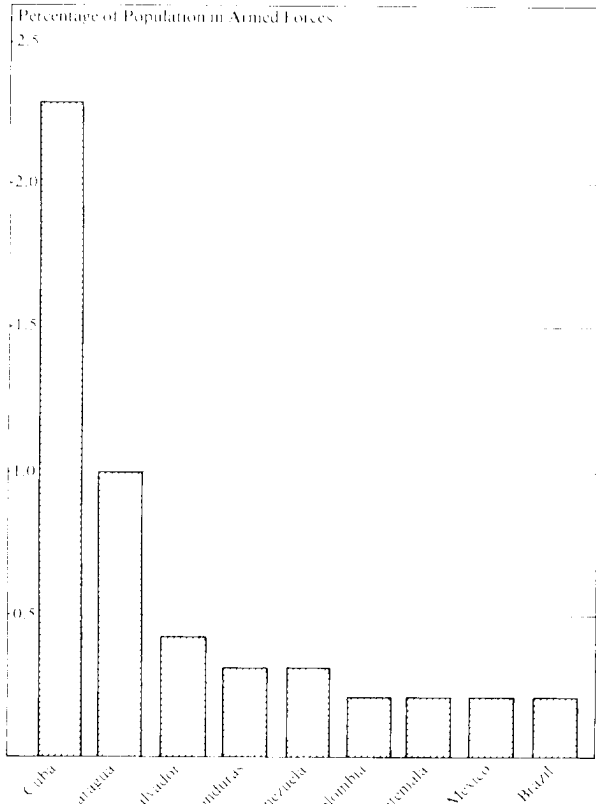


Chart 4

Optimum High-Altitude Combat Radii of Cuban Mig-21s and Mig-23s

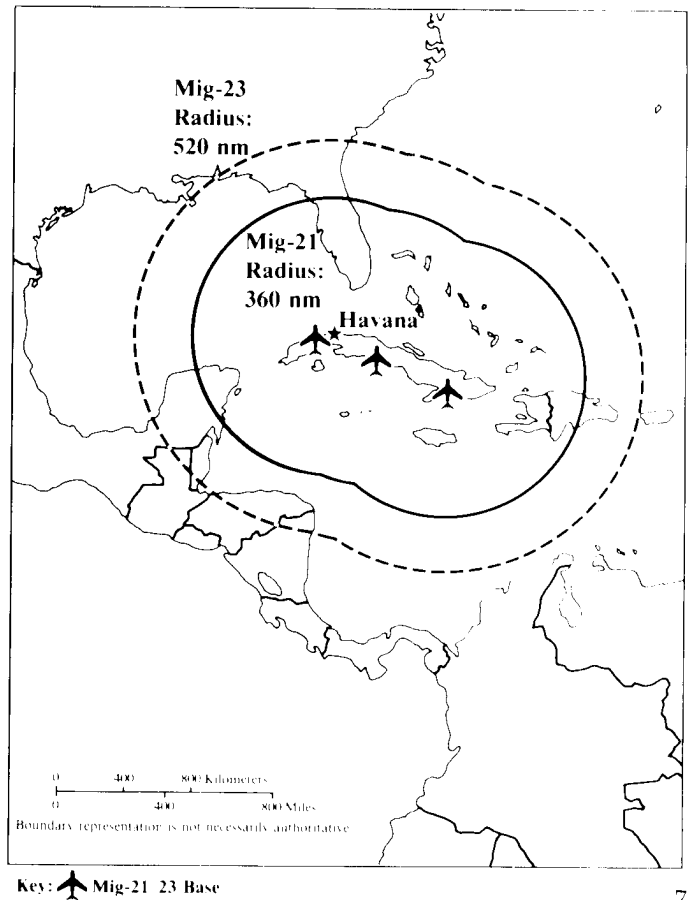
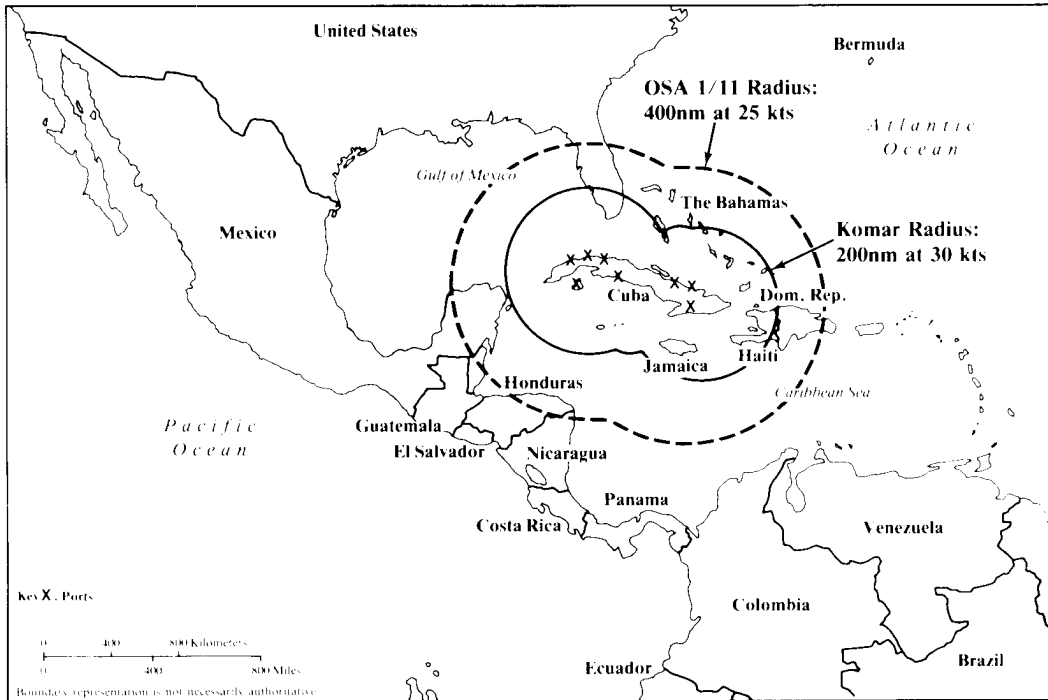


Chart 5

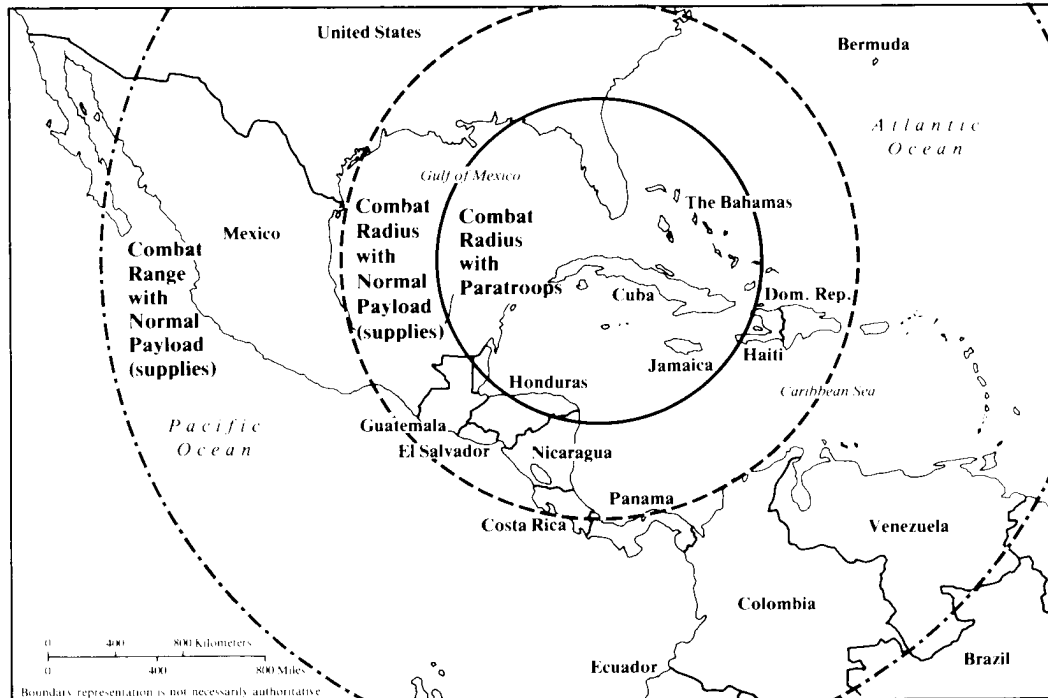
Operating Areas of OSA- and Komar-class Guided Missile Patrol Boats from Cuban Ports*



*Operating areas shown are based on each craft's normal tactical speed, and could be up to 50 percent less if high speed operations were being conducted. The maximum speed of the OSA is 36 knots and that of the Komar 40 knots.

Chart 6

Range and Radius of AN-26s from Havana



*Combat radius is the airfield distance attainable on a flight carrying payload to a destination, with sufficient onboard fuel reserves to return to point of origin. For a paratroop mission, stated radius allows for sufficient time-on-station to airdrop paratroops. For the delivery of supplies, stated radius allows for landing and take-off at destination, and assumes that entire payload is delivered before return. Combat range is the total distance attainable on a one-way flight carrying payload the entire distance.

Chart 7**Strength and Missions of Cuba's Paramilitary Organizations**

| <u>Organization</u> | <u>Subordination</u> | <u>Strength</u> | <u>Mission</u> |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Youth Labor Army | MINFAR (Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces) | 100,000 | Civic action force, receiving little military training in peacetime. One wartime mission would be to operate and protect the railroads. |
| Civil Defense Force | MINFAR | 100,000 | "Military" units would assist in providing local defense; non-military would provide first aid and disaster relief. |
| Territorial Troop Militia | MINFAR | More than 500,000 at present; still forming | Regional security/local defense. |
| Border Guard Troops | MININT (Ministry of the Interior) | 3,000 full-time, plus unknown number of civilian auxiliaries | Help guard Cuban coastline. |
| National Revolutionary Police | MININT | 10,000, plus 52,000 civilian auxiliaries | Responsible for public order in peacetime; could help provide rear area security during wartime. |
| Department of State Security | MININT | 10,000-15,000 | Counterintelligence and prevention of counter-revolutionary activities. |

Chart 8**Cuban Advisors**

| <u>Nation</u> | <u>Total Number (Estimated)</u> | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| | <u>Military</u> | <u>Civilian</u> |
| Angola | 20,000 | 6,000 |
| Ethiopia | 11,000-13,000 | 600 |
| Nicaragua | 1,800 | 3,500 |
| South Yemen | 200-300 | 100 |
| Grenada | 30 | 300 |

Photos: Front Cover, Department of Defense.
2. Department of Defense.
3. top—Gamma-Liaison/J.P. Quittard; bottom—Sovfoto.
4. top—U.S. Navy (2); bottom—Department of Defense.
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