



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence



# Cuban Policy Toward Latin America

National Intelligence Estimate



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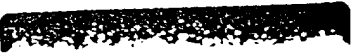
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CUBAN POLICY TOWARD  
LATIN AMERICA

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## THE ESTIMATE

Two years ago, Cuba reverted to much more militant support of revolutionary insurgents, especially in Central America. Castro sees promising opportunities through the promotion of insurgency to advance the cause of revolution in the region, restore a sense of revolutionary momentum at home, and enhance Cuba's security—by helping sympathetic regimes come to power in the area and by pursuing policies to justify and possibly increase Soviet aid and support for Cuba. Serious domestic economic and political problems and other adversities have made Castro more rather than less militant on behalf of regional insurgents, a reflection of his frustrations over these problems and of the increased influence of his hardline advisers. Despite Castro's signals of an interest in reducing bilateral tensions with the United States (par for the course with new US administrations), he almost certainly will not make any significant foreign policy concessions to improve relations. Under most circumstances—certainly much short of a danger of impending US military action threatening his survival—Castro probably will continue and even expand his support of regional revolutionaries.

Soviet perception of the opportunities in Latin America created by the revolution in Nicaragua appears to have lagged Castro's. Subsequently, however, Moscow not only has backed Castro's return to militancy in Central America but has stepped up its own efforts to exploit instability and support Cuban activities in support of insurgents. Moscow almost certainly will continue to encourage and to underwrite Cuban assistance to insurgents—to maintain a degree of revolutionary momentum and to undermine the US position in the region. It also hopes to keep the United States embroiled in Latin America and with its allies in Western Europe over how to respond, and to exploit any resurrection of the Vietnam syndrome here. Only if the United States were to raise substantially the costs and risks to the Soviets of their troublemaking in the region would the Soviets pull back—and that could be only temporary—from their support for the insurgents, although US political pressures could lead Moscow to be more circumspect tactically. Soviet circumspection with respect to Latin American insurgencies, however, would not imply any reduction in Moscow's determination to retain its stake in Cuba. Any US military challenge to

Note: A subsequent edition of this Estimate will include the "Supporting Analysis."





the Castro regime almost certainly would bring a major crisis in US-Soviet relations.<sup>1</sup>


The Soviet-supported Cuban challenge to US regional interests will continue to be formidable. Cuba is supported by the revolutionary governments in Nicaragua and Grenada, and usually by Mexico. Prominent out-of-office leaders in a few other countries have close ties with Havana. Cuba has strong clandestine networks and sources of support among a spectrum of nationalists, leftists, and radicals; and social and economic pressures in many countries will present new opportunities for the growth of pro-Cuban radical movements.

Nationalism and suspicion of US intentions run high in Latin America, even in the more conservative countries, and have reduced the ability of the United States to direct events or to mobilize anti-Castro measures. However, greater US political, economic, and security involvement in the region—while not likely in the near term to alleviate substantially the root causes of instability—could shore up beleaguered governments, help bring about nonviolent change, and thus reduce Cuba's ability to gain the advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> A forthcoming interagency intelligence paper will assess Soviet Latin American policy in greater detail, including the means and instruments that Moscow uses to encourage and support Havana's revolutionary policies.





Latin America always has had high priority in Cuban foreign policy under Castro, despite substantial and active Cuban involvement in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World. Castro's persistent objective regarding Latin America and the Caribbean has been to undercut US influence and enhance his own, ultimately through the promotion of revolutionary governments that look to Havana for guidance. In addition to his commitment to revolutionary causes, Castro is influenced by his close ties with and dependence on the USSR, and is driven by his hostility toward and fear of the United States; he sees US and Cuban interests in the region as irreconcilable. In effect, therefore, he sees a compelling need to expand Cuba's influence in order to curb Washington's freedom of action to isolate and bring pressure on Havana.

The USSR holds similar objectives toward the region, though Moscow sees it as a less immediately important theater of its overall competition with the United States than does Havana. Because Castro supports the USSR's foreign policy goals generally and shares its objectives in Latin America specifically, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the USSR influences Cuba's regional policy. Cuba's extensive activities and the survival of Castro's regime itself ultimately depend on massive Soviet economic and military aid, and thus on Soviet approval. Because of the scope of shared objectives, as well as close consultations with Soviet officials and awareness of the limits of Moscow's tolerance, Cuba generally has had considerable latitude in implementing its policies. As a rule, Castro acts essentially on his own initiative in his home region, as contrasted with greater Soviet controls over Cuban activities in Africa and the Middle East. In the 1960s, this led to sharp tactical differences with Moscow over the utility of Cuban support for weak insurgent groups as opposed to cultivating good relations with moderate and conservative governments.

During most of the 1970s, while Castro followed the Soviet line of emphasizing diplomatic and commercial relations, he never renounced revolution. Two years ago—this time with Soviet approval—Cuba reverted to much more militant support of revolutionary insurgents, especially in Central America. At the same time, Castro has shown greater belligerence toward a number of other countries, especially Colombia and Ven-

ezuela. This sharp change in Cuban priorities reflects Castro's sense of greater potential for revolutionary victories through military force than he had envisioned before the success of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in mid-1979.

Castro's emphasis on support of insurgencies also reflects his frustration over domestic problems, including a stagnant economy and serious deficiencies in housing, transportation, public services, food, and consumer goods. Popular frustration and widespread hardship have led the leadership—hardline elements of which have been strengthened by Cuban setbacks—to look to outside issues such as revolutionary duty, the threat to Cuban security, and solidarity with Third World compatriots as a diversion. New support for insurgencies also grows out of Castro's limited gains from cultivating regional governments, and from setbacks to his international prestige generally as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In short, Castro sees promising opportunities through promotion of insurgency to advance Cuban objectives in the region and to restore a sense of revolutionary momentum at home when little else seems to be working to his regime's advantage.

Despite the USSR's traditional caution regarding direct involvement in insurgency in Latin America, the Soviets too saw greater opportunities for advancing their interests in the region as a result of the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. Beginning in 1980, Moscow not only backed Castro's return to militancy in Central America but also stepped up its own efforts to exploit instability and support Cuban efforts in support of insurgents—particularly through arranging for war supplies for Salvadoran leftist extremists. If the United States were substantially to raise the costs and risks to the Soviets of their troublemaking in the region, they would be likely to display for a time greater tactical prudence. Moscow would be likely to recommend tactical caution to Havana as well, and to underscore its strong desire to avoid a US-Cuban military confrontation.

Such a shift in Soviet tactics would not imply a change in long-term objectives to undercut and supplant US influence in Latin America, but simply a recognition of the obstacles to their ambitious under-

2

present power realities in the region. Thus, Moscow almost certainly will continue to encourage and underwrite some measure of Cuban assistance to insurgents—to maintain a degree of revolutionary momentum, and also to keep the United States embroiled in Latin America and with its allies in Western Europe over how to respond, and to exploit any resurrection of the Vietnam syndrome here. Nor will tactical prudence on the part of the USSR necessarily imply any reduction in its determination to retain its stake in Cuba. In fact, Moscow is likely to see any serious threat to Cuba as a major crisis in US-Soviet relations. The recent sharp increase in Soviet military shipments to Cuba probably is intended to make this point, as well as provide for Cuban retransfer of arms to the Nicaraguan regime and to regional insurgents.

For their part, Cuban leaders are now more concerned about US countermeasures than at any time since the early 1960s. Castro is not convinced that the USSR would defend him against US military actions, especially in the absence of a formal defense treaty with the Soviets despite his efforts to get one. He sees Cuba as the vulnerable, exposed edge of the Communist world and a prime target for a US countermove against Soviet activities elsewhere. His expressions of concern during the invasion of Afghanistan and the Polish crisis bear witness to his worry. Thus, since late 1980, the Cubans have given signals of an interest in reducing bilateral tensions, primarily to avoid punitive US actions and secondarily to obtain economic benefits—a tactic they have employed early in preceding US administrations. Because of current heightened concern about US intentions, Castro has temporarily reduced the actual level of his support to Salvadoran insurgents and might do so to other regional revolutionaries. But his deep-seated antagonism toward the United States has not diminished; and, as in the past, he almost certainly would not make any significant foreign policy concessions—including Cuba's right to support revolutionaries—to improve US relations. In fact, his most likely response to open US pressure would be to step up his troublemaking activities, to throw the United States onto the defensive.

#### Outlook

Castro, while mindful of US warnings and Soviet concern that he avoid actions that would provoke a US military response toward Cuba or a major US-USSR

crisis, probably will continue over the next year or so to provide strong backing to the revolutionary governments and movements Cuba now supports. The focus of his efforts will be in the Central American and Caribbean region, albeit with an eye on South America for opportunities. His assistance earlier this year to the M-19 insurgents in Colombia and his pressures on leftists in other countries to prepare for insurgency probably indicate that he continues to see militancy as the best course for keeping the United States at bay and for surviving any forceful showdown.

When diplomacy fails to achieve Cuba's objectives in a vulnerable country, Castro will attempt to exploit local economic and social problems, political instability, and points of tensions with the United States. This is done primarily through youth, labor, political, and cultural organizations that are sympathetic to Cuba, and front groups for radical elements. Cuba will also make good use of manpower-intensive developmental assistance to selected countries, earning good will and propagandizing at the same time. Although Cuba is hard currency poor, it can provide personnel-intensive aid such as doctors, teachers, construction workers, and disaster assistance. Considerable media and propaganda coverage is also provided, extolling the virtues of Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Communism, while criticizing the United States.

Use of Cuban combat forces in Latin America to assist insurgent groups is not anticipated in the near term. Despite such use in Angola and Ethiopia, Cuba and the Soviet Union do not consider the presence of Cuban troops there to constitute a direct provocation to US interests as Cuban troops in Latin America would. The greatest potential for the use of Cuban troops in the region would be in response to a serious threat to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua. Castro has more influence and prestige at stake in Nicaragua than he has ever had in a Latin American country. Havana will continue to provide extensive political, technical, and security support to solidify the revolutionary regime. Military equipment and training will be provided by both Cuba and the USSR. Castro's commitment to the regime's survival is so intense that he would be strongly motivated to use Cuban forces to defend the Sandinistas against a serious external or domestic challenge. Only fear of impending US military retaliation—especially if backed by urgent Soviet warnings—would deter him if he concludes: Cuban intervention could quickly stabilize the situation.

[REDACTED]

*El Salvador.* The bold expansion of Cuban support for leftist extremist insurgents during 1980—especially provision of abundant military supplies in conjunction with the USSR, Nicaragua, and other countries—indicated Castro's eagerness to promote another revolutionary triumph. In response to US pressures, Cuba and Nicaragua have sharply cut back the flow of arms and ammunition. But other, less conspicuous forms of assistance have not been similarly reduced: guerrilla training, combat planning and intelligence support. Cuba will not abandon the insurgents and, even under sharper US pressures, Castro will probably arrange for sufficient external aid to underwrite the insurgents' continued potency as a disruptive and destructive force. He probably would consider a resumption of more generous and conspicuous support if the insurgents gain military and political momentum. He will also continue his campaign to discredit US assistance to the junta in world opinion. In any case, he probably hopes that expanded US involvement in El Salvador will increase Latin American and European political backing for the revolutionaries and thus provide protection for Havana against US retaliation.

*Guatemala.* Castro assigns less immediacy to the insurgency in Guatemala, which is not as advanced as the one in El Salvador. Nonetheless, Cuba will continue gradually and guardedly to expand its support to strengthen revolutionary groups. If the Salvadoran insurgents either succeeded in gaining control of the country or failed outright, Cuba would consider sharply expanding assistance to Guatemalan insurgents, to sustain revolutionary momentum in Central America.

*Elsewhere in Latin America.* Castro will continue to try to cultivate strong, friendly, supportive relationships with those countries he believes will best benefit Cuba's interests—for example, Mexico, which has supported the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and has criticized US policy in El Salvador. Panama, though seen as a less faithful friend, will also remain important to Cuba for political, economic [REDACTED] purposes. At the same time, however, Castro's current hard line toward moderate and conservative governments, together with his militancy in Central America, has already strained relations with Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Venezuela, and a number of other countries in the region, some with which he had previously

sought to improve relations. He probably will increasingly view the hemisphere as polarized between groups of revolutionary and reactionary governments; increase Cuban criticism and low-risk actions aimed at undermining most conservative military regimes; and view most of the democratic governments as reactionary—with relations either remaining cool or deteriorating.

A number of factors—including Cuban and Soviet uncertainty about US intentions—will tend to restrain him from pushing confrontational policies even more vigorously and widely than at present. He may also be checked, at least in the near term, by the relative absence of revolutionary conditions and capabilities in some target countries, and by the prospects for legitimate changes in governments in the region that would be favorable to Cuba. Moreover, his more pragmatic advisers are likely to warn that more confrontations in the region would undercut Cuban chances for winning broad support for Central American insurgents.

We nonetheless believe that there is some chance—perhaps 20 percent—that Castro, in reaction to serious new domestic problems or foreign policy setbacks, will adopt more belligerent policies in Latin America generally than we have estimated. In such a situation he would conclude that increased hostility with the United States was inevitable, and would fatalistically accept the consequences of more aggressive pursuit of revolutionary breakthroughs. Cuba would then be even more eager than it is now to help leftist extremists to organize and launch armed revolt, and to employ purely vengeful and terrorist methods to weaken regional governments and undermine US interests. Such aggressive policies would tend to undercut Havana's overall objectives in Central America.

Paradoxically, the more prudent Castro's activities in support of Latin American revolutionaries, the more likely Cuba would be to make significant and lasting gains in the region. By patiently orchestrating broad political and international support for revolutionary movements, Castro would increase the costs to the United States of deterring their success, either in the target countries or by attempting directly to constrain Cuba.

But almost whatever course Castro follows in these respects, his challenge to US regional interests will continue to be formidable. Despite Cuba's many weak-



[REDACTED]

nesses, it retains considerable assets for furthering its interests.

- Massive military and economic support from the Soviet Union.
- It is supported by the revolutionary governments in Nicaragua and Grenada, and usually by Mexico.
- Prominent out-of-office leaders in Venezuela and a few other countries have close ties with Havana, and one or more of them may gain greater influence through elections during the next few years.
- Cuba has strong clandestine networks and sources of support among a spectrum of nationalists, leftists, and radicals throughout the region.

- Mounting social and economic pressures in many countries will present new opportunities for the growth of pro-Cuban radical movements.

- Nationalism and suspicion of US intentions run high, even in the more conservative countries, and have reduced the ability of the United States to direct events or to mobilize anti-Castro measures in the OAS or by other means.

Greater US political, economic, and security involvement in the region, while not likely in the near term to alleviate substantially the root causes of instability and the pressures for change, could work to reduce Cuba's ability to gain advantage—by helping to address pressures through nonviolent politics, by shoring up beleaguered governments, and by raising the costs and risks of Cuban militancy.