

# DEFENCE DIPLOMACY & NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

## Views from the Global South

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## Cuba's Defence Diplomacy

Hard and soft power, 1959-2018

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### Abstract

Cuba, a country with eleven million people, played a significant military and development role from the 1960s to the late 1980s, and is still an influential donor country. Its reputation was built on support to revolutionary and national liberation movements in Latin America and in Africa. Additionally, Cuba also was a provider of medical and humanitarian assistance to the global South.

Cuba's military were involved in training and advising Latin American revolutionaries and provided assistance in several African colonial and postcolonial wars. During the 'special relation' with the Soviet Union and the COMECON countries, Cuba had a redoubtable military and intelligence apparatus, at the same time procuring explicit defence against a potential invasion by the United States (US) and supporting multiple revolutionary and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the COMECON, Cuba restructured its economy, strongly supported by its Armed Forces as a management instrument and as a food and security provider. In the 1990s, when its strong military position was weakened, Cuba still preserved and even expanded its medical and literacy assistance to many countries. During the period of the Latin American Pink Tide governments (2000-2015), Cuba was again a high-profile player in Latin American and Caribbean politics.

### Introduction: Cuba's diplomacy and 'revolutionary internationalism'

Cuba, a country of eleven million inhabitants, was a significant power in the international political arena from the 1960s to the late 1980s, and it is still an influential donor country. Its reputation was built on support to revolutionary and national liberation movements in Latin America (providing training and assistance to guerrilla movements) and in Africa (through a strong military presence). However, it is less well-known that Cuba is also an innovative and significant provider of medical assistance to the Global South, beginning in the early 60s and intensifying until the present. To this day, the country is a significant development actor in terms of medical and literacy expertise, especially in Africa and Latin America.

In this chapter, I will trace the emergence and evolution of Cuba's formal and informal diplomatic networks which supported and influenced the political and social agendas of Latin American, Caribbean and African countries.<sup>1</sup> This will be done through an interpretation of Cuba's 'Revolutionary Internationalism' and its motives, the modus operandi of its diverse hard and soft power institutions, and its large-scale personnel involvement. The chapter traces the results of Cuba's internationalism in the context of their foreign relations with the two superpowers during the Cold War, and with Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East. My guiding research question is: how did Cuba cope with its singular position of enmity with the US and relatively stressful friendship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War without losing its own long-term objective, which was not only to survive but also produce radical changes in the so-called Third World? How did Cuba maintain its influence and prestige when the military muscle and generous economic assistance of the Soviet Union ended?

With its strategic position in the Gulf of Mexico, and its proximity to the US (Florida, 90 miles), Mexico (Yucatan, 120 miles), Haiti (50 miles) and Jamaica (90 miles), Cuba is a key country in the Caribbean. However, it is precisely this geopolitical location that made Cuba, the largest island of the Caribbean, an object of the expansionist policies of its larger neighbours, especially the US. Several 19th century American presidents tried to annex or buy the island and its population when it was still a Spanish colony, and during the last of its three consecutive liberation wars, the US intervened and occupied the island in 1898.

Formally declared independent in 1902, it remained an American protectorate until 1 January 1959, when the Cuban Revolution triumphed. However, it remained economically vulnerable until the end of the 20th century, reinforced by the centuries-long tradition of sugar production, lack of energy sources, and need for a strong defence structure against external threats. Cuba's economic vulnerability was intensified by an economic embargo imposed in 1962 by the US, which also meant economic sanctions against third party commercial relations.

Senior Cuban diplomat, Carlos Alzugaray, former ambassador to the European Union, clarified 'Cuban national interests' as follows (2017):

Preserving and defending the independence, sovereignty, self-determination, and security of the Cuban nation as the primary mission; establishing external economic relations that will promote its development without being used as a means of external pressure; assuming and protecting a popular, democratic, and participatory form of government based on its own traditions; establishing and promoting of a prosperous and fair socio-economic system in which "the full dignity of the human being should be the first law of the Republic (...)" ; safeguarding and protecting Cuba's cultural identity and socio-political values; and projecting Cuba's cultural

and ideological values internationally at a level of involvement proportional to its real possibilities as an effective member of international society.

In the course of this contribution, it will become clear that, as a guiding principle, Cuba always sought and acquired political support from the non-aligned (NO-AL) countries and became an eminent member state of this organisation, accompanying its military endeavours with humanitarian aid as long as it had one of the largest standing armies in the region. After the Cold War, it continued its humanitarian assistance and maintained a position of influence far beyond its 'country class' of a relatively small country.

I will analyse two distinct phases in Cuba's relations with the outside world. The timespan covers the period from 1959 to 1989 during which Cuba, with Soviet support, had created the second-largest military force in the Western hemisphere and participated in large-scale expeditionary operations in Africa, as well as providing continuous support to left-wing movements and governments in Latin America and the Caribbean. During the 60s, its revolutionary objectives and defensive and stability priorities sometimes clashed with those of the Soviet Union, but in the period thereafter, keen diplomacy and military expeditionary support to Africa were balanced. From the early 70s to the late 80s, Cuba experienced relative welfare under Soviet support. However, a new phase was initiated with the implosion of the Soviet Union, when Cuba's 'Special Period' began, a period of internal austerity and drastic changes in its foreign policy that continued in the 21st century, based on soft power and peace facilitation.

Cuba's overtures towards the Soviet Union were initiated in February 1960, when Soviet Vice-Premier Mikoyan visited Cuba and negotiated a trade agreement on the importance of Cuban sugar, Soviet oil and commercial loans. In May 1960, diplomatic relations with Moscow were re-established; they had been ruptured in 1952. Che Guevara headed the first significant Cuban mission to the Soviet government and, in May 1962, the Soviet Union became Cuba's self-appointed military protector by soliciting Fidel Castro's permission to deploy nuclear missiles on the island. Khrushchev intended to kill two birds with one stone (Pavlov, 1994:40-42):

... positioning nuclear weapons on the doorstep of the United States with the noble justification of the "defence of Cuba against possible American aggression". An agreement was reached about the deployment of intermediate and tactical nuclear missiles and specialized Soviet forces, a total of 45,000 enlisted men and officers with munitions and other supplies for thirty days of combat, while authorizing Field Commander Pliyev in Cuba to exercise his own flexible response ... without asking for Moscow's permission.

This caused the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis. After this, Khrushchev and Kennedy cut a secret deal without consulting the Cubans, who heard of the deal through the radio and were deeply offended (Ramonet, 2008:312). The Soviet government tried to soften Cuban

feelings with multi-billion-dollar grants, abundant military assistance, and the continued presence of the Soviet military on the island with a combat brigade of 2,800 men.<sup>2</sup> However, the mutual relations only improved during the Brezhnev years (Bain, 2007:27; Latrèche, 2011).

## **Part I: Cuba's hard power (1960s to 1980s)**

After 1959, Cuba had to handle three main concerns: redesigning its relationship with the US, whose growing enmity had become obvious; reshaping an economic and political support structure with new allies in Europe, Asia and Africa; and remodelling its formal and informal diplomacy to support and promote similar revolutionary efforts elsewhere while maintaining its sovereignty, and economic and commercial interests, and building a broad international support structure. That meant simultaneously building an army; developing formal and informal diplomacy; establishing an economic support structure with new allies; and creating an internal security system and foreign intelligence service.

### **Army and militia (the FAR and MINFAR)**

Fidel Castro, the political and military leader of the insurgency, resisted a counterinsurgency campaign by the regular army of dictator Batista, before taking the initiative in a successful offensive strategy that finally caused the collapse of Batista's forces (Castro, 2010a, 2010b). Cuba's new armed forces were created from the structures of the guerrilla forces, the Rebel Army in the Eastern mountains of the Sierra Maestra, and the armed resistance groups of students and youth in the flat lands and the cities. Along with this, rebellious army, navy and air force officers who had been incarcerated by the former dictator were reintegrated in the new army (Graña, 2008). In February 1959, Fidel Castro became prime minister (and president in 1976), while his brother Raúl Castro took over command of the Armed Forces.

Cuba's first armaments were donated by the Venezuelan government of that time, or captured by the rebel leaders, while the first military training of the newly appointed officers was sometimes given by former sergeants of Batista's army (Báez, 1996). The new military ranks still referred to the former rebel army ranks, and anyone above the rank of captain was *comandante* (major), even the commanders of brigades (Bell, Caram, Kruijt & López, 2004; Kruijt, 2017). In 1961, the government structure was reorganised, and the Ministry of Defence became the Ministry of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR and MINFAR). Raúl Castro was the minister from 1959 to 2006 when he succeeded his brother as (interim) president, before being formally elected Cuba's president in 2008, retiring in 2018 while remaining first secretary of the Communist Party.

The FAR had a double mission in the 1960s (Dominguez, 1978:342-246). The first was to suppress internal insurgencies of 'counterrevolutionary forces', mainly in the mountainous Escambray region in Central Cuba where around 180 smaller and larger rebellion groups were contesting the new government. The second was to protect the country against invasions, as in the Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón) in 1961, when a group of 1,300+ CIA-trained mercenaries undertook a failed invasion. After two days of severe fighting, the invaders had suffered casualties of 114 dead and 1,200 captured. Immediately before the invasion, the government had also created a system of militias (currently called the *Milicias de Tropas Territoriales*, MTT), youth members with light weapons who protected Cuba's infrastructure and assisted the FAR. However, before the Missile Crisis of 1962, the Soviet Union had already provided support to the Cuban Armed Forces in the form of equipment.

In 1970, after a failed sugar harvest, the Cuban leadership had to publicly recognise that its economy needed Soviet support. Sugar was Cuba's only real export commodity, and at the time both capitalist and Soviet economists were unanimous about the wisdom of continuing this mono-product culture, despite all previous efforts of industrial diversification and import substitution. Numerous Soviet experts visited the island for economic planning, business management, engineering projects, infrastructural design, military and technological advancement, and even higher education. In 1972, Cuba became a full member of the COMECON (an association for economic integration), and the contingent of Soviet specialists increased from 1,000 in the early 1960s to 6,000 by 1975; of them, 50% were military specialists (Duncan, 1985:87ff., 101).

Soviet investments and development assistance contributed to a remarkable growth of new industrial plants, and the reconstruction of out-of-date enterprises, mostly sugar plants (Pavlov, 1994:76). The Soviet Union had essentially become Cuba's mono-supplier of essential products, oil and raw materials, its principal provider of fertilisers, trucks, cars, and road-construction equipment, and also paid the running costs of transportation in both directions, dispatching about 300 cargo vessels on a permanent basis (Pavlov, 1994:83).

One of the institutions that strongly benefitted from Soviet support was FAR (Báez, 1996; Vellinga, 1976). The Cuban military maintained warm relations with their Soviet counterparts and commanding officers received training in Moscow or Leningrad (Baez, 1996). The FAR were modernised along Soviet lines, and until the late 90s, nearly all Cuban generals had been trained in the Soviet Union.

In the early 70s, a re-equipment programme was launched with the most sophisticated weaponry (MIG fighter-bombers, T-62 tanks and BM-21 missile launchers) and military technology at the time (Duncan, 1985:101). During the three decades of 'fraternal cooperation' between the Soviet Union and Cuba, the FAR was annually provided with supplies, training and equipment worth about US\$1 billion (Latell, 2003:10). By the

late 1970s, the Armed Forces had expanded hugely and at its peak by the end of the 1970s, and during its Africa campaigns, the FAR had between 470,000 and 510,000 members (Latell, 2003:11; 2009):

It was the largest military force in Latin America and vastly bigger than those of countries Cuba's size anywhere in the world. Furthermore, man for man during the 1970s and 1980s, it may have been the best and most experienced fighting force of any small nation, with the single exception of Israel.

In the early 1970s, military officers also started to perform managerial functions beyond the soldierly realm. There had always been cabinet ministers with a military rank, and from that point on, a process started in which eight to ten senior members of the FAR were permanently in charge of strategic ministerial portfolios (Duncan, 1985:108-109).

The FAR also implemented large-scale expeditionary operations in Africa (LeoGrande, 1980; Gleijeses, 2002, 2013; George, 2005; Liebenberg, Risquet & Shubin, 2016). By the 60s, the Cuban leadership had sent military deployments to Algeria and Syria, to Congo Brazzaville and Congo (Zaire), and it operated in the Horn of Africa in the 70s. However, its most prominent role was in Southern Africa. Cuba sent 380,000 soldiers and 70,000 additional civilian technicians and volunteers to Angola, equipped with 1,000 tanks, 600 armoured vehicles and 1,600 pieces of artillery (Risquet, 2007:xlvi; 2008:102). Along with this, Cuba had a military presence in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique, and sent civilian 'internationalists' to at least ten African countries. However, the FAR operated only sporadically in Latin America, especially in the 1960s (Ramonet, 2008:733), although it was often not the FAR members who participated, but rather special envoys or instructors of the Special Forces within the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), under the leadership of Piñeiro (see the section below on Foreign Intelligence).

### **Diplomacy (MINREX and ICAP): The managing of Cuba's foreign relations**

Whatever the Soviet influences and pressures on matters of foreign policies in Latin America, especially with respect to the political actors of the left, Fidel Castro was never an obedient subscriber to Soviet politics (Pavlov, 1994:97ff.). While the Soviets assisted with credit lines, commercial activities, technical and military assistance, and arms delivery, the Cubans acted as political advisers and provided military training to national liberation movements in Latin America and in Africa. In fact, over several decades, Cuba was the 'general hospital' for many wounded or crippled revolutionaries and welcomed insurgents and political exiles onto the island.

Militarily, Cuba became engaged in African wars, while politically it heavily supported Latin America's guerrilla movements in the 60s and continued to help new politicians and actors of the left in Latin America and the Caribbean. Fidel Castro personally monitored Cuba's foreign policy closely, and this is perhaps illustrated in an observation by the

then-Minister of MINREX, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez. In 1972, at the request of Cuba's spy master Manuel Piñero, three senior members of Cuba's foreign intelligence requested an interview about the Central Committee's policy with respect to the US. Rodríguez told them bluntly (Suárez & Kruijt, 2005:47ff., 233ff.):

Look ... if Fidel instructs me that I explain to you Cuba's policy with respect to the United States, I think that I'm able to do it. But don't worry too much. Here, [even] the members of the Politburo do not know what our policy is about. We're going to give you instructions and you follow what Fidel and I tell you to do. Because here, [the two] who handle it, are Fidel and me.

Cuba was one of the 20 founding members of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948, but in 1962 its membership was suspended by a majority vote, under strong American pressure. The island was excluded because 'Marxism-Leninism was incompatible' with the principles and objectives of the inter-American system (Birsén, 2015), although the two US neighbours, Canada and Mexico, never ruptured diplomatic relations with Cuba. During the Reagan administration, Cuba was put on the US 'State Sponsors of Terrorism' list in 1982, and there is no other country in the world that was the subject of American sanctions for so many decades (Bernell, 2011).

Cuba's formal and informal diplomacy was in support of the group of NO-AL countries, of which the island became an influential member, and in 1979 and 2006, the country hosted the sixth and the 14th NO-AL summits. Cuban diplomacy was also explicitly aimed at establishing and maintaining good relations with all member states of the United Nations (UN), and it participated and participates in nearly all organisations of the UN system. It took special care to nurture its relations with Latin America and with the many small Caribbean states, all of them voting members of the UN General Assembly (Ceceña, Barrios, Yedra & Inclán, 2011; Suárez & Amézquita, 2013). Its prestige and reputation as an important international and regional ally made the persistent economic embargo a yearly dispute in the UN meetings.

Many of Cuba's political alliances with leftist movements and their leaders were based on personal friendships with Fidel Castro, who developed a strong affinity for Caribbean leaders, becoming close with Chile's Allende, Panama's General Torrijos, Peru's General Velasco, and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez after 1994. He also occasionally hand-picked Cuban diplomats who he thought would be appreciated by these leaders and become 'friends of the president', even before the establishment of formal bilateral relations.

An additional instrument of informal policy was and is the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP, Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples), initially an organisation created to accommodate foreign visitors and sympathisers, but which gradually became an institution where semi-diplomatic relations were nurtured with



countries still not officially tied to Cuba. These included the overseas territories of American and European countries, especially in the Caribbean before independence, with relevant political and popular organisations in other countries, and the Caribbean islands with American, British, Dutch and French statehood.

The ICAP identified other actors and movements beyond the traditional ‘revolutionary movements’, searching for other nationalist-leftist regimes and movements:

We realized that by being more open-minded and using a more delicate tone, we penetrated sectors to which we otherwise would never have gotten access. That is what we called “popular diplomacy”, going beyond the sectors we traditionally reached, the so-called “revolutionary sectors”.<sup>3</sup>

The ICAP also created ‘visiting brigades’ when American, European, African and Asian delegations came to the island. Notwithstanding the official Cuban ‘scientific atheism’, the ICAP and the Departamento América tried to invite the representatives of Liberation Theology of to the island:

During a long period, we maintained good relations with many of the progressive religious believers ... A large number came to Cuba and it facilitated the ideological and political insight of Cubans into that even so important issue. On matters of religion many Latin Americans and some Europeans, like François Houtart, assisted us. I conversed and dined twice with Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of Liberation Theology, and transmitted him Fidel’s invitation to come to Cuba. But he didn’t dare to make that trip.<sup>4</sup>

The famous Dominican Frei Betto (1985) came to Havana and interviewed Fidel Castro about religion and revolution. In the early 1990s, ICAP co-organised solidarity flights from Brazil (with theologians Frei Betto and Leonardo Boff), accompanied by entrepreneurs, politicians, students and artists. ICAP also assisted in masses celebrated by progressive priests with solidarity groups from Argentina and Colombia.<sup>5</sup>

### **Foreign intelligence (MININT and Central Committee)**

The most publicly acknowledged Cuban organisation for relations with Latin American rebel movements was the Departamento América, which was formally created in 1975 but had operated under other names since early 1959. Its chief was the veteran *comandante* Manuel Piñero, a close friend and confidant of Fidel and Che Guevara. This small but efficient organisation was hidden in the corridors of the MININT, until 1961 called the Ministry of Government, and initially was called section ‘M’.<sup>6</sup>

‘M’ had several sections, and section M-OE was reserved for Special Operations (M-Operaciones Especiales), the paramilitary unit that trained many Latin American guerrillas. Section M (and its successors) always operated autonomously as they were

created with the consent of Fidel Castro, who wanted a swift and agile organisation without bureaucracy. Originally, Piñeiro was also in charge of State Security and Foreign Intelligence, as Technical first Vice-Minister of MININT. In the early 70s, State Security, Intelligence and 'National Liberation' were split in three, and 'National Liberation' became a 'civilian' committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The Departamento America was an elite organisation, with members hand-picked by Piñeiro.

Algeria and Mexico were of crucial importance for Cuba. Algeria was the pre-eminent country for diplomatic and other contacts with liberation movements in Africa and Asia, and in 1962, Piñeiro formed a "working group" for strategic cooperation. Cuba assisted with a mission during the Algerian-Moroccan conflict in 1963, followed in 1965 by an agreement on intelligence cooperation between the two countries. Also in 1965, a special unit was created to accommodate relations with other African liberation movements. Che Guevara travelled to Africa for three months in 1964-1965, establishing more direct contacts, and Algeria was instrumental in establishing these relations.

Mexico was the only Latin American country that did not rupture its diplomatic contacts with Cuba in the 60s under strong American pressure. Thus, Mexico, and by the late 1960s Panama under General Torrijos as well, were the bridgeheads for travel and contact with clandestine movements in the region. In Mexico City and Panama City, many revolutionary refugees found a home, and institutional contacts were established during the decades of military dictatorship. From the Cuban embassy in Mexico to the legation in Panama, intensive contacts with the Central American guerrillas were maintained.<sup>7</sup>

Latell, the former CIA officer at the Cuba desk in 1964 and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America in the 90s, considered the Cuban intelligence as 'one of the five or six best such organizations in the world, and has been for decades' (Latell, 2007:192).

## **Part II: Cuba's soft power (1989 to present)**

Civilian assistance has always been another hallmark of Cuba's policy, even during interventions in war contexts. During the Central American civil wars, the future FPL representative of the largest military organisation within the Salvadorian guerrilla army FMLN, Jorge Juárez, was severely wounded. He remembers the treatment he received during his periods of convalescence:

It is surprising, but nobody wrote a study about the enormous efforts of the Cubans to attend to the many injured of the wars in Central America. Nearly all patients received literacy courses, primary or secondary education as well; the blind were trained in braille. It was probably the most important contribution of Cuba to the combatants of Central America.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, most military missions in Africa were accompanied by medical and literacy campaigns, albeit on a smaller scale. The most striking example was the spontaneous post-war development assistance in Angola. When the Cuban military contingents were to return after their tour of duty in Angola, the authorities asked Raúl Castro for urgent reparation and reconstruction assistance. Many common soldiers and officers, mechanics, drivers, engineers and paramedics took off their uniforms and continued working for weeks, or sometimes months, as civilian volunteers, applying their own professional experience. However, soft power diplomacy became the first priority after the implosion of the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc in the late 80s and early 90s.

### **The FAR and national defence after 1991**

When the Cold War came to an end and the US emerged as the only military superpower, the consequences for Cuba were disastrous. Cuba had become highly dependent on economic and military support from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, in the form of credits, soft loans and export subsidies. Its economic structure had been transformed into a mono-exporter of sugar and agricultural products to the COMECON countries, and while not a member of the Warsaw Pact, its military standing had benefitted enormously from special training and favourable delivery of equipment and spare parts. However, the collapse of the Socialist bloc was not the only catastrophe that struck Cuba, as the US intensified their already-damaging embargo. The Cuban government announced a 'Special Period in Peacetime', as the standard of living was drastically reduced.

Cuba's economy and society were transfigured into a system of extreme austerity and belt-tightening. Food was incredibly scarce, and nutritional deficiencies began to develop, while the desperate shortage of fuel nearly caused a standstill of the public transport system. The government prevented hunger and starvation by distributing packages of essential food and clothing, and the situation slowly improved after the turn of the century. Cuba's economy was in part refinanced by the 'special relationship' between Cuba and Venezuela after the election of Chávez as president (Clem & Maingot, 2012; Trikunas, 2012; Piccone & Trikunas, 2014). The dependency on incoming hard currency (euros from tourism and medical tourism) grew, and dollar remittances from the Cuban diaspora increased from US\$1,2 billion in 2006 to US\$3,5 billion in 2014 (Erisman, 2018:51-55. Nickel exports, medical missions abroad, medical services for paying foreign visitors, and Canadian, European and Latin American tourism became the primary source of foreign currency. President Putin pardoned 90% of the unsettled foreign debt, and Cuba restructured its foreign debt with the member states of the European Union. Finally, in 2015, after decades of silent diplomacy, diplomatic relations with the US were re-established (LeoGrande & Kornbluh, 2014; Ramírez & Morales, 2014), but the effects of 25 years of the 'special period' are ongoing.

Cuba's military was also hit hard by the downfall of the Socialist bloc, and in December 1982, Soviet Party leader Andropov explicitly told Raúl Castro that the Soviet Union would not defend Cuba by sending troops. Subsequently, the MINFAR created a defensive tunnel structure and a voluminous militia system with the 'nationwide capabilities to revert to guerrilla warfare in the event of major military hostilities' (Latell, 2003:11). Economic and military support by the Soviets continued on a diminishing scale after 1985, but fell dramatically by the end of 1991, when the Soviet Union morphed into Russia. Delivery of new weapons and spare parts was very difficult, and the FAR's only option to remain operational was cannibalising older equipment. Fuel was another crucial shortage.

When Chávez negotiated with Cuban diplomats about an invitation to travel to Cuba in 1994, the Departamento America let him know, 'that Cuba not even could buy him a matchbox', and Chavez decided to buy the ticket himself.<sup>9</sup> When a Guatemalan army delegation visited the island in 1996 during the reconciliation sessions with the guerrillas, the pilots were shown MIGs, but they were not ignited, as this was only permitted in emergency situations.<sup>10</sup>

Trainings in Russia were cancelled, intelligence hardware was restricted, and military service was reduced from three to two years. The FAR's personnel was officially halved, although the reductions probably went further, to one third or less of its previous strength, while the budget was cut in half (Klepak, 2000:3ff., 2005:47ff., 2014; 2018:26ff.; Diamint & Tedesco, 2018). A similar process occurred within the MININT's military structures, and in 1994, the Special Forces of the MININT, the training specialists of the Latin American guerrillas in former decades, were dissolved.

Thus, Cuba's hard power diplomacy came to an end. During the 80s, Cuba had supported Central American guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala, and the victorious post-guerrilla Sandinista government in Nicaragua. However, in 1990 it had to retire all of its military presence, and in 1991 the last troops departed from Africa. The reduced FAR received new tasks. There had always been military veteran generals in key posts of the government, and now, with an economy in crisis, these veterans were selected to fulfil management functions in most of the strategic Cuban industries (Klepak, 2018:30-31). During the 1990s and early 2000s, approximately 60% of state enterprises had a military manager, and in the early 90s, promotion to lieutenant-colonel required a management course in agricultural or industrial economy. During the twelve years of government by Raúl Castro (2006-2018), the budget of the FAR slowly increased.

### **Public health care and medical brigades**

Cuba's internationalism, which until the mid-1980s had been predominantly expressed through support for guerrilla movements in Latin America and the Caribbean and large-scale military operations in Africa, had now turned to provision for humanitarian assistance

by medical and literacy teams (Feinsilver, 1993; Kirk & Erisman, 2009; Kirk, 2015, 2018; Erisman & Kirk, 2018). Cuba's civilian development aid aims to provide poor citizens in underdeveloped or poor countries with assistance in fields in which Cuba has expertise: public health provisions and literacy campaigns, post-disaster reconstruction, and sport (training and facilities). According to the statistics of the MINREX, from 1959 to 2011, around 156,000 Cuban civilians worked as 'internationalists' worldwide: 81,000 in Africa, 47,000 in the Americas, and 10,000 in the Middle East. In the same period, around 40,000 academic professionals, of whom 30,000 came from Africa, graduated in Cuba.<sup>11</sup> Cuba assisted in the establishment of medical schools in Yemen (1976), Guyana (1984), Ethiopia (1984), Guinea Bissau (1986), Uganda (1988), Ghana (1991), Luanda (1992), Gambia (2000), Equatorial Guinea (2000), Haiti (2001) and Eritrea (2003).<sup>12</sup>

The first Cuban medical mission abroad was in Algeria (1963), and by 1978, around 2,000 Cuban health personnel worked abroad, which increased to 3,000 in 1999, 3,800 in 2001, 15,000 in 2003, 25,000 in 2005 and 30,000 in 2007 (Kirk & Erisman, 2009:8, 12). During the administration of Raúl Castro, this number grew and other medical initiatives, such as medical schooling for foreigners, were continued or expanded. In July 2016, 55,000 medical professionals (of which 25,000 were doctors) were working in 67 countries (Kirk, 2018:59). This brought and brings Cuba an enormous amount of prestige in the Global South (Huish, 2014:188ff.).

In October 1998, Fidel Castro launched the idea of a special Medical School for Latin American students, the *Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas* (ELAM). The university opened its doors in September 1999 with students from 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries. By the mid-2000s, it started to attract students from other continents and from 2012, students from 98 countries graduated from ELAM. The ELAM system and study allowances also expanded to other countries when Venezuelan President Chávez co-financed and co-developed the Cuban initiative. ELAM-like medical schools were established in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela, and undergraduate schools were set up in Guyana and Nicaragua.<sup>13</sup>

In 2004, Cuba launched the programme *Operación Milagro* (Operation Miracle) to cure cataract and other eye diseases, co-financed by Venezuela. It started in Venezuela and was extended to many other countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. According to official data, 2,577,000 persons benefitted from this Cuban-Venezuelan initiative between 2004 and 2015 (*Misión Milagro*, 2016). Medical brigades operated and still operate in many Latin American and Caribbean countries, especially after natural disasters (Kirk, 2018:63-66ff.). In 2016, the countries which most benefitted from Cuban medical support in Latin America were Venezuela (28,351 medical personnel), Brazil (10,994), Bolivia (721), Ecuador (567), Guatemala (415) and Guyana (181); while those

in Africa were South Africa (9,344), Angola (1,712), Mozambique (303), Guinea (221), Namibia (125) and Gambia (113). During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, 258 medical specialists were sent to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea (Anderson, 2014).

### **Literacy campaigns**

A second instrument of international assistance is literacy campaigns. In Cuba, a massive literacy campaign was organised in 1960, and in 1961 the island had been officially declared 'free of illiteracy'. Based on these experiences, Cuban teachers advised on, assisted in and implemented literacy programmes in Angola and Nicaragua, and in other assistance missions in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.

In 2000, the instrument was standardised in an audio-visual programme called 'Yo, sí puedo' (Yes, I can) (Artaraz, 2012). In the early 2000s, it was implemented in Venezuela on a massive scale, with half a million unemployed students incorporated as teachers, and around 500 Cuban experts assisting in the specific design. In 2006, Venezuela was also declared 'free of illiteracy', and the programme was then adapted for the multinational and multilingual country of Bolivia. Of the indigenous population, around 40,000 Quechua and Aymara monolingual Bolivians benefitted from the programme, while Cuban and Venezuelan teachers adapted the design for a second campaign during assistance to Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Cuba had implemented adapted versions of 'Yes, I can' in 30 countries (Abendroth, 2009).

### **Peace negotiations**

By the late 80s, Cuba became engaged in peace negotiations in the Latin American region. Fidel Castro and Piñeiro convinced the leaders of the M-19 and members of the Colombian Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (CGSB) to engage in a political rather than a military solution, and Piñeiro organised meetings between the CGSB and the Salvadorian FMLN to facilitate formal and informal peace dialogues. Cuba continued to play a leading role in the peace process in Colombia and in Guatemala, the last two countries in which guerrilla movements were still fighting in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the brutal years of counterinsurgency (1978-1983) under the military governments of Lucas García and Ríos Montt, the guerrillas lost the war, and retired to remote indigenous regions, retaining some smaller urban pockets in the western highlands and the northern jungle (Balconi & Kruijt, 2004; Kruijt, 2008:144-153). The leadership of the URNG lived in exile in Mexico City, from where the chief commanders directed the war by fax and telephone.

After the return to democracy, informal conversations were initiated in Costa Rica and Spain, and formal discussions in Oslo. From 1991 to 1996, the peace negotiations continued, but the real breakthrough came when two key negotiators, Rodrigo Asturias (of the

Guatemalan URNG) and General Julio Balconi (an army general), reached an agreement about informal consultation, extended to extra-official sessions between the army and the guerrillas, with the silent approval of the civilian presidents. Norway and Cuba acted as facilitators, and in March 1996, Cuba organised a three-day session of reconciliation between the army and the guerrillas in Havana, after which the guerrillas announced a unilateral cease-fire, and a timetable for disarmament was drawn up.<sup>15</sup> The peace negotiations were successfully ended after the Havana session, and Cuba's relationship with Norway on matters of peace in Latin America would continue throughout the larger period of the Colombian peace talks in the 1990s and 2000s.

Colombia's peace process had a history of pacts, ceasefires, amnesties, demobilisation and reintegration into society (Pizarro, 2017; Villamizar, 2017). During one of the most important peace processes, which lasted from 1989 to 1991, Cuba acted as a peace facilitator, at the request of both the Colombian government and the guerrilla movements. Thereafter, only the two oldest guerrilla movements, the FARC and the ELN, continued their insurgency operations. From then until the present, nearly all consecutive Colombian presidents asked for Cuba's assistance to re-initiate informal dialogues, re-open informal peace talks, provide facilities in Cuba, and ask for peace diplomacy and missions of Cuban diplomats (Castro, 2017).

After the peace agreement with FARC in 2016, peace negotiations were initiated in and then suspended by the new government of President Duque.

## Conclusions

Ninety miles away from the US, the most powerful military world power, Cuba's diplomacy was based on defence alliances and support from Asian, African and Latin American countries. With its relatively weak economic structure and its history of sugar exportation, it relied largely on monocultural sugar production and generous credits and grants during its alliance with the Soviet Union and the European Socialist bloc. This was also true of its military capability. It supported guerrilla and national liberation movements in Latin America, largely through training, medical support and facilities on the island, and in Africa, with expeditionary military forces as well as medical and civilian support.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's soft power became the defining characteristic of its defence policy. During more than 15 years of intimate relations with Venezuela (1999-2015), Cuban-Venezuelan soft policy favoured manifold countries. It was during the time of ALBA (the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América, Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America) that a special bond between Cuba and Venezuela was created in 2004, and afterwards expanded to Bolivia (2006), Nicaragua (2007) and Ecuador (2009), and a further six Caribbean island-states between 2008 and 2014.

The first 15 years of the 21st century were also Latin America's Pink Tide, with friendly socialist or reformist governments in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and good relations with most Caribbean island-states. Cuba and Venezuela opted for new Latin American bodies, where the US was absent or not dominant: UNASUR (the Union of South American Nations, the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas, although Cuba did not become a member); CELAC (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños, a kind of OAS but excluding Canada and the US); and the Sao Paulo Forum, a side group of leftist Latin American political and social movements.

Cuban defence policy has always been interwoven with its internationalism, which became part of the daily life of many Cuban families, where husband or wife, daughter or son participated in missions abroad. 'Roughly a tenth of Cuba's population of eleven million has taken part in some form of internationalism: as soldiers in foreign wars, disaster relief personnel, teachers, doctors, cultural workers, and specialists in a vast variety of fields' (Randall, 2017:209).

During the long consecutive government periods of Fidel Castro (1959-2006) and Raúl Castro (2006-2018), 'internationalism' and international solidarity were the backbone of Cuba's foreign relations and defence diplomacy. Bilateral relations with Asian, African, Latin American and European countries, and membership of nearly all organisations of the UN system, were and are nurtured. While Cuba's military capabilities have shrunk dramatically and its economy, even after the prudent reforms of former president Raúl Castro, is still seeking its stability and self-sustained growth, it enjoys significant international goodwill. For example, year after year, the UNGA has voted against the continuance of the US embargo, with a growing majority of countries condemning it. By November 2017, only two countries opposed the resolution – Israel and the US. Cuba's defence policy is therefore not based on military presence or sophisticated equipment, but on humanitarian assistance and medical expertise. It even downgraded its pretences of being an offensive force promoting revolutions worldwide. In June 2019, the Cuban government closed the offices of the OSPAAAL, the former Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America, founded in Havana in January 1966 after the Tricontinental Conference, when it had acclaimed to be the forerunner of revolutionary support to the socialist cause.



### **Notes**

- 1 This article draws on research published as Kruijt (2017) and Suárez and Kruijt (2015).
- 2 The combat brigade remained in Cuba until September 1991, a month after the coup attempt against Gorbachev.
- 3 Interview with Giraldo Mazola (Havana, 3 February 2012) and Luis Morejón (Havana, 1 March 2012). Mazola was the founding Director and Morejón was the Vice-Director of the ICAP (see Suárez & Kruijt, 2005:15ff., 422ff.).
- 4 Interview with Fernando Martínez Heredia, Cuba's leading philosopher until his death in 2017 (Havana, 2 March 2012); see Suárez and Kruijt (2005:703ff.).
- 5 Interview with Luis Morejón (Havana, 1 March 2012); see Suárez and Kruijt (2005:422ff.).
- 6 I use the term 'Departamento América' to cover all institutions that evolved from G2 in M in Vice Ministerio Técnico (VMT) of the MININT: Dirección General de Inteligencia (DGI), Dirección General de Liberación Nacional (DGLN), all operating within the MININT, and then Departamento América after 1975. Eventually, the Departamento América was incorporated into the Departamento de Relaciones Internacionales of the Central Committee.
- 7 Interviews with Ramiro Abreu (19 and 25 October 2011), Jorge Luis Joa (27 October 2011), and Fernando Ravelo Renedo (interview 17 October 2011); see Suárez and Kruijt (2005:520ff., 95ff., 120ff.).
- 8 Interview with Jorge Juárez Ávila (16 July 2015).
- 9 Interview with Carlos Antelo, then the minister councillor at the embassy in Caracas (Havana, 24 and 27 October 2011); see Suárez and Kruijt (2015:600ff.).
- 10 Conversations with General Julio Balconi in Cuba (October 2003).
- 11 Presentation by and discussion with Noemí Benítez y de Mendoza (Sociedad Cultural José Martí), "Internacionalismo y política exterior de la Revolución Cubana", at the International Symposium La Revolución Cubana. Génesis y Desarrollo Histórico, organised by the Instituto de Historia de Cuba (13-15 October 2015.)
- 12 <https://bit.ly/2w5KgFQ> [Accessed 12 January 2016].
- 13 Interview with Maritza González Bravo, academic vice-rector of the ELAM system (9 November 2012); see Suárez and Kruijt (2015:656ff.).
- 14 Interview with Javier Labrada (Havana, 8 November 2012). Labrada was a senior adviser in Venezuela, Bolivia and Haiti; see Suárez and Kruijt (2015:634ff.).
- 15 Interview with Ramiro Abreu, the long-time Cuban overseer during the Central American civil wars (Havana, 25 October 2011); see Suárez and Kruijt (2005:520ff.).

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