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A portrait of the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez in between the Cuban and Venezuelan flags. Credit: Chávez Fusterlandia (On the left) A silhouetted profile of Fidel Castro in his military cap says "the best friend." Dan Lundberg, March 18, 2016 / Shutterstock

Venezuela and Cuba: The Ties that Bind

I. Two Nations, One Revolution: The Evolution of Contemporary Cuba-Venezuela Relations

By Brian Fonseca and John Polga-Hecimovich

"Cuba es el mar de la felicidad. Hacia allá va Venezuela."
("Cuba is a sea of happiness. That's where Venezuela is going.")

—Hugo Chávez Frías, March 8, 2000

Contemporary Cuban-Venezuelan relations blossomed in the late 1990s, due in large part to the close mentor-pupil relationship between then-presidents Fidel Castro Ruz and Hugo Chávez Frías. Their affinity grew into an ideological and then strategic partnership. Today, these ties that bind are more relevant than ever, as Cuban security officials exercise influence in Venezuela and help maintain the Nicolás Maduro government in power. Details of the relationship, however, remain shrouded in secrecy, complicating any assessment of Cuba's role in Venezuela. The Venezuelan and Cuban governments have not been transparent about the size and scope of any contingent of Cuban military and security professionals operating in Venezuela. In fact, Havana claims that there are no Cuban security personnel in Venezuela, but merely medical staff supporting humanitarian missions.¹ At the same time, the United



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By Richard E. Feinberg

¹ Sergio Alejandro Gómez and Ismael Francisco, "Cuba no puede retirar sus tropas de Venezuela, porque no existen, asegura el Minrex," *Cuba Debate*, May 1, 2019, <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2019/05/01/cuba-no-puede-retirar-sus-tropas-de-venezuela-porque-no-existen-asegura-el-minrex/#XUF5C3dFyUJ>; Yuniel Labacena Romero, "Emociones con los «militares» cubanos que están en Venezuela," *Juventud Rebelde*, May 23, 2019, <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/internacionales/2019-05-23/emociones-con-los-militares-cubanos-que-est-an-venezuela>.

States and others have at times exaggerated the number of Cuban security forces in Venezuela for political purposes.² Despite the lack of transparency and exaggerations regarding Cuban security professionals operating in Venezuela, it is evident that Cuban security training and technical assistance has aided the Venezuelan government to establish a firewall against internal and external threats.

At the outset of this partnership, Castro provided mentorship to Chávez in the areas of health, politics, and security and intelligence. In return, Chávez helped underwrite Cuba at a time of economic hardship and diminishing relevance in the international system following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the texture of Cuban-Venezuelan relations remains consistent with the areas of cooperation borne of the Chávez-Castro relationship, the intensity and depth of engagement slowly faded under presidents Raúl Castro and Miguel Díaz-Canel in Cuba and Maduro in Venezuela—with the notable exception of Cuban security and intelligence support to the Venezuelan leadership. Although it is difficult to assess the number of Cubans assisting the Venezuelan government and their precise roles, it is clear that Havana has a compelling economic and political interest in the Maduro government's survival.

This essay will explore three periods of Cuban-Venezuelan relations during the past 20 years. The first period comprised a series of bilateral agreements, including the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement (*Convenio Integral de Cooperación*), and spanned Chávez's arrival to power in 1999 and lasted until 2004. The second period involved an increase in the exchange of goods and the institutionalization and regionalization of relations. It began with rising oil prices and the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América, ALBA*) in 2004 and lasted until Chávez's death in 2013. The third stage spans the Maduro presidency from 2013 to the present. This period coincides with a fall in oil prices, Venezuela's economic and political crisis, and a stronger role for Cuban political, military and intelligence advisers in Venezuela.

Two Nations, One Revolution (1999-2004)

Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez first met in 1994 following Chávez's release from prison after his failed 1992 coup attempt against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. In his visit to Cuba, Chávez gave an impassioned speech at the University of Havana in which he praised the country as a "stronghold of Latin American dignity" that must be emulated.³ However, the relationship did not begin to take form until Chávez's election to the Venezuelan presidency

2 This includes the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States and anti-Castro civil society organizations, which have exaggerated claims about the size of Cuban military and security forces in Venezuela.

3 Marco Aponte-Moreno and Lance Lattig, "Chávez: Rhetoric Made in Havana," *World Policy*, 2012, <https://worldpolicy.org/2012/03/26/chavez-rhetoric-made-in-havana/>.

in 1998. Castro attended Chávez's inauguration in 1999 and later that year, the two governments began to establish vital economic, political, and security ties. The two leaders also visited each other frequently between 1999 and Chávez's death in 2013; Chávez was especially fond of making unscheduled stopovers in Havana, and Castro celebrated his 75th birthday in Venezuela.

Castro long sought revolution in Venezuela as well as preferential access to Venezuelan oil.⁴ Castro's first trip after coming to power in 1959 was to Venezuela, where he solicited \$300 million in oil from then newly elected President Rómulo Betancourt.⁵ Betancourt declined and tensions between Havana and Caracas grew.⁶ In late 1961, Betancourt broke relations with Cuba altogether following a new doctrine of severing ties with governments that had come to power via non-electoral means; in 1962 Venezuela voted to expel Cuba from the Organization of American States (OAS). For its part, Cuba provided more than \$1 million in financial support, including arms and military equipment, to Venezuelan insurgent movements such as the Armed Forces of National Liberation (*Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional*) between 1961 and 1964.⁷ Tensions came to a head in 1967, when the Venezuelan Army and National Guard were forced to repel an attack by a small contingent of Cuban and Venezuelan guerillas on the beach of Machurucuto.⁸ Carlos Andrés Pérez reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1974 at the beginning of his first term in office.⁹

For Castro, Chávez appeared as one of the last champions of the Cuban-inspired revolutionary social and political movements that had swept Latin America and the Caribbean during the Cold War. Chávez identified as a socialist and often employed a highly charged “anti-imperialist” rhetoric. He viewed himself as a revolutionary in keeping with the precedents set by Simón Bolívar and Fidel Castro...

4 “‘Venecuba,’ a single nation,” *The Economist*, February 11, 2010, <https://www.economist.com/the-Wamericas/2010/02/11/venecuba-a-single-nation>.

5 Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 100-108; Patrick Oppmann, “The History That Chains Cuba to Venezuela’s Crisis,” *CNN World*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/02/americas/venezuela-cuba-history-oil/index.html>.

6 “Betancourt Say He Denied Castro a \$300 Million Loan,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1964, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/07/20/archives/betancourt-says-he-denied-castro-a-300-million-loan.html>.

7 Central Intelligence Agency, “*Foreign Intervention by Cuba*,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP-77M00144R000400100003-7.pdf>; Kevin Ginter, “Truth and Mirage: The Cuba-Venezuela Security and Intelligence Alliance,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2013.758003>.

8 Kevin Ginter, “Truth and Mirage: The Cuba-Venezuela Security and Intelligence Alliance,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2013.758003>; Jim Wyss, “From Failed Invasion to Red Carpet, Castro’s Ideals Still Pushed by Venezuelan Government,” *Miami Herald*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article117749768.html>.

9 Isa Cardozo da Silva and Richard S. Hillman, “Venezuela: Petroleum, Democratization and International Affairs,” in *Latin American and Caribbean Foreign Policy*, eds., Frank O. Mora and Jeanne K. Hey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), Pgs. 158-60. Harold Trinkunas, “What is Really New about Venezuela’s Bolivarian Foreign Policy?,” *Strategic Insights*, Volume V, Issue 2 (February 2006).



Chávez and Fidel Castro in Sandino, Cuba, inaugurating the new Simón Bolívar community. Photo: ©Cubadebate

Chávez's rise came nearly 30 years after the Machurucuto event. For Castro, Chávez appeared as one of the last champions of the Cuban-inspired revolutionary social and political movements that had swept Latin America and the Caribbean during the Cold War. The political newcomer identified as a socialist and often employed a highly charged "anti-imperialist" rhetoric. Moreover, he viewed himself as a revolutionary in keeping with the precedents set by Simón Bolívar and Fidel Castro—often invoking their names as a means of establishing legitimacy and inspiring support for his socio-political movement. From the outset of his presidency, Chávez accepted former Cuban officials and pro-Castro sympathizers as part of his inner circle and adapted a number of Castroist ideas, including the Bolivarian circles (*círculos bolivarianos*), parastatal institutions inspired by Cuba's Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (*Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*).

The Cuba-Venezuela relationship, however, was not based purely on the ideological affinity of its leaders. Its foundations also included strong commercial ties. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and throughout the Special Period (*Período Especial*) of the 1990s, Cuba sought to replace the economic subsidies long provided by Moscow. Havana wanted access to oil at below market prices and investment flows from Caracas. For its part, the Chávez government pursued global leadership through alliances with other developing countries. Later, leaders in Caracas desired the political advisory and intelligence and counterintelligence support that Cuba could provide.¹⁰

Opportunities for Cuban participation in Venezuela's armed forces increased as Chávez began politicizing the Venezuelan military shortly after taking office.¹¹ In the wake of the deadly Vargas mudslides in February 1999, the Venezuelan president launched *Plan Bolívar 2000* to engage Venezuelan soldiers in socioeconomic programs aimed at providing food, medical assistance, education, and infrastructure to some of the poorest parts of the country. The

¹⁰ These leaders included Elías Jaua, Alí Rodríguez, and Nicolás Maduro, as well as Chávez himself.

¹¹ James Cohrs, "Venecuba: An Analysis of Cuban Influence in Venezuela and its Support for the Bolivarian Revolution," Cedarville University, International Studies Capstone Research Papers, 2015, http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/international_studies_capstones/1.

plan enlisted the support of thousands of Cuban personnel, including teachers, medical professionals and an unknown number of Cuban security officials.¹²

In a related development, and something that deepened tensions between the Venezuelan military leadership and Chávez, the government allowed guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) to establish training camps in the western border states of Zulia, Táchira, and Apure. Venezuelan support to the FARC took place between 1998 and 2002, during the ultimately unsuccessful peace talks between the group and the administration of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana. During this period, Chávez ordered Venezuelan officers to provide logistical support to FARC guerrillas launching raids into Colombia. This angered Venezuela's military leadership that until then had been taught—and expected—to defend Venezuela against socialist-inspired insurgencies like the ones they were now ostensibly supporting.¹³

The Cuban and Venezuelan governments solidified their partnership through a flurry of bilateral agreements, including the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement in October 2000. Under this framework, Venezuela pledged to sell up to 53,000 barrels of oil per day to Cuba at a fixed, reduced price through its state-owned *Petróleos de Venezuela*, SA (PDVSA).¹⁴ For its part, Cuba offered Venezuela “medical services, specialists and health technicians to provide services in places where such personnel are not available” at no cost.¹⁵ The agreement also provided Venezuelans the ability to send patients and their relatives to Cuba for specialized medical treatment. Although the island had already sent medical professionals to Venezuela, this agreement increased the number of doctors, nurses, and paramedics from dozens to thousands.

Chávez would soon need Castro's strategic political and security assistance. When the Venezuelan president appointed allies to prominent posts at PDVSA in April 2002, dissident members of the military and the leadership of the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce (*Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela*, Fedecámaras) briefly ousted Chávez in a coup d'état, before a counter-coup brought him back to power. In response, according to an interview with Castro, the Cuban leader coached Chávez and his inner circle through the ordeal. Castro advised Chávez not to resign, and instead to “demand honorable conditions for surrender, guarantees that you won't be

12 Carlos A. Romero, “South-South Cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba,” in *South-South Cooperation: A Challenge to the Aid System?*, eds. Rosario Bella Guzmán and José Enrique Africa, et al., *Reality of Aid Network* (Quezon City: Ibon Books, 2010), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/E7CA78D6C6C901D0C125775400224AA6-ROA%20SSDC%20Special%20Report%28English%29%5B1%5D.pdf>.

13 Brian Nelson, *The Silence and the Scorpion: The Coup Against Chávez and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 126-27.

14 “Convenio Integral de Cooperación entre la República de Cuba y la República Bolivariana de Venezuela,” Article III, 2000, https://www.oas.org/juridico/mla/private/rexcor/rexcor_resp_ven9.pdf.

15 Ibid.

the victim.”¹⁶ Over the phone, Castro also committed to sending a diplomatic delegation to Venezuela in support of Chávez. Then-Venezuelan Minister of Defense José Vicente Rangel

reinforced that the call with Castro was “the determining factor. His advice allowed us to see better through the darkness. It helped us a great deal.”¹⁷

In the aftermath of the 2002 coup attempt, Chávez became more radicalized and distrustful of those around him—especially, and understandably, the political opposition and opposition-aligned PDVSA and military leadership. He also grew closer to Castro and the Cuban government.

In the aftermath of the 2002 coup attempt, Chávez became more radicalized and distrustful of those around him—especially, and understandably, the political opposition and opposition-aligned PDVSA and military leadership. He also grew closer to Castro and the Cuban government. Following the event, Chávez changed the nature of the relationship, seeking not only Castro’s advice, but also active support from the Cuban intelligence service to help him maintain power and stave off internal opposition and manage tensions with the George W. Bush administration.¹⁸

The number of Cuban uniformed personnel in Venezuela and their roles during this period is unclear. It is evident, however, that tacit U.S. support for the opposition during the 2002 coup attempt helped drive Chávez towards Cuban security forces. Cuban military personnel became more visible in Caracas in the immediate years following 2002, according to multiple sources interviewed for this study that asked to remain anonymous.¹⁹ The increase in Cuban military members coincided with the decline of U.S. personnel. Chávez started purging the Venezuelan military leadership shortly after his return to Miraflores in 2002, and in 2004 he turned his attention to dismantling the U.S. military presence in his country. In 2004, the president withdrew the U.S. Military Group’s access to the Venezuelan military headquarters at Fuerte Tiuna, causing them to take up residence at the U.S. Embassy. At the time, the U.S. military group comprised 40 military personnel—many of whom served as trainers and liaisons to Venezuelan forces. By 2007, only three U.S. defense personnel remained in the country.²⁰

16 Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: My Life* (New York: Scribner, 2006).

17 Rosa Miriam Elizalde and Luis Báez, *Chávez Nuestro* (La Habana: Casa Editora, 2004).

18 Moisés Naím, “The Tragedy of Venezuela,” *The Atlantic*, February 25, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/02/the-tragedy-of-venezuela/284062/>; Brian Nelson, *The Silence and the Scorpion: The Coup Against Chávez and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 126-27.; William Rosenau and Ralph Espach, “Cuba’s Spies Still Punch Above Their Weight,” September 29, 2013, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/cubas-spies-still-punch-above-their-weight-9147>.

19 A special report by Reuters also identifies the post-coup environment in 2002 as a critical moment in the burgeoning relationship between Hugo Chávez and the Cuban government. The report notes that, “Chávez placed Cuban advisors within his inner circle to tighten security, according to his former advisors and several former military officials.” See Angus Berwick, “Special Report: How Cuba taught Venezuela to quash military dissent,” Reuters, August 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-cuba-military-specialreport/special-report-how-cuba-taught-venezuela-to-quash-military-dissent-idUSKCN1VC1BX?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews>.

20 United States Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General, “Report of Inspection: Embassy Caracas, Venezuela,” Report Number ISP-I-07-28A, September 2007. <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/129671.pdf>.

The Deepening of Cuban-Venezuelan Relations (2004-2013)

Interdependence between the two countries grew on December 14, 2004, on the tenth anniversary of Chávez's first visit to the island, when Chávez and Castro signed the Cuba–Venezuela Agreement. This strategic arrangement established “cooperation between the Republic of Cuba and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela... based... not only on solidarity principles, which will always be present, but also, in the highest possible level, on the exchange of goods and services that are most beneficial for the economic and social needs of both countries” (Article 2). Each country sought material and ideological benefits from the agreement. Cuba eliminated duties on all Venezuelan imports (Article 12.1), offered tax exemptions to profits on Venezuelan investment in Cuba (Article 12.2), and granted scholarships (Article 12.7) and educational exchanges (Article 12.10).²¹ Perhaps the most consequential service it offered, however, was increasing the number of Cuban medical professionals sent to Venezuela.

As president, Chávez promoted dozens of social welfare missions (*misiones sociales*) to bring state services to the poor. One of the earliest and largest of these missions was *Misión Barrio Adentro* (Into the Neighborhood Mission). This program began in early 2003 when the mayor of Libertador Municipality outside of Caracas, Freddy Bernal, initiated discussions with the Cuban Embassy to bring 58 Cuban physicians to poor neighborhoods in his municipality. By December of that year, Bernal's Plan Barrio Adentro had become so popular that Chávez transformed it into the first national social mission.

The December 2004 agreement thus allowed Barrio Adentro and other social missions using human capital from Cuba to grow. While Venezuela provided financial support through PDVSA, Cuba sent medicine and personnel necessary to design, execute, and supervise the program with the help of the Venezuelan Ministry of Health and Ministry of Defense. According to some sources, Barrio Adentro included 23,789 Cuban doctors, dental specialists, optometrists, nurses, other personnel, and more than 6,500 sites where patients were seen. The agreement itself asserted that Cuban health care professional served some 15 million Venezuelans (Article 12.12).²²

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21 “Agreement between the President of Venezuela and the President of Cuba for the implementation of the ALBA,” 2004, <http://www.fidelcastro.cu/en/documentos/agreement-between-president-venezuela-and-president-cuba-implementation-alba>.

22 P. Sean Brotherton, *Revolutionary Medicine: Health and the Body in Post-Soviet Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 174.

A number of other social missions also used the expertise and personnel offered by Cubans over the course of the decade. Through *Misión Milagro* (Miracle Mission), Cuban ophthalmologists performed eye surgeries on impoverished Venezuelans. Additionally, Cuban medical professionals participated in Venezuela's *Misión Sonrisa* (Smile Mission), established in 2006 to offer dental prosthetic rehabilitation to the poor as part of the national public health program, and in *Misión Dr. José Gregorio Hernández*, created in 2008 to provide medical home visits to people with disabilities. Cuban teachers contributed to the *Misión Robinson I and II*,

Misión Ribas, and *Misión Sucre* educational programs, and Cuban experts contributed to other social missions as well via social cooperation agreements.

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In all, Venezuelan social scientist Carlos Romero estimates that, at its apex in the mid-2000s, there were some 30,000-40,000 Cuban professionals in Venezuela.²³ Importantly, this includes Cuban military members. While the Venezuelan armed forces (*Fuerza Armada Nacional*, or FAN, until 2008, and *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana*, FANB, after 2008) maintained the central role in most social missions' logistical support and facilities construction, Cuban military of-

ficials and civilians who reported directly to Chávez or the minister of defense often played technical advisory and supervisory roles. Cuba—through its National Defense Law 75—has vast experience in leveraging the military to provide technical support to society, especially with respect to natural or manmade disasters.²⁴ According to retired Venezuelan officers interviewed for this study, these Cubans were housed in military installations and given lodging, food, and transportation. The exact number of Cuban security and intelligence personnel reporting directly to Chávez or the minister of defense is unknown. In addition to their stipend in *bolívars*, the Cuban government paid them in dollars as per the bilateral agreement.

In this period, Venezuelan oil diplomacy approached its peak. The country not only used the 2004 agreement to increase the amount of oil it sent to Cuba at favorable prices (Article 12.5), raising it to some 96,000 barrels per day, but the document also marked the formal creation of the ALBA regional alliance.²⁵ At its inception, Venezuela and Cuba were the only members. Subsequently, a number of other Latin American and Caribbean states joined: Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Honduras, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and

23 Carlos A. Romero, "South-South Cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba," in *South-South Cooperation: A Challenge to the Aid System?*

24 Cuba Defensa, "Ejército Juvenil del Trabajo," <http://www.cubadefensa.cu/?q=ejercito-juvenil&b=d2>.

25 "Agreement between the President of Venezuela and the President of Cuba for the implementation of the ALBA"; Juan O. Tamayo, "How will the Venezuela-Cuba link fare after Chávez's death?" *The Miami Herald*, March 5, 2013, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article1947916.html>.



Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez begin the Cuba-Venezuela Medical Mission initiative in 2003, aiming to improve health standards in both countries.

Source: Misión Médica de Venezuela Facebook page

Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Lucia.²⁶

The promulgation of this agreement marked a new phase of

cooperation beyond the energy sector and medical and other personnel, including the regionalization of the Cuba–Venezuela partnership.

Far more consequential to regional relations and to Venezuela's place in the Caribbean was the formation of PetroCaribe. Launched on June 29, 2005, as an ALBA initiative, PetroCaribe was originally conceived as an alliance of Central American and Caribbean states, including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador.²⁷ Participant countries would purchase Venezuelan oil on conditions of preferential payment. In Jamaica, Guyana, Nicaragua, and Haiti, the value of preferential Venezuelan financing for oil imports was more than 10 percent of government revenue and the equivalent of around four percent of GDP, and accounted for all of Haiti's national oil supply and until recently nearly 75 percent of Nicaragua's.²⁸ Venezuelan aid to Nicaragua drastically diminished between 2017 and 2019,²⁹ and other PetroCaribe members have seen similar declines. Still, Venezuelan oil has been a significant source of aid for cash-strapped countries in the region.³⁰

According to then-oil minister Rafael Ramírez, between the creation of PetroCaribe in 2005 and January 2012, Venezuela provided a total of 178 million barrels of crude oil worth \$14.4 billion to the 18 member countries. Ramírez said that PetroCaribe members had saved \$2.7 billion as a result. Unsurprisingly, many of these small states have supported Venezuela

26 Honduras withdrew in 2010 and Ecuador withdrew in 2018. Ken Cole, "Progress into the 21st Century: The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America," *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 3 (2/3), 2011, 116-27.

27 Guatemala and Honduras later withdrew from the program.

28 "Single point of failure," *The Economist*, October 4, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2014/10/04/single-point-of-failure>.

29 Arturo Cruz, "How to Understand the Nicaraguan Crisis," Wilson Center, 2018, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/nicaragua_crisis-arturo_cruz_final.pdf.

30 "Caribbean islands warned as Venezuela collapses," *Curaçao Chronicle*, 2016, <http://curacaochronicle.com/main/caribbean-islands-warned-as-venezuela-collapses/>.

diplomatically in the Organization of American States (OAS) and other multilateral forums. For Cuba, the oil shipments were vital in subsidizing its economy.

For its part, Cuba's support for Venezuela extended beyond the social missions. Collaboration between Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, FAR) and

Venezuela's FANB intensified throughout the 2000s. The two countries signed bilateral agreements for the joint development and training of members of all branches of the FANB, including travel to Cuba to train, and Cuban officers began to play a direct role in planning within the Venezuelan military. A special report by Reuters published in August 2019 indicated that two agreements signed by Cuba and Venezuela in May 2008 provided for Cuban assistance in overhauling Venezuela's Directorate of Military Intelligence, the training of Venezuelan intelligence officers in Cuba, and the provision of Cuban advisors to train and inspect Venezuelan military units.³¹ According to a paper published by the anti-Castro In-

stitute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami, delegations from the Institute of Higher National Defense Studies (*Instituto de Altos Estudios de Defensa Nacional*, IAEDEN) visited the island, and graduating officers from the Venezuelan Army's Military Command attended graduation ceremonies in Cuba presided over by Fidel Castro.³²

Under Chávez, Cuban advisers began to work in the highest echelons of the Venezuelan executive, training police as well as members of the military and intelligence services.³³ Chávez remained concerned about maintaining loyalty within security and defense institutions and leaned on Cuba's experience in coup-proofing the government.³⁴ Cuba's role was to monitor, supervise, and report the internal situation of the barracks to the Venezuelan political leadership, as well as advise on psychological operations at the national and international level. According to former Director of Civil Protection Antonio Rivera, approximately 400 Cuban security profes

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31 Angus Berwick, "Special Report: How Cuba taught Venezuela to quash military dissent."

32 The IAEDEN visit to Cuba in 2005 and the graduation ceremonies are cited in the following Granma article: <http://www.acn.cu/2005/junio/13cmvenezuela.htm>. See also, Hernán Yáñez, "The Cuba-Venezuela Alliance: "'Emancipatory Neo-Bolivarismo' Or Totalitarian Expansion?" *Institute for Cuban & Cuban-American Studies Occasional Papers* (Miami: University of Miami, 2005).

33 "'Venecuba,' a single nation," *The Economist*, February 11, 2010, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2010/02/11/venecuba-a-single-nation>.

34 According to one retired Venezuelan officer interviewed for this study who held a position in Command Operations, during this time, there were between ten and 20 Cuban military members for each Venezuelan state, with greater numbers in Caracas, totaling 250 to 300 total FAR personnel. The interviewee described weekly meetings of the Army General Command that included the General Commander of the Army, the second Commander of the Army, and its General Staff in full, along with several members of the Cuban FAR from the colonel and general ranks, who attended the meetings as civilians to disguise their presence. The source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that these Cuban personnel supervised logistics, support, transportation, and weapons details of the FANB and reported directly to Chávez.

sionals served in advisory functions, aiding with reorganization and doctrine, and providing education to Venezuelan security forces.³⁵ It is unclear if Rivera was referencing FAR personnel, the Ministry of Interior (MININT) personnel, or both, further illustrating the complexity in defining and identifying the scope of security personnel.

Due to health problems, Castro delegated the duties of president to his brother Raúl on July 31, 2006. As Fidel's health worsened, Raúl Castro was named president in early 2008. In June 2011, Chávez revealed in a televised address from Havana that he was recovering from an operation to remove an abscessed tumor with cancerous cells. This marked the beginning of a two-year battle with cancer and associated health problems, a period in which he sought medical care in Cuba. After winning the 2012 presidential elections, Chávez missed his January 10, 2013, inauguration in Caracas, as he was receiving cancer treatment in Havana. He finally returned to Venezuela in February and passed away on March 5, 2013, with Nicolás Maduro succeeding him. With Fidel Castro's deteriorating health and Chávez gone, it was up to newly anointed leaders—former Minister of Defense and Fidel's right hand Raúl Castro and Maduro—to carry the relationship forward.

far from ending the Cuba-Venezuela alliance, the death of Chávez and the onset of Venezuela's prolonged economic crisis have instead transformed it into one of elevated mutual dependence

A Transactional Relationship (2013-present)

Until 2013, Venezuela could afford the economic cost of support to Cuba during a decade of rising oil prices, and the Cuban and Venezuelan governments had been strategically aligned under Chávez and the Castros. In many ways, the personal and political solidarity between the two countries' leaders mitigated the vulnerabilities created by interdependence.

However, far from ending the Cuba-Venezuela alliance,³⁶ the death of Chávez and the onset of Venezuela's prolonged economic crisis have instead transformed it into one of elevated mutual dependence. According to published reports, Maduro and his confidants rely on Cuban security and intelligence personnel to identify potential coup plots and provide advice on managing popular unrest, while the governments of Raúl Castro and now Miguel Díaz-Canel have relied on Venezuelan oil to keep Cuba's economy running. Therefore, while Díaz-Canel

has offered Maduro his "unwavering solidarity," the relationship appears more quid pro quo and lacks much of the public political activism that characterized the previous two periods.³⁷

35 Ted Piccone and Harold Trinkunas, "The Cuba-Venezuela Alliance: The Beginning of the End?" *Brookings Institution*, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CubaVenezuela-Alliance-Piccone-Trinkunas.pdf>.

36 Ibid.

37 Kirk Semple, "With Spies and Other Operatives, a Nation Looms Over Venezuela's Crisis: Cuba," *New York Times*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/world/americas/venezuela-cuba-oil.html>.

More than ever, it appears that Cuba helps Maduro stay in power while Venezuela helps Cuba maintain itself economically. As such, the two countries have something else in common: a fear of U.S.-sponsored regime change.

Some aspects of the partnership between the two countries have receded since Chávez's death. Cuban medical professionals have left the country en masse, from a high point of approximately 40,000 down to an estimated 20,000 or fewer. As Venezuela's economic crisis intensified in 2013, funding for Barrio Adentro decreased. Consequently, many Cuban medical personnel began returning to Cuba; Castro and Díaz-Canel recalled some allegedly due to a lack of payment by Venezuela, while others sought asylum in the United

States.³⁸ Shortly thereafter, the head of the Venezuelan Medical Federation reported that 80 percent of the program's physical establishments had been abandoned.³⁹

Venezuela's leadership and regional influence have waned as well. In 2016, Argentine President Mauricio Macri pulled his country and its 20 percent stake out of Telesur, and Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru

have all suspended or withdrawn their membership in the intergovernmental Union of South American Nations (*Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*, UNASUR), Brazil's geopolitical project embraced by many of the region's "Pink Tide" governments.

The Cuba-Venezuela relationship today appears largely centered on the security and intelligence transactional aspect. Increasingly, the Cuban government has supplied Caracas with security and intelligence support that help it to stay in power, such as deploying security personnel to protect Maduro and other members of the political elite, providing counterintelligence support to mitigate uprisings, and technical advisory to counter opposition and international efforts at regime change.⁴⁰ Senior officials of the U.S. government have found the Cubans' apparent degree of influence within the military high command and political leadership particularly worrisome. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2019, Admiral Craig S. Faller, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, stated that Cuba "owns the security around Maduro and is deeply entrenched in the intelligence

The Cuba-Venezuela relationship today appears largely centered on the security and intelligence transactional aspect.

38 Jim Wyss, "Dumping medicine, faking patients: Cuban doctors describe a system that breeds fraud," *The Miami Herald*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article129125864.html>.

39 "El 80% de los módulos de Barrio Adentro del país está cerrado," *La Patilla*, 2014, <https://www.lapatilla.com/2014/12/08/el-80-de-los-modulos-de-barrio-adentro-del-pais-esta-cerrado/>.

40 These findings are echoed in the Reuters special report cited above, based on previously undisclosed documents seen by the reporter. A center-right publication in the U.K. also concluded that Venezuela's intelligence services are run under a structure similar to Cuba's intelligence organizations. See Philip Sherwell and Andrew Hamilton, "As Hugo Chávez fights for his life, Cuba fears for its future," *The Telegraph*.

service.”⁴¹ He went on to assert that Cuban spies, intelligence and political advisers, counterintelligence agents, and military trainers help suppress dissent within the armed forces and throughout society.⁴² Maduro, like Chávez, appears to admire the Cuban dictatorship’s success at maintaining itself in power and has employed some of the same methods, such as repression, censorship, and social control. For example, as in Cuba, Maduro has used consumer good scarcity and rationing as a way to control the population, has leveraged migration as a means of reducing socio-economic and political pressure and has intentionally created fear and distrust among citizens as a means of mitigating potential uprisings.

Ascertaining the true numbers of Cuban military and intelligence professionals deployed to Venezuela is fraught with difficulty. First, there is no public record of total personnel operating on the ground. Various sources—often uncorroborated and ideologically predisposed to exaggerate or minimize numbers—claim figures that range from 4,500 to 25,000 Cuban military and intelligence personnel embedded in the Venezuelan military and intelligence services. Or-

Ascertaining the true numbers of Cuban military and intelligence professionals deployed to Venezuela is fraught with difficulty.

ganization of American States Secretary-General Luis Almagro has suggested a number of 22,000 Cuban “infiltrators” in the Venezuelan government,⁴³ and former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton levied an accusation that somewhere between 20,000 and 25,000 Cuban military and intelligence professionals prop up the Maduro government.⁴⁴ One anti-Castro leaning think tank, cited by the *Panama Post* and *The Independent*, claims that there are just over 4,500 personnel organized into battalions spread throughout the country.⁴⁵ According to SEBIN defector General Manuel Ricardo Cristopher Figuera, Cuban protective services around Maduro grew from an estimated 20 to 200 during the first half

41 “2019 Posture Statement to Congress,” U.S. Southern Command, 2019, <https://www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/SOUTHCOMs-2019-Posture-Statement-to-Congress/>.

42 Kirk Semple, “With Spies and Other Operatives, a Nation Looms Over Venezuela’s Crisis: Cuba,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/world/americas/venezuela-cuba-oil.html>.

43 “Almagro: Al menos 22.000 cubanos se infiltraron en Venezuela,” *El Nacional* (Caracas), October 16, 2018, http://www.el-nacional.com/noticias/politica/almagro-menos-22000-cubanos-infiltraron-venezuela_256078; Karen De Young and Anthony Faiola, “As Venezuela’s misery grows, U.S. focus shifts to Cuba’s role,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-venezuelas-misery-grows-us-focus-shifts-to-cubas-role/2019/03/26/05fedfa0-4b2c-11e9-b79a-961983b7e0cd_story.html?utm_term=.5a5981569d5e.

44 John Bolton, “State of the Union,” *CNN*, March 3, 2019, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1903/03/sotu.01.html>; Karen DeYoung and Anthony Faiola, 2019.

45 Foresight Cuba, “Ejército Cubano en Venezuela,” *ForesightCuba*, July 1, 2017, <http://foresightcuba.com/ejercito-cubano-en-venezuela/>; Josefina Blanco, “Proof of Extensive Cuban Military Presence in the Venezuelan Armed Forces,” *Panam Post*, February 20, 2019, <https://panamapost.com/josefina-blanco/2019/02/20/proof-of-extensive-cuban-military-presence-in-the-venezuelan-armed-forces/>; Andrew Lewer, “A foreign military intervention in Venezuela has taken place, and Prince Charles could help to stop it,” *The Independent*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/venezuela-nicolas-maduro-juan-guaido-royal-family-prince-charles-cuba-a8831131.html>.

of 2019.⁴⁶ These estimates aside, it is notable that, while describing the role of Cuban military and intelligence professionals in Venezuela in detail, a 2019 investigation by Reuters does not mention numbers.

Second, it is difficult to distinguish Cuban security and intelligence personnel representing the FAR, MININT and its Intelligence Directorate (DI), let alone distinguish FAR or MININT officers working in non-security areas. Havana does this intentionally in an effort to create ambiguity about personnel deployed to Venezuela. Analysts may aggregate representatives of these distinct organizations into a single figure meant to represent the totality of Cuban security and intelligence personnel operating within Venezuelan territory. However, it is likely that these institutions fulfill different functions, from providing technical support to the Venezuelan military to aiding the government in maintaining domestic order and supporting both the government and Havana's intelligence operations. It is possible that some Venezuelan military resent or are adverse to a Cuban military/security presence that undermines the prominence of the Venezuelan military. The Venezuelan military has a strong sense of pride grounded in its long history defending the nation from internal threats.⁴⁷ This is among the reasons that Cuban military reportedly dress in civilian attire and tend to withhold their affiliation in working within the Venezuelan military ranks.⁴⁸

It is possible that there are a few thousand Cuban security and intelligence professionals on the ground supporting Venezuelan military, intelligence services and providing protection to Maduro, but it is well below the high estimates of 20,000-25,000.⁴⁹ The FAR is comprised of an estimated 50,000-65,000 active military personnel.⁵⁰ As such, it is unlikely that total personnel deployed to Venezuela would exceed a double-digit percentage of its active force.⁵¹ MININT has an estimated 70,000 or more across its six agencies, and much of that workforce is busy exercising domestic control inside Cuba. And although there are still thousands of Cuban doctors and humanitarian-focused personnel providing services in Venezuela—in

46 José Enrique Arriola and Ethan Bronner, "Top Defector Tells of Spying, Stealing and Mutiny in Venezuela," *Bloomberg*, July 29, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/amp/news/articles/2019-07-29/top-defector-tells-of-spying-stealing-and-mutiny-in-venezuela?twitter_impression=true.

47 Brian Fonseca, John Polga-Hecimovich and Harold Trinkunas, "Venezuelan Military Culture," Florida International University Paper Series, May 2016, <https://gordoninstitute.fiu.edu/policy-innovation/military-culture-series/brian-fonseca-john-polga-hecimovich-and-harold-trinkunas-2016-venezuelan-military-culture.pdf>.

48 Based on interviews with former military personnel.

49 In addition to the personnel on the ground in Venezuela, there is likely additional personnel in Cuba supporting its forces in Venezuela. Cubans on the island are likely providing logistical and advisory support to Cubans on the ground in Venezuela as well as reporting to Cuban leadership.

50 For the range in size see: "2019 Cuba Military Strength," Global Firepower - World Military Strength, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=cuba; and Badri-Maharaj, Sanjay, "The Decline of the Cuban Armed Forces" Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, January 18, 2017. https://idsa.in/idsacomments/decline-cuban-armed-forces-sbmaharaj_180117.

51 Thank you to Harold Trinkunas for pointing this out to us.



Cuba's President, Miguel Díaz-Canel during a visit to Venezuela, 2018 Photo: Shutterstock

exchange for some form of compensation—it is likely that most Cuban medical personnel are just that—medical professionals. Still, it is important to note that Cuban doctors are often used to advance the Venezuelan government's political interests, such as preferentially providing care to government supporters.⁵²

Ultimately, the number of Cuban security and intelligence personnel is not as relevant as the roles that numerous sources report that the Cubans play inside Venezuela. Maduro appears to base at least some of his decisions on the opinions and instructions of Cuban advisers, since he knows that his survival depends in part on their expertise. Intelligence and counterintelligence—likely provided by both Venezuelan and Cuban personnel—are particularly important for the president to snuff out threats to his power from within the FANB, the political elite, or the political opposition. For example, Maduro has arrested and jailed scores of allegedly mutinous officers without due process, such as the case of Navy Captain Rafael Acosta, and there are credible reports of their torture.⁵³ According to defectors, much of the security and intelligence cooperation is coordinated through the Cuba Cooperation and Liaison Group in Venezuela (GRUCE) that works closely with the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the Military Counterintelligence Directorate (DGCIM).⁵⁴ Beyond interviews with Venezuelan defectors by members of the media, there is limited evidence of GRUCE's role

52 Insight Crime, "Cuban Doctors Used in Extortion Scheme by Venezuelan Gov't," March 22, 2019, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/cuban-doctors-used-in-extortion-scheme-by-venezuelan-govt/>; Nicholas Casey, "It Is Unspeakable: How Maduro Used Cuban Doctors to Coerce Venezuela Voters," *New York Times*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/world/americas/venezuela-cuban-doctors.html>; Robert Huish and Jerry Spiegel, "Integrating health and human security into foreign policy: Cuba's surprising success," *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 2008), 42-53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41945989>.

53 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission, "UN Human Rights report on Venezuela urges immediate measures to halt and remedy grave rights violations," 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24788&LangID=E>.

54 David C. Adams, "Cuba's Army in Venezuela: Doctors or Soldiers," *Univision*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/cubas-army-in-venezuela-doctors-or-soldiers>; *Diario Las Américas*, "General Exiliado Detalla Plan de Accion de Militares Cubanos en Venezuela," June 12, 2018, <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/general-exiliado-detalla-plan-accion-militares-cubanos-venezuela-n4153245>; Juan Antonio Blanco, Rolando Cartaya, Luis Domínguez, Casto Ocando, "Cubazuela: Chronicle of a Cuban Intervention," *Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba*, April 2019, <https://info.fhrcuba.org/hubfs/uploads/2019/04/CUBAZUELA-CUBAN-INTERVENTION-English.pdf>; BBC Monitoring, "Explainer: War of Words Over Venezuela's Cuban Connection," *BBC News*, March 19, 2019, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200p0fg>.

in Venezuela. Nonetheless, according to Reuters, the role of the Cuban-mentored DGCIM has been critical: it has “embedded agents, often dressed in black fatigues, within barracks. There, they would compile dossiers on perceived troublemakers and report any signs of

disloyalty, according to more than 20 former Venezuelan military and intelligence officials.”⁵⁵

According to defectors, much of the security and intelligence cooperation is coordinated through the Cuba Cooperation and Liaison Group in Venezuela (GRUCE) that works closely with the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the Military Counterintelligence Directorate (DGCIM).

In return for this security and intelligence aid, Maduro continues to grant generous, albeit declining, oil subsidies to Cuba.⁵⁶ There have been disruptions and interruptions in crude shipments, but as Venezuela sinks deeper into extreme economic depression, it somehow continues to maintain the outlines of the countries’ 2004 agreement. The stakes are so high for the Maduro government that PDVSA bought nearly \$440 million worth of foreign crude in 2017 and 2018 and shipped it directly to Cuba on friendly credit terms—often at a loss.⁵⁷ As of early 2019, reports estimated Venezuelan oil shipments to Cuba at about 40,000 barrels

per day, with a market value of more than \$800 million annually, despite Venezuela’s need for hard currency to import food and medicine.⁵⁸

In short, our research leads us to conclude that Maduro relies to some degree on Cuban security and intelligence support to remain in power, and therefore has done everything in his control to continue to facilitate the shipment of subsidized crude to Cuba. It is also important to note that Maduro is also leaning on Russia and China to weather attempts to dislodge him and his inner circle from power, which challenges assertions that Cuba is solely responsible for maintaining the Maduro regime in power.

Venezuela and Cuba Moving Forward

The relationship between Venezuela and Cuba has evolved significantly since 1999. What began as a personal and ideological partnership between Presidents Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez quickly evolved into a strategic arrangement between their two countries based on the exchange of subsidized oil for medical personnel and political support. At the beginning of the sec-

55 Reuters, “Special Report.”

56 Haley Zaremba, “Why Is Venezuela Still Sending Subsidized Oil To Cuba?” *OilPrice.Com*, July 17, 2018, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Why-Is-Venezuela-Still-Sending-Subsidized-Oil-To-Cuba.html>.

57 Marianna Parraga and Jeanne Liendo, “Exclusive: As Venezuelans suffer, Maduro buys foreign oil to subsidize Cuba,” *Reuters*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-oil-imports-exclusive/exclusive-as-venezuelans-suffer-maduro-buys-foreign-oil-to-subsidize-cuba-idUSKCN1IG1TQ>.

58 John Otis, “Cuba’s Reliance Upon Venezuela for Cheap Oil Looms as Potential Threat,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/cubas-reliance-upon-venezuela-for-cheap-oil-looms-as-potential-threat-11551224164>.

ond decade of the 2000s and into the presidencies of Castro's and Chávez's successors, that relationship became more pragmatic, as Cuban military and intelligence personnel help Nicolás Maduro stay in power amid a profound social, economic, and humanitarian crisis, while oil provided by Venezuela continues to provide much needed support to the Cuban economy.

If oil shipments from Caracas were to stop, Cuba would struggle to find a replacement at a time when it appears to be entering into a period of deepening austerity increasingly like the Special Period of the post-Soviet 1990s. For now, Venezuelan subsidies are enabling Cuba to avoid another Special Period. As such, Cuba will remain an ally of the Maduro government, as the country remains Cuba's primary supplier of oil and market for Cuban services exports. It appears that the

Trump administration's hardline approach to Cuba and Venezuela, instead of driving a wedge between Havana and Caracas, has instead forced them closer together as both try to weather increased pressure from Washington. Still, it is unlikely that the Trump administration will countenance—at least publicly—a softening of its uncompromising policy towards Cuba in exchange for Cuba's support in promoting change in Venezuela. This is especially true as the U.S. general elections in 2020 draw nearer, elections in which an important swing state, Florida, houses the largest Cuban and Venezuelan diaspora communities in the United States.

Likewise, it would be politically damaging for the Maduro administration and *chavismo* to admit publicly that the Venezuelan government no longer has the ability to supply Cuba with oil. Given credible reports of Cuban military personnel and intelligence officials advising the upper echelons of the Venezuelan armed forces and government and of the influence that these Cuban officials might have over Maduro, the Venezuelan president has a strong incentive to continue providing assistance to the Cuban government. In short, Cuba and Venezuela are now interdependent, such that developments in one country would have dramatic domestic effects in the other.

...Cuban military and intelligence personnel help Nicolás Maduro stay in power amid a profound social, economic, and humanitarian crisis, while oil provided by Venezuela continues to provide much needed support to the Cuban economy.

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The Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our America-Peoples' Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP) High Level Summit takes place in Caracas, Venezuela in 2017 | Photo: ©Shutterstock

II. The Geopolitics of Cuba–Venezuela–U.S. Relations: An Informal Note

By Richard E. Feinberg

Introduction

This essay situates the evolving relations between Cuba and Venezuela within the context of the Caribbean Basin and their powerful northern neighbor, the United States. There is a natural rivalry between Cuba and Venezuela for sub-regional leadership, and relative power relations have shifted over time. U.S. aversion to radical social change in the region has molded perceptions of inter-American relations by both *fidelistas* and *chavistas*, even as their left-leaning political ideologies and governance models differ substantially. The failed coup in April 2002 against Hugo Chávez marked a tipping point, after which Venezuela replaced long-standing U.S. security ties with Cuban security assistance. The Cuban-Venezuelan barter relationship, exchanging cheap oil for Cuban medical and other expert services, promoted the vital economic and political interests of both parties. Today, both countries are suffering the consequences of gross economic mismanagement, creating opportunities for the international community. Yet so far, international diplomacy has failed to find an adequate response to the new Venezuelan model of what I would call “minority authoritarianism.” Escalating international economic pressures on both Cuba and Venezuela, in the context of official U.S. rhetoric calling for regime change, seems like a poor strategy for driving a wedge between the two Caribbean Basin states.

The Intertwined Geopolitics of the Caribbean Basin

Ties between Cuba and Venezuela are deeply rooted in history and geography. For hundreds of years both nations were integrated into the Spanish Empire, were governed under similar political and legal codes, and were part-and-parcel of Spain's tightly interwoven colonial commercial system. In the 19th century, Cuban and Venezuelan independence fighters engaged in fraternal mutual assistance; Cuban founding father José Martí spent six months in Venezu-

Ties between Cuba and Venezuela are deeply rooted in history and geography.

ela in 1881. In July 1958, representatives of the opposition groups battling Fulgencio Batista convened in Caracas; the Pact of Caracas recognized the leadership position of Fidel Castro and established principles for a post-Batista government.¹ Many Venezuelans, having just ousted their own dictator, Marco Pérez Jiménez, in early 1958, sympathized with

the Cuban struggles against Batista. To thank Venezuelans for their support for his cause, the first country Fidel Castro visited after his 1959 triumph was Venezuela. When the Venezuelan government turned against Castro in the early 1960s, the Cubans provided training and weapons to anti-regime revolutionaries.

By location, Venezuela and Cuba are part of the same geopolitical system arrayed around the Caribbean Basin. Both nations face the dominant superpower to the north, the United States. In such circumstances of extreme asymmetry of power, nations can choose to align themselves with the neighboring hegemon: generally, most of the smaller Caribbean and Central American nations have chosen to maintain close relations—that is, to “bandwagon” in international relations jargon, with the United States. But both Cuba (11 million population) and Venezuelan (over 30 million) are large enough to imagine charting more independent paths. Such was the Pan-American vision of the Venezuelan patriarch Simón Bolívar, a fighter and thinker who greatly inspired Fidel Castro. In recent years, both nations have been aligned in their interests to gain a greater degree of autonomy from the United States; rationally they have sought to act in concert, to better “balance” against U.S. power.

But seeking a degree of independence from Washington does not necessarily imply outright hostility. For example, after his election in 2006, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega successfully juggled good relations with both Cuba and Venezuela, availing himself of the financial largesse of Hugo Chávez, while maintaining more-or-less normal relations with the United States and affording Nicaragua unimpeded access to international financial institutions. Following that example, upon the election of Barack Obama, Raúl Castro signaled his interest in pursuing a similar policy of balancing profitable relations with both Caracas and Washington.

1 Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, Fourth Edition.), 234.

At the same time, Cuba and Venezuela have been rivals for regional influence. By size of landmass and economic resources, Venezuela is the natural sub-regional hegemon, so long as Mexico—by far the largest Caribbean Basin nation outside of the United States—chooses to pursue a low-key “non-interference” foreign policy. In the early post-World War II years, Venezuela took the lead in seeking the ouster of regional dictators in favor of democratic movements; notably, in the 1970s Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez spearheaded foreign military assistance to the Sandinistas in their bid to oust Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.²

The emergence of Fidel Castro, however, enabled Cuba to challenge Venezuela for regional influence. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cuban support for revolutionary movements in the region, while ultimately unsuccessful outside of Nicaragua, gave Castro meaningful leverage in national and regional politics. It was not by coincidence that Colombia and the international community agreed that Havana, with its ties to the guerrillas but also because of its regional stature, should host the 2012-16 peace talks between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The rise of Hugo Chávez shifted the regional balance back toward Venezuela. While falling far short of its originally stated aim of uniting Latin America and the Caribbean, Chávez’s Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) did create a diplomatic amalgam that eclipsed, at its apogee, the increasingly archaic Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that had been a valuable vehicle for Cuban influence.

Today, both Venezuela and Cuba are consumed with severe internal economic difficulties. Nevertheless, both nations jockey for influence among other regional states. Each, in my experience, displays its own diplomatic style: Venezuelan diplomacy, following the personality of Hugo Chávez, tends toward the dramatic and bombastic, while the more mature Cuban diplomats are typically professional and businesslike, although they, too, can resort to hot rhetoric when feeling provoked.

By recognizing the inherent competition for regional leadership between the nations of Cuba and Venezuela, rooted in both history and geography, the international community could better play to each nation’s strategic visions. Signaling recognition and respect for each nation’s claim to regional leadership would be a good place to start.

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2 Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press), 1989.



U.S. and Cuban flags fly over the newly opened U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba under the Obama administration. | Photo: ©Marat Aguilar, December 30, 2015/Flickr

The United States and Radical Social Change

Much has been written about the causes, fundamental and proximate, of the conflictive relations between the United States and Fidel Castro.³ Regardless of precisely when he became a Marxist-Leninist, Castro clearly believed that the United States of the mid-20th century, so fully consumed by Cold War anti-communism, would inevitably find itself in fierce opposition to the radical social reform that Castro felt Cuba required. Castro also assumed that his internal enemies and the Miami-based diaspora would rally Washington to the counter-revolution. For his survival, Castro turned to the Soviet Union.

By 2008, when Raúl Castro assumed the presidency, the international environment had changed radically: the Soviet Union had dissolved and the Cuban revolution had long ago fully consolidated its hold on power, having built a strong state and eliminated all traces of domestic opposition. Under these circumstances, Cuba could—indeed needed—to reach out to the United States to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations. While this shift in strategic doctrine involved certain risks, Raúl Castro was willing to take the gamble, at least while Barack Obama was in office.

Hugo Chávez had tremendous admiration for Fidel Castro and for his abilities to maintain his independence from U.S. foreign and commercial ties. However, by the end of the 20th century, the United States was more comfortable with ideological pluralism and more willing to live with progressive social policies, even those involving expropriations of properties (accompanied with adequate compensation), while still seeking to promote democratic political norms. But the civilian-military coup in April 2002 had a radicalizing impact on Chávez.⁴ He saw that

3 See, for example, William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

4 Brian A. Nelson, *The Silence and the Scorpion: The Coup Against Chávez and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (New York: Nation Books, 2009).

there were rebellious factions in the military willing to work with the business community and civilian opposition to overthrow him by force. Public statements by the Bush administration signaled support for the coup attempt, even before it could consolidate. Staging and losing a coup is a very grave error; there are dire consequences for those who unsheathe the sword without being able to drive it to the hilt! Inevitably, once back in power the triumphant Chávez sought to pre-empt future coups by purging the security apparatus and staffing the civilian ministries with loyalists. As Fidel Castro counseled his protégé, “the state that doesn’t defend itself is cut to ribbons.”⁵ Before dying of cancer in 2013, Chávez had over a decade to stand up a security apparatus and civilian public sector populated with loyal *chavistas*, people who owed their careers to *chavismo* and who in their barracks and government offices were force-fed incessant political indoctrination.

In refreshing his security apparatus, who better to turn to than Cuba? Fidel Castro had already ruled for over 40 years, without facing a serious coup attempt (as far as we know). By their very nature, the precise size and activities of international security and intelligence assistance are considered national security secrets. But we can readily discard the notion that the numbers of Cuban security advisers are in the thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, as asserted by senior U.S. officials without offering credible evidence. (Given the intense interest in Venezuela and Cuba within the Trump administration, we can assume that the U.S. government would likely be running psychological operations campaigns against both governments, campaigns that could well include exaggerated claims of bilateral security cooperation and that might, in the first instance, be directed against the target governments but whose content quickly reverberates in the U.S. media.). Surely such a massive foreign security presence would be both inefficient and counterproductive, raising the hackles of patriotic Venezuelan officers and compromising the *chavista* nationalism brand. As an indicator of a more likely presence, the U.S. military group, expelled by Chávez in 2004, had numbered some 40 military personnel, many of whom served as trainers and liaisons to Venezuelan forces (as noted in the companion essay by Brian Fonseca and John Polga-Hecimovich). The U.S. government does not release detailed data on its intelligence presence abroad.

Chávez expelled this U.S. military and intelligence presence and gradually reduced the overall U.S. diplomatic footprint in Caracas. After all, hadn’t the U.S. publicly blessed the April 2002 coup against him? And hadn’t the U.S. fomented division and discontent within the armed forces prompting coups in Guatemala (1954) and in Chile (1973) against reform-minded governments? Both of these episodes are deeply imbedded in the worldview of the Latin American left. Furthermore, Cuban counter-intelligence would not want any competition in Caracas from its arch-enemy agencies.

5 Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: My Life* (New York, Scribner, 2006), 542.

Chávez's counter-intelligence blows, and the gradual exiting of other American presence including in the commercial spheres, have badly eroded the U.S. government's understanding of the inner workings of the Chávez government and security apparatus. This intelligence

In the case of Cuba, the Trump administration has adopted an assertive unilateralism, throwing its weight against the preferences of most European and Latin American nations, who much preferred the Obama strategy of engagement and support for gradual, peaceful change. By contrast, on Venezuela the Trump administration has been willing to coordinate policies with the Lima Group of regional governments.

deficit may help to explain the persistent underestimation of the staying power of the *chavista* government. The intelligence deficit also helps to explain the blatant intelligence failure in early 2019, when the U.S. government very publicly backed opposition leader Juan Guaidó in his efforts, thus far unsuccessful, to splinter the armed forces and oust President Nicolás Maduro and his close associates.

Interestingly, the style of U.S. diplomacy has varied significantly toward these two Caribbean Basin nations. In the case of Cuba, the Trump administration has adopted an assertive unilateralism, throwing its weight against the preferences of most European and Latin American nations, who much preferred the Obama strategy of engagement and support for gradual, peaceful change. By contrast, on Venezuela the Trump administration has been willing to coordinate policies with the Lima Group of regional governments. The administration recognized that despite its general disdain for multilateralism, in the Lima Group it found governments with

similar concerns and goals, even if not always in full agreement on tactics and instrumentalities. This flexibility in administration diplomacy might seem an obvious response to opportunity, yet the Trump team has not always been willing to work with like-minded allies on other issues, such as commercial policies toward China.

Regime Types and Ideologies

There is another explanation for the U.S. intelligence and diplomatic failures to date in Venezuela: the hemisphere is confronting a new model of "minority authoritarianism" that has, at least momentarily, confounded the U.S. government as well as other international players. During an earlier period often labelled "electoral authoritarianism,"⁶ the *chavista* government arguably respected, more or less, democratic norms even as incumbent candidates enjoyed an uneven playing field. In the golden era of sky-high oil prices, Chávez could heat up the economy, measurably improving living standards, and win internationally supervised elections. But the collapse of global oil prices, and gross economic mismanagement, cor-

6 Carlos Romero, "Venezuela and Cuba," in H. Michael Erisman and John M. Kirk, *Cuban Foreign Policy Transformation under Raúl Castro* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2018).

ruption and clientism, ended the fiesta; the *chavistas* could no longer be confident in winning contests genuinely “free and fair.” Rather, *chavista* power came to be based on a loyal security apparatus, including military and police (assisted by paramilitaries), and a bloated public sector equally staffed by *chavista* loyalists, blurring the lines between state and party. Accumulated over two decades, the *chavistas* ruled over an entire generation of recruits. The wages in government jobs might not be very generous but loyal *chavista* employees at least enjoyed steady employment as well as other associated perks. A similar governing coalition has emerged in Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega. How durable this model of minority authoritarianism will be remains to be tested; but in the medium-term, in both Venezuela and Nicaragua, it has survived significant challenges.

It should be noted that this “minority authoritarianism” model differs markedly from the Cuban model. The Venezuelan model evolved gradually and maintains important elements of democratic capitalism, including opposition political parties, however stifled, and a local private sector, however debilitated. The Venezuelan model has evolved gradually, whereas the Cuban system is the product of a root-and-branch upheaval that thoroughly crushed the *ancien régime*. Further, the *chavistas* have not yet been able to mount an equivalent to the hegemonic Cuban Communist Party, with its mass social organizations, extensive social networks, and efficient surveillance systems

Fundamental ideological differences separate the two governments. Marxism-Leninism (*fidélismo*) and state populism (*chavismo*) are at odds in critical respects. Without diverging into a lengthy discourse over ideological definitions and characteristics, historically Marxists have viewed with

contempt populists and their failure to understand class struggle, their readiness to form alliances with class enemies, dangerous reliance on personalities, and sloppy organizational structures. In economic execution, the sober Cubans manage tight fiscal and monetary policies (at least until this year’s surprise announcement of big wage hikes without complementary measures to stimulate a strong supply response), in contrast to Venezuela’s exploding deficits and consequent run-away inflation.

Yet, Chávez’s approach to governing mirrored that of the Cuban government in several important respects: the primacy of politics and ideology over economic results, the preference for presidential centralism, and the recourse to direct popular consultations and mobilizations. Rhetorically, the two governments display a dedication to social equity, international

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solidarity, and national autonomy.⁷ They also share a deep skepticism concerning “bourgeois democracy,” and toward U.S. policy, which to them seems to weaponize democratic liberties

to assist favorable factions but opportunistically to discard them when the wrong side is winning.

Publicly, Fidel Castro spoke very highly of Hugo Chávez.⁸ But he must have recognized the younger man’s ideological immaturity. The elder Fidel was so much better educated, better read, better traveled. We can speculate that Castro could see through Chávez’s many personality flaws, but he quickly recognized how useful Chávez and oil-rich Venezuela could be to Cuba. We do not know what Raúl Castro, first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party until 2021, and President Miguel Díaz-Canel think of Nicolás Maduro, but it is likely that the bilateral relationship is based more upon opportunistic interests than on genuine mutual respect.

The Trump administration has emphasized the ideological overlaps between the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. But the differences in ideologies, organizational structures, economic policies and leadership styles are worthy of note. Wise policymakers would recognize these discrepancies, which compound the inherent competition for regional leadership between the two nations noted above, and the opportunities they present to international actors.

Economic Complementarity

Cuba’s energy model had been highly dependent upon oil shipments from the Soviet Union. In the post-Soviet period Cuba built up its domestic energy production with infusions of capital and equipment from Canada, China, South Korea, and elsewhere. As a result, Cuba produces around 50,000 barrels of oil per day (b/d), or roughly 30-40 percent of its consumption needs.⁹ But the country remains heavily dependent upon imported hydrocarbons; about half of Cuba’s electric power comes from imported fuel.

As energy prices climbed in the early 2000s a Cuban-Venezuelan economic exchange agreement was extremely timely. At its height in 2012, Venezuela supplied Cuba with 105,000 barrels per day at highly subsidized prices. In return, Cuba provided up to 40,000 specialists

7 Roger Burbach, Michael Fox, and Federico Fuentes, *Latin America’s Turbulent Transitions: The Future of Twenty-First Century Socialism* (New York and London: Zed Books, 2013).

8 Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: My Life*.

9 Richard Feinberg, “Cuba’s Economy After Raúl Castro: A Tale of Three Worlds,” (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2018).



Venezuelan socialist brigade volunteers work in Cuba's poor barrios to bolster both countries economic cooperation efforts. | Photo: Flickr

in health care, sports and education; these experts were strategically placed in poor barrios to bolster Chávez's electoral results. According to one estimate, between 2000 and 2018, 219,000 Cuban professionals served in Venezuela. Moreover, between 2000 and 2006 some 300,000 Venezuelans travelled to Cuba to receive medical attention financed by the Venezuelan government.¹⁰ Venezuela paid handsome sums for this expert labor, subsidies which swelled Cuba's external "services" exports to an estimated \$6 billion per year.¹¹

Through these barter arrangements the two nations were exchanging goods and services in which each had a strong comparative advantage and an excess of supply. And the economic exchange provided solutions to each partner's most pressing problems.

Venezuelan oil subsidies to Cuba fit into the *chavista* strategy of using oil to exert diplomatic influence throughout the Caribbean Basin; PetroCaribe was an initiative of the Venezuelan-led Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). During the energy crisis of the 1970s, Venezuela and Mexico had joined in a similar regional subsidy scheme. Despite repeated pleas from many regional leaders, the United States had been unwilling to finance a regional energy plan, leaving a vacuum that Chávez was quick to exploit. PetroCaribe's influence was especially visible within the Organization of American States, where the ALBA members regularly aligned with Venezuela and blocked U.S. initiatives.

But now that Maduro is more dependent upon his security apparatus than upon electoral support, he probably places more value on security assistance, and the numbers of Cuban "internationalists" have declined markedly.

¹⁰ Carlos Romero, "Venezuela and Cuba."

¹¹ Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Pavel Vidal, "El impacto en la economía cubana de la crisis Venezolana y de las políticas de Donald Trump," Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, May 2019.

While invaluable in the short run, the Venezuelan oil subsidy had a deleterious effect on the on-again, off-again Cuban process of economic reforms. The Cuban government had announced plans to build alternative energy capacity with the participation of foreign investors, but execution has lagged badly.¹² A major strategic failure of the Raúl Castro era (2008–2018) was his neglect of energy independence—facilitated by Venezuelan largesse.

Today, Venezuelan oil shipments and related financial subsidies have declined but remain significant in terms of the Cuban energy matrix. In 2017 Venezuelan oil shipments had fallen by about half, to 55,000 barrels per day, and to an estimated 47,000 b/p by March 2019.¹³

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We cannot yet know the full impact of U.S. sanctions which seek to disrupt Venezuelan oil exports; a complete shut-off of Venezuelan energy supplies would cost Cuba another estimated \$1.8 billion.¹⁴ The decline in Venezuelan subsidies from cheap oil and overpriced medical services is certainly compounding the many headaches of Cuban policy makers. Furthermore, U.S. hostilities have reduced tourism income, national exports remain depressed and, inexplicably, the Cuban authorities are making life more difficult for the one

promising sector in the economy, the emergent private sector. Overall, official statistics claim that growth remains positive if anemic, but the visible reality is one of growing consumer scarcities, shortages of gasoline, and a very depressed investment climate.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba had succeeded in gradually diversifying its international relations. The government did not want to repeat its experience of extreme dependency upon the Soviet bloc. Cuba welcomed Venezuelan assistance but recognized the vulnerabilities of the *chavista* regime and sought to diversify its commercial exchanges. Initially, many governments were willing to provide Cuba with trade credits but increasingly balked at Cuba's inability to honor contracts and keep current on debt repayment schedules. Similarly, many potential investors visited the island but most departed discouraged by the government's ambivalence toward international capital, the excessive red tape, and the overall low quality of the business climate.¹⁵ Today, Cuba is not creditworthy and neither China nor Russia, and certainly not private financial institutions, are willing to provide fresh credits on a large scale. By itself, Venezuelan assistance can help to keep the Cuban economy afloat but it is not sufficient to re-ignite growth.

12 Richard Feinberg, "Cuba's Economy After Raúl Castro."

13 Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Pavel Vidal, "El impacto en la economía."

14 Ibid.

15 Richard Feinberg, *Open for Business: Building the New Cuban Economy* (Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution, 2016).

Looking Forward

Under what circumstances might the two regimes part ways? Is either likely to abandon the other, to pursue their own divergent goals?

Reportedly, the Obama administration engaged in discussions with the Cubans regarding Venezuela, probing to see under what conditions Havana might assist in re-orienting Venezuela back toward pluralist democracy and a foreign policy less reflexively hostile toward the United States. More recently, European countries have engaged in similar probes.¹⁶ So far, the Cubans have demurred, at once downplaying their influence in Caracas and asserting that the bilateral relationship was not negotiable.

One could imagine a complex deal whereby the U.S. and the international community indicated a willingness to replace Venezuelan oil shipments and financial subsidies, in whole or in part, in return for Cuban collaboration in nudging the *chavistas* toward a solution to the Venezuelan crisis (whatever that might look like). But several complications arise, from the Cuban perspective. Can Havana trust any agreement entered into by the Trump administration? Even if executive branch officials were sincere, might Congress and hostile Cuban-Americans disrupt any accord? Could Havana be certain that successor governments in Caracas would honor the accord? And would Cuban international credibility itself suffer if Cuba were perceived to be sacrificing a once loyal ally in a self-interested deal with the United States? Finally, might the whiff of such a deal, which some Cubans might see as treachery, provoke serious rifts within the Cuban Communist Party?

U.S. policymakers imagine that by further punishing Cuba, they might drive a wedge between Havana and Caracas and compel Cuba to withdraw its security assistance. The logic is hard to follow. The administration appears intent on a punitive policy toward Havana in any case, driven by its own domestic political goals as well as ideological predispositions. Why should Cuba believe that, if it abandoned a regional ally, the U.S. would soften its sanctions? On the contrary, the Trump administration appears to hope that the removal of the *chavista* government in Venezuela would be but a prelude to the real prize: regime change in Havana. If anything, the harsh rhetoric and escalating economic sanctions against both governments seem more likely to push the targets closer together, in a defensive huddle.

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¹⁶ Author interviews 2018-19, Havana and Washington, D.C.

Under the Trump administration, the United States has lumped together Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua in a “Troika of Tyranny.”¹⁷ Beyond the turn of phrase, the label suggests an erasing of the differences among the regime types. Yet, as this essay suggests, the phrase “Two Nations, One Revolution” masks important differences that an astute U.S. foreign policy could exploit. The Cuban variant of *fidelist*a Marxism is very distinct from *chavista* populism, in social base, organizational structure, and macroeconomic management. Moreover, as history and geography suggest, Cuba and Venezuela are natural competitors for influence in the Caribbean Basin. Pushed together, they are more likely to seek to balance against U.S. leadership and to search for external leverage (as from China and Russia). Pried apart, geopolitical logic would suggest that the individual states might either seek to accommodate to U.S. power or take advantage of today’s multipolarity to survive within a worldwide diversity of relationships.

17 See: The White House, “Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Administration’s Policies in Latin America,” November 2, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-administrations-policies-latin-america/>.

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