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An Embargo Free Cuba: A Regional Security Partner

Major Kevin J. Stepp
United States Marine Corps

Despite the United States' decades-long foreign policy to economically isolate Cuba, Cuba has maintained considerable partnerships and influence across the Latin American region. In a political environment where the United States has reopened diplomatic and economic relationships with Cuba, Latin America's regional security environment should be reexamined in the context of an embargo free Cuba. Cuba's partnerships and influence with many nations in the region frequently intersects with the United States' security objectives in Latin America. A shortsighted focus on the present challenges of the United States' and Cuba's relationship distracts from the potential opportunity created by an embargo free Cuba. Moreover, a policy to economically isolate Cuba puts at risk opportunities for the United States to draw close partners in a region that may be drifting away from the United States' security objectives. A trade embargo free Cuba will contribute to a

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more secure Latin American region by transitioning Cuba into a stable partner aligned with several of the United States' theater security objectives.

Cuba's ties to the United States' partners in the region could risk theater security objectives that seek to promote regional security and stability through partners. Mexico and Colombia are two Latin American nations that maintain strong bilateral relationships with the United States while simultaneously maintaining partnerships with Cuba. A joint United States-Mexico partnership augments the security posture on the United States' southern approach by its conduct of security cooperation and law enforcement activities.¹ For more than five decades, and in direct support of the Colombian government's fight against the Revolution Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the United States has directed diplomatic, military, and economic resources toward Colombia's internal security posture.² In August 2014, Cuba's capital city of Havana was selected to host peace talks between the FARC and the Colombian government.³ And, most recently in September 2014, Mexico's Foreign Secretary visited Cuba to strengthen existing ties with the island nation calling Cuba a "corner-stone of Mexico's foreign policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean."⁴ Cuba's relationships with Mexico and Colombia could weaken the United States' existing strong partnership with these two nations. Cuba's influence with many other Latin American nations could erode, and may already be eroding, the United States' influence, particularly in pursuit of regional security objectives. The cost of decreased influence for the United States may be its partners selectively supporting the United States' initiatives in the region, or at worst, having to choose between Cuba's and the United States' respective security objectives if they are at conflict. Failing to engage Cuba as a diplomatic partner in the region fails to leverage the influence Cuba holds with many of the United States' partners. In the United States Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) resource constrained and economy-of-force theater, the United States' security objectives depended on strong, committed, and enduring partnerships. Rather than risk the United States' security objectives, Cuba's influence with many of the United States' Latin American partners must be leveraged to bolster commitments from partner nations. Transitioning Cuba into a regional partner aligned with the United States will further strengthen the United States' partnership in Latin America.

Reopening trade relations with Cuba will achieve one of the United States' security objectives to build partner capacity by supporting Cuba's economic development. Prior to the passing of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act authorizing a trade embargo on Cuba, the Cuban economy was almost solely dependent on its robust commercial relationship with the United States.⁵ In the decades since the embargo, Cuba has sought to reestablish economic ties to replace this lost commercial activity. Brazil's capital investment in Cuba's Mariel Harbor, an international shipping port, is indicative of Cuba's pursuit of economic development and the region's willingness to support Cuba.⁶ Through economic development, unconstrained by the United States, Cuba will be a better resourced nation and will develop greater capacity to respond to security threats in the Caribbean and Central American region.

Robert Zoellick, a former trade representative of the United States and currently the 11th President of the World Bank Group, believes there is a strong link between a nation's economic strength and the ability to respond to security threats.⁷ Economic development will build Cuba's capacity to access, manage, and control resources which will strengthen its response to local and regional security threats. Since 2010, due to internal economic policy changes, Cuba has experienced a three-fold increase in self-employment opportunities.⁸ However, these growing private sector opportunities are challenged by the lack of available capital to support private development.⁹ The increased free exchange of goods and influx of foreign investment will bolster Cuba's on-going privatization. Additionally, as Cuba continues to develop its economic strength, a nation more capable of responding to and supporting cooperative responses to local, territorial, and regional security threats will result.

Cuba's economic development would have a near immediate effect on the regional security environment in the form of decreased human trafficking and illicit migration off the coast of Florida. SOUTHCOM ranks human trafficking as one of its predominant security challenges, which are steadily increasing in the Caribbean, particularly for those routes leading through the Caribbean to Florida.¹⁰ An unconstrained and more economically stable Cuba would provide its people with economic alternatives and greater opportunities for improved social welfare. With a primary mission of protecting the southern approach to the United States, SOUTHCOM should have much interest in an embargo free Cuba. The potential to decreased human trafficking and illicit migration in the Caribbean should be viewed as an opportunity for an embargo free Cuba to improve the region's security posture.

Cuba's new capacity will also augment the region's security posture as Cuba begins to actively contribute to cooperative maritime security activities. Cuba's hosting of the peace talks between the FARC and the Colombian government demonstrates both Cuba's interest in the internal security of its partner nations and its desire to contribute toward greater regional security in Latin America. Cuba, though a state with a depressed economy, is an active and engaged participant in both the regional and global community. In advance of the United States, Cuba sent 160 medical workers to Sierra Leone in response to the Ebola crisis in West Africa.¹¹ An embargo-free Cuba will be poised to participate in regional security activities across the Caribbean and Central America to an even greater degree. For example, security and defense activities like Operation UNIFIED RESOLVE saw 68% of maritime interdictions supported or directly performed by partner nations.¹² Though Cuba did not participate in Operation UNIFIED RESOLVE, declining budgets, specifically directed toward an economy-of-force theater like SOUTHCOM, necessitate reliance on partnering and cooperative activities. Cuba could provide resources and forces to augment the security activities occurring in the region.

A joint United States-Cuba initiative, where the Cuban Border Guard actively patrols its territorial waters to preserve life and to prevent illicit migration attempts by Cuban citizens has resulted in consistent yearly increases in maritime interdiction rates.¹³ This type of cooperation between the United States Coast Guard and Cuban Border Guard demonstrates the potential for an embargo free Cuba to participate and increase the space of ongoing cooperative maritime security activities. Cuba's support of internal security in Central America and its interest in containing a crisis in West Africa demonstrate its concern in maintaining a secure region and may signal its willingness to augment the posture of larger cooperative security activities.

However, upon initial consideration of lifting the trade embargo, it may appear that the opportunity of greater regional security is odds with national security strategic interests. The challenges associated with lifting the trade embargo on Cuba are not minor and may describe an environment where the United States must maintain unilateral containment of Cuba until reforms are made from within. Cuba's government, led by the Fidel family, has perpetuated decades of human rights violations.¹⁴ Also, it could be argued that Cuba's decades of anti-American sentiments have perpetuated the perception to many nations in Latin America that the United States is an interventionist. Peter Hakim, with the University of Calgary Centre for Military Strategic Studies, proposed that the present course of the United States' relations with Latin American nations could result in an eventual drifting of diplomatic and economic engagement away from the United States' interests.¹⁵ Cuba's influence with United States' partners could prove to be a tipping point either to support a drift of Latin American nations away from the United States or to develop into stronger and sustained relationships with the United States.

The Cuba of the 1960s and 1970s is not the Cuba of today; Cuba is a country in transition. The Cuban government is already demonstrating a softening in its long held authoritarian domestic and

foreign policy. Gary Maybarduk, an independent consultant in the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, noted that Cuba's transition to support greater human security and welfare is demonstrated by Cuba recently signing two international human rights treaties.¹⁶ One of these treaties guarantees the right of self-determination to peacefully assemble, and to exercise additional civil and political freedom; the other guarantees fair wages, the right to work, and additional social and economic freedoms.¹⁷ Maybarduk also noted that as an embargo free Cuba engages in the greater global economy, Cuba will be subjected to increased international pressure to conform to international norms.¹⁸

Reopening diplomatic relationships starts a new dialogue between the island nation and the United States. This rapprochement assumes that as the United States offers the incremental reopening of ties Cuba will respond with internal policies that embrace a greater degree of human rights, security, and welfare for the Cuban people and for foreigners who engage with the Cuban people. Increased engagement and the rapprochement of diplomatic relations pose a risk. A recent statement by Fidel Castro promoted cooperation in the interest of creating solutions with the United States yet maintains his characteristic distrust of the United States' policy.¹⁹ Cuba may maintain a stalwart commitment to its governmental policies and make no changes to its internal security and economic policies. To effectively transition Cuba in to a regional security partner, Cuba will ultimately have to respond through incremental changes to its domestic environment. Cuba's response to the United States and to increased international pressure at the reopening of ties will weigh as heavily on the outcome of transitioning Cuba into a regional partner as will the United States' upcoming executive and legislative actions.

General Kelly noted in his posture statement that to enable capacity building, "Trust must be built . . . and sustained through regular contact."²⁰ Contact with Cuba is ongoing through a shift in the United States' executive policy and legislative actions that are gradually reopening diplomatic and economic relationships. In the interest of the United States' security objectives, Cuba's transition must be managed to avoid disengagement by our partners in the region, and to do this the United States must be ready to engage Cuba as a partner. Amid the challenges, lifting the embargo will create an opportunity for the United States to develop Cuba into a partner and to leverage a new United States-Cuba relationship toward stronger partnerships with many other Latin American nations.

A softening and transitioning Cuba is opening the door for the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between Cuba and the United States. An embargo free and economically resourced Cuba will be more capable of contributing toward the regional security of Latin America. Lifting the embargo will develop Cuba's capacity through greater access to foreign economic activities that will contribute to and augment ongoing cooperative security activities. Uninhibited by the trade embargo, the United States can leverage its new relationship with Cuba to augment the security posture and to strengthen drifting partnerships. To neglect Cuba's influence in the region is shortsighted. It is also shortsighted to dismiss Cuba's potential to support the United States' regional security objectives because of the challenges of Cuba's failing socio-economic and domestic policy. Placing too great a focus on the challenges of the United States-Cuba relationship will risk gaining the opportunity to create a more stable partner and contributor toward a more regionally secure Latin America.

¹ U.S. Relations with Mexico, United States Department of State, last modified September 10, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35749.htm>.

² U.S. Relations with Colombia, United States Department of State, last modified November 19, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35754.htm>.

- ³ *The Economist*, "Colombia's Peace Process: The Moment of Truth," August 30, 2014, The Americas, <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21614157-government-and-farc-grapple-victims-truth-justice-and-mechanics-ending>
- ⁴ *EFE Agency*, "Mexico Foreign Secretary Visit Cuba," last modified September 8, 2014, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2014/09/08/mexico-foreign-secretary-visits-cuba/>
- ⁵ Julia E. Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88, 89.
- ⁶ Julia E. Sweig and Michael Bustamante, "Cuba After Communism," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 92, Issue 4, (July/August 2013), 8.
- ⁷ Robert Zoellick, "Who Won the Recession? The Currency of Power," *Foreign Policy*, November 2012, 9.
- ⁸ Mark P. Sullivan, "Cuba: U.S. Policy and Issues for the 113th Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, (Washington, D.C., 31 July 2014), 14.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 14.
- ¹⁰ Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, United States Marine Corps, Commander United States Southern Command: Before The 113th Congress House Armed Services Committee, 26 February 2014, 6.
- ¹¹ Maria Cheng, "Cuba Sending Dozens of Doctors to Fight Ebola," Associated Press, September 12, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/cuba-sending-hundreds-doctors-fight-ebola-25450654>
- ¹² Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, United States Marine Corps, Commander United States Southern Command: Before The 113th Congress House Armed Services Committee, 26 February 2014, 43.
- ¹³ Mark P. Sullivan, "Cuba: U.S. Policy and Issues for the 113th Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, (Washington, D.C., 31 July 2014), 53-54.
- ¹⁴ Julia E. Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65, 147, 149.
- ¹⁵ Peter Hakim, "The Future of Inter-American Relations," *Calgary Papers in Military and Strategy Studies* (University of Miami, January 21, 2014), 3.
- ¹⁶ Gary H. Maybarduk. "Cuba and the U.S National Interest: Developing an American Strategy for the Cuban Transition", *Cuba in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2008), 29.
- ¹⁷ James C. McKinley Jr, "Cuba Signs 2 Human Rights Treaties," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/world/americas/29iht-cuba.4.10589148.html?_r=0
- ¹⁸ Gary H. Maybarduk. "Cuba and the U.S National Interest: Developing an American Strategy for the Cuban Transition", *Cuba in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2008), 29.
- ¹⁹ *The Associated Press*, "Fidel Castro speaks out on normalizing relations with the U.S.," January 28, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/fidel-castro-speaks-normalizing-realtions-article-1.2094622>
- ²⁰ Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, United States Marine Corps, Commander United States Southern Command: Before The 113th Congress House Armed Services Committee, 26 February 2014, 20.