

CUBA'S VENEZUELAN INTERVENTION

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Venezuela is immersed in a political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. Its GDP has dropped by at least 54% in the last five years and crude oil production has fallen from 3.3 million barrels of oil per day (b/d) in 1998, when Chávez became president, to 770,000 b/d in August 2019¹ (oil accounts for at least 95% of the country's export revenues).² The 2 million percent hyperinflation rate has ravaged savings and salaries and devastated a once-vibrant manufacturing sector.³ At least 87% of Venezuelans now live in poverty,⁴ social services have collapsed, people are going hungry and dying in hospitals for lack of supplies, and more than 4 million Venezuelans have fled,⁵ as the mass exodus continues.

According to a June 2019 report on Venezuela by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in 2018 alone, Venezuelan security forces reportedly commit-

ted at least 5,287 extrajudicial killings and were responsible for 52 deaths during public protests; from January to May 2019, 22 National Assembly Deputies had been stripped of parliamentary immunity.⁶ The UN report also described patterns of grave human rights violations and confirmed that the strategy of the government of Nicolás Maduro was to neutralize, repress, and criminalize opposition and dissent, militarize State institutions, restrict democratic space, dismantle institutional checks and balances, and shrink space for independent media.

CUBA'S INFLUENTIAL ROLE IN VENEZUELA

In a recently-published book, *Cuba's intervention in Venezuela: a strategic occupation of global implications*,⁷ I describe how Cuba has played a critical role in Venezuela's demise by colonizing the country and progressively transferring its socio-political and eco-

1. Marianna Parraga and Mircely Guanipa, "Venezuelan oil exports fall to lowest level in 2019 as U.S. sanctions bite," *Reuters*, September 3, 2019.

2. Juan Forero, "Hyperinflation shatters Venezuelan manufacturing," *The Wall Street Journal*, Caracas, March 5, 2019.

3. Venezuela's annual inflation rate jumped to 2.69 million percent in January 2019, from 1.70 million percent in December, according to estimates from Venezuela's opposition-led congress. It is the highest inflation rate on record. (Trading Economics, "Inflation in Venezuela," <https://tradingeconomics.com/venezuela/inflation-cpi>.)

4. Poverty was at 87% in 2017, according to data from the Living Conditions Survey (Encovi) carried out by the Central Venezuelan, Catholic Andrés Bello, and Simón Bolívar Universities. Extreme poverty was 61.2% in 2017. Most analysts agree that the rate of poverty and extreme poverty both increased in 2018. See Luis Pedro España, María G. Ponce, "Encuesta sobre condiciones de vida en Venezuela," IIES-UCAB. Feb. 2018, bit.ly/2VtScA

5. Tom Phillips, "Venezuela's 'staggering' exodus reaches 4 million, UN refugee agency says," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2019.

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

7. María C. Werlau, *Cuba's intervention in Venezuela: a strategic occupation of global implications* (Free Society Project, 2019) https://www.amazon.com/Cubas-Intervention-Venezuela-Occupation-Implications/dp/1086552970/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=werlau&qid=1568906993&sr=8-1

conomic “revolutionary” template to the new colony. Essentially, the Cuban regime has occupied Venezuela, not with a traditional military force but by strategically placing assets to control its economy, security forces, communications, and society in general. As a result, Cuba is present in all aspects of Venezuela's economy and society—armed forces, security apparatus, presidency, ministries, migration services, electoral board, commercial registries, airports, border crossings, ports, banking system, telecommunication company, state enterprises, and in all industries including petrochemical, mining, and construction.

CUBA'S CORE COMPETENCIES

How was Cuba—much smaller in size and population than Venezuela, ruled by a military dictatorship commanding a parasitic economy and committed to a failed ideology—able to successfully usurp the sovereignty of the much richer Venezuela without even firing a shot? Thanks to asymmetrical capabilities, a unique set of tools derived from the totalitarian model, that constitute the regime's “core competency,”⁸ or comparative advantage, a unique brand of “soft power on steroids” honed over six decades.

The Cuban regime and all its entities operate without the need to respond to term limits, free elections, balance of powers, bureaucratic and institutional demands, scrutiny from the media or civil society; thus, it operates without rules and limits present even in the weakest democracies. As a result, the Communist Party of Cuba can design strategies, implement methodologies, and direct international propaganda, disinformation, influence, and penetration with absolute cohesion and long-term planning. It has consistently and for decades dedicated massive material and human resources to a formidable intelligence and propaganda apparatus actively deployed internally and externally and devoted to surveillance, repression, and influence. The intelligence services operate

without legal or ethical limits, systematically manipulate interests, predispositions, and weaknesses, and resort to even the most perverse tactics to achieve their objectives.

VENEZUELA: A PRIZE FOR CUBA

In controlling Venezuela, Cuba achieved a coveted prize. It was long the jewel in the crown of Castro's historic obsession to expand the Cuban revolution in the region and spread its influence throughout the world. Commanding Venezuela—for its oil and mineral wealth, privileged location, and geostrategic importance—was the spearhead of Fidel Castro's long-held “continental project” since his rise to power in 1959 to spread the Cuban revolution from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. For decades, Cuba gave Venezuelan guerrillas money, soldiers, weapons, training, safe haven, and logistical and strategic support to overthrow their country's democratically-elected governments (as it did in most of the region and in other hemispheres). Having failed with armed insurrections, it changed to a more covert, but no less committed, strategy. Its intelligence service developed and maintained many clandestine influential agents in Venezuela's political parties, government, armed forces, institutions, and society in general.

Hugo Chávez was one of its engenderers. During his military career, he was part of a clandestine civic-military plan, or conspiracy, to overthrow Venezuela's democracy and implement a radical, Communist-inspired project; some of its leaders had known ties to Cuba. After he headed an unsuccessful coup d'état and was released from prison 18 months later as a result of an amnesty, Chávez developed a symbiotic relationship with Fidel Castro. Castro understood—no doubt, with the help of a hefty intelligence dossier—how to skillfully manipulate Chávez. The synergy of their grandiose dreams and mutual interests shed a comprehensive, and secret, revolutionary

8. The business management theory of core competency strategy is applied to geopolitics. The term “core competency” was coined in 1990 by the leading management experts C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel. (C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, “The Core competence of the corporation,” *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1990.) It states that firms must seek to grow and play to their strengths (areas or functions in which they have competencies.) The theory also defines what forms a core competency that is not easy for competitors to imitate; it can be reused across the markets that the firm caters to and the products it makes. (“Core Competency Theory of Strategy,” <https://www.managementstudyguide.com/core-competency-theory-of-strategy.htm>.)

integration plan put into action from the onset of Chávez's presidency. Cuba provided the ideological and strategic direction while deploying its repressive architecture as Venezuela financed it with its oil wealth. Perhaps unbeknownst to Chávez, Castro had always plotted to secure the dominating role. Upon Chávez's death, officially announced on March 5, 2013, Cuba orchestrated his succession by Nicolás Maduro, who had been trained in Cuba and was loyal to Cuba since his youth.

The Cubans began to arrive as soon as Chávez assumed the presidency. But, it is impossible to know from open sources how many Cubans are in Venezuela at the service of their government—many have not entered officially and some pose as Venezuelans. Cuban official sources (which are never reliable) have reported around 46,000 Cuban “collaborators”⁹ in Venezuela working on “more than 200 projects,” 21,500 of whom are in the health sector;¹⁰ that would leave at least 24,500 in unspecified capacities (presumably in a security or military capacity). Other well-informed sources believe the number is much larger. Many of the civilian “collaborators” are agents or collaborators of Cuban counterintelligence services; all have orders to promote the Bolivarian project, monitor each other, inform on their surroundings, and even take up arms to fight for the revolution. But the measure of Cuba's Venezuelan intervention is not in the number of Cubans in Venezuela, it is in the influential and wide-ranging controlling roles they have in all of Venezuelan society, exerted inside Venezuela as well as from Cuba.

CUBA-VENEZUELA INTEGRATION

The Cubazuela or Venecuba¹¹ integration project encompasses the following (as detailed in my aforementioned book):

Integration of the Security and Armed Forces

In 2007, Venezuela's Armed Forces adopted the Cuban military doctrine of a militarized society and “war of all peoples” as well as the concept of “fatherland, socialism, or death.” They have been subordinated with strong ideological-political indoctrination, purges, pervasive surveillance, fear, and repression with deathly consequences (incarceration, torture and even death) imposed by very strong military counterintelligence with Cuban leadership and training. The loyalties of the higher echelons of the military have been bought with the Cuban model of political and economic military hegemony; today, Venezuela's military reportedly administers two-thirds of the economy.

Cuba also has a preponderant role in all the security forces (intelligence and counterintelligence services, National Guard, police, paramilitaries) that control and repress society as a whole. It helped develop the motorized paramilitaries, “colectivos,” trains and helps coordinate them, and is involved in torturing and interrogating regime opponents.

Integration of Information and Communications

Cuba exercises a virtual occupation of Venezuela by controlling the databases of ministries, agencies, state companies, electoral system, migration services, etc., and comprehensive data on all the citizens, including very detailed information such as their blood type and physical handicaps. Cuba keeps the source codes and has real-time control of communications through an underwater fiber optic cable connecting the two countries. Venezuela's new identity card, the “fatherland” card, which is required to vote, access social services as well as subsidized gasoline and food, was developed by Cuba and its data controlled by Cuban IT experts. Cuba also developed and runs

9. Cuba refers to the temporary workers it sends abroad as “international collaborators;” for many years in the past it had preferred terms such as “proletarian internationalists.”

10. “Maduro se reunió con el vicepresidente de Cuba para fortalecer el vínculo bilateral,” La Habana, *EFE*, November 18, 2017; “Díaz-Canel le enviará otros 500 médicos especialistas a Maduro,” La Habana, *Diario de Cuba*, September 10, 2018.

11. Certain journalists started to use the term “Cubazuela” or “Venecuba” in the mid 2000s. See, for example, Benedict Mander, “Ties bolster regimes in Havana and Caracas,” Caracas, *Financial Times*, September 14, 2011; and José de Córdoba, “The future of ‘Cubazuela’: the ties between Castro and Chávez have kept the island nation afloat. What now?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2013. Also see James A. Cohrs, “Venecuba: an analysis of Cuban influence in Venezuela and its support for the Bolivarian revolution,” *International Studies Capstone Research Papers, Senior Capstone Papers*, Cedarville University, April 24, 2015.

programs of electronic surveillance and cyber-repression aimed at opponents, retired members of the armed forces, and celebrities that even monitor their connections on social networks.

Economic Integration

The first of successive Venezuela-Cuba Comprehensive Cooperation Agreements, signed in October 2000, began the integration of hundreds of projects in the two countries (mostly within Venezuela), that included the most sensitive Venezuelan industries such as financial and food production and distribution. The integration essentially consists of control and subsidies for the Cuban regime. Cuban state companies, most of them belonging to its military conglomerate or intelligence service, are paid through collaboration agreements to manage and/or provide services to Venezuelan entities as well as serve as intermediaries for Venezuela's software and medical imports. There is little information of any actual economic successes.

Judicial Integration

Cuba-Venezuela judicial integration normalized cooperation in security, i.e., repression, to "defend the Bolivarian project." As a first step the Venezuelan constitution was amended to deliver a populist document with a long list of "rights" for the lower social classes and majority rule without minority protections; the new constitution allows the president to remain in power indefinitely with enormous powers and discretions, secures judicial submission to the executive, provides the legal architecture to curb the independent media, politicizes the judiciary, and perpetuates the revolution in power.¹²

The Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty between Venezuela and Cuba was signed in 1999 and came into effect December 22, 2004, when it was approved by the Venezuelan National Assembly. The treaty established the legal framework for cooperation between Cuban and Venezuelan authorities investigating criminal matters and included the unusual clause that Venezuela agreed to act even in cases in which the crime in question was not a crime in Venezuela. A U.S. embassy cable of March 2004 dissected some of the problems with the treaty, as outlined by Venezuelan constitutional lawyers and scholars, that put the Venezuelan judicial system at the service of Cuba's totalitarian justice system: it allows Cuban officials to act directly in Venezuela to investigate people that could be charged in Cuban courts (including Venezuelan citizens for criticizing the Cuban regime) or to persecute people in Venezuela, and it entailed cooperation on political and military cases including confidential cooperation that violates Venezuela's constitution.¹³ The U.S. diplomatic cable concluded that the treaty opened the door "to investigations of Cuban dissidents in Venezuela."¹⁴ Further, a 2010 bilateral agreement allows Cuban police and security personnel to carry out intelligence and police tasks in Venezuela.¹⁵ In March 2018, the attorney generals of both countries signed another cooperation agreement.¹⁶

Ideological Integration

A secret strategy was put in place to radically transform Venezuela over three generations by teaching people to behave differently in economic, political, and social terms. Former PDVSA President General Guacaipuro Lameda, received his "ideological induction" from Fidel Castro in Havana in 2000 and has described in detail Fidel's "recipe" of collective impoverishment, political manipulation, and repres-

12. Douglas Farah, "Cuba's role in the Bolivarian radical populist movement's dismantling of democracy," December 11, 2017, IBI Consultants LLC, p. 28, https://www.ibiconsultants.net/_pdf/cuba-in-the-bolivarian-revolution.pdf, p. 38.

13. "Confidential" cable, signed by Brownfield, March 4, 2015, wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05CARACAS671_a.html.

14. Ibid.

15. Joaquim Ibarz, "Los cubanos controlan ya sectores claves de Venezuela," *La Vanguardia*, February 7, 2010.

16. "Fiscalías de Cuba y Venezuela firman acuerdo de cooperación judicial," Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, May 12, 2018, mpre.gob.ve/2018/03/12/fiscalias-de-cuba-y-venezuela-firman-acuerdo-de-cooperacion-judicial/.

sion.¹⁷ The plan takes its ideological imprint from “21st century socialism,” a revolutionary, populist, anti-capitalist, and anti-U.S. template essentially derived from Fidel Castro’s playbook. Its cradle is the Foro de Sao Paulo, created in 1990 by Fidel, with the Brazilian Lula da Silva’s support, to rethink, revive, and coordinate the radical left after the collapse of Soviet communism.

The Foro abandoned the idea of an armed route to power and embarked on revolutionary transformation through elections and dismantling of democratic institutions and bourgeois structures from within. Its inspiration appears to come from the Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s ideas on cultural hegemony.¹⁸ Its objectives are continental. With Chávez generously dispensing oil riches, the Cubazuela plan was expanded with the 2004 creation of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas) for hemispheric integration under 21st century socialism.

Socio-Cultural Integration

The Cuban branch of the “santería” religion was deliberately transferred to Venezuela and became the extra-official religion of the Bolivarian revolution. Likely devised as an instrument of sociopolitical control, it meant to manipulate Chavez’s affinity for the religious and occult and infiltrate and manipulate Venezuelan society and foster cultural transformation.

Criminal Integration

Criminal integration has two aspects:

Internally: predatory integration. Venezuela adopted the Cuban prototype of socialism: imposed poverty on the people through centrally-planned “social” ownership of the means of production and distribution together with enclave or captive capitalism (so called “state capitalism”) for the exclusive enjoyment of the elite in power. The Cuban regime has traditionally exploited its citizens for profit and similar tactics in Venezuela are to be expected. One that is already in place is forced migration, used to generate

state revenues and influence other countries through destabilization.

Externally: criminal integration, as mafia states. The Cuba-Venezuela integration plan is sustained by shared international criminal networks. Cuba, for decades involved in illegal activities—drug trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, etc.—, enabled the insertion of Venezuela’s bolivarian leadership into an international criminal cartel and opened doors for its establishment of relationships with transnational actors who share nefarious interests. The alliance is involved in all sorts of illegal activities—among them drug trafficking, illegal mining, and money laundering—in conjunction with transnational actors that are enemies of liberal democracy and share nefarious interests: (1) states such as Iran, China, and Russia, that provide Venezuela loans and investments, sell weapons, help with geo-strategic and military coordination, and craft international political support; and (2) non-state actors such as Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, Russian mafias, Hezbollah, ELN FARC, and others that operate in the mining arch border area with Colombia’s Margarita Island, and other areas. These networks of external actors have varying relevance to the Venezuelan situation, but altogether guarantee a constant flow of resources, share strategies, intelligence, and asymmetric comparative advantages (in technology, biotechnology, etc.) For instance, a Venezuelan-Cuban joint venture delivers false passports to Islamic agents, potential terrorists, and criminals; several have been involved in terrorist attacks in Europe and hundreds have been identified trying to enter the United States.

CONCLUSION

The Cuba-inspired and -directed “socialism of the 21st century” has evident asymmetric value; it not only affects the citizens of both Venezuela and Cuba but also poses grave security threats to the region. Though greatly weakened in recent years, the influence, commitment, and tactics of its proponents should not be underestimated.

17. “Una grave alerta de Guaicaipuro Lameda,” March 11, 2016, goo.gl/E9ZwTd; Carla Angola, “Los pobres tendrán que seguir siendo pobres, los necesitamos así,” February 13, 2013, goo.gl/5kaA2p.

18. Dr. Hilda Molina, who was a very close associate of Fidel Castro in the 1980s to 1992, confirms that he had studied Gramsci and was enthusiastic about applying his theories. (Several interviews and correspondence with the author, 2019.)