

Russia-Cuba-U.S. Security Relations

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By Jorge I. Domínguez

On 13 January 2022 Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov suggested that the Russian Federation may deploy military units to Cuba and Venezuela in response to U.S. military support for Ukraine. What agreements may provide for shared security reassurances for Russia, Cuba, and the United States?

Military deployments to Cuba are not new. The Soviet Union began to deliver military supplies to Cuba in 1960 and, in 1962, deployed nuclear warheads, ballistic missiles, and tens of thousands of troops to Cuba. The Soviet Union continued to deploy military forces to Cuba until the end of the Cold War.

Russian military deployments to Cuba are not new. The U.S. Southern Command has monitored Russian Navy deployments to the Caribbean. The last visit to Havana took place in June 2019 -- the frigate Admiral Gorshkov and supporting ships. The equipment of Cuba's armed forces is of Soviet vintage; Russian-Cuban military agreements since 2016 focus on spare parts re-supply. In 2022, a Russian telescope went live in Cuba, interoperative with Russian space satellites, enabling intelligence cooperation.

A **"security regime" may govern these trilateral relations.** A security regime implies a pattern of explicit and implicit understandings among international adversaries that aims to enhance the security of each party. It embodies practical rules to limit the scope of conflicts that still persist. It relies on direct consultation.

The Soviet-U.S. security regime on nuclear and conventional forces. Following the 1962 crisis, the U.S. and the USSR agreed on these understandings:

1. The USSR withdrew its missiles and nuclear warheads from Cuba and the U.S. withdrew its Jupiter missiles from Turkey.
2. The U.S. allowed U.S. verification of its weapons withdrawal. Soviet troops could remain; the Soviet navy, absent nuclear weapons, could visit Cuba.
3. The U.S. promised not to invade contingent on Cuba's permitting on-site inspection. Cuba did not; the no-invasion pledge did not become effective.
4. Only the U.S. and the USSR negotiated. The U.S. refused to engage Cuba directly. There was no formal treaty.

National Security Council Adviser Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoir that, in 1970, following a Soviet request, he affirmed that the understanding "prohibit[ed] the emplacement of any offensive weapons of any kind or any offensive delivery system on Cuban territory. We reaffirmed that in return we would not use military force to bring about a change in the governmental structure of Cuba." Kissinger had known about the now-dropped on-site inspection requirement. The security regime at last became effective.

Later that year, the U.S. objected to new Soviet naval facilities in the port of Cienfuegos. The USSR affirmed “that ballistic missile submarines would never call [on Cuban ports] in an operational capacity,” and that it did not have and would not build a naval base in Cuba.

Both amendments to the understandings embodied the security regime’s practical rules:

1. Each side stopped doing what the other one found objectionable.
2. Each side made unilateral nonreciprocal concessions.
3. Cuba remained excluded.

Two amendments came later. In 1975, Cuba accepted the 1962 crisis settlement, dropping its previous demands that the U.S. had rejected. The U.S. subsequently discovered a residual Soviet brigade in Cuba; Cuba and the USSR reaffirmed the understandings, agreeing not to introduce Soviet combat troops in the future nor to turn the existing brigade into a self-sufficient combat force.

The three governments came to welcome the security regime. Each took care not to humiliate another, made unilateral nonreciprocal concessions, and stopped doing what the other found most objectionable. Precedents were binding and the basis of refinements. Only the U.S. and the USSR negotiated, however.

The Post-1990 Security Regime: Russia/USSR leads. The USSR, then Russia led to create a post-Cold War security regime. In 1991, the USSR withdrew its remaining troops from Cuba. In January 2002, President Putin closed the decades-old Lourdes intelligence facility. In 2000 Russia and Cuba closed Cuba’s only still-unfinished Juraguá nuclear power plant.

Cuba chooses restraint. During the Cold War, Cuba refused to join multilateral nuclear weapons treaties. Yet in 2002 Cuba ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean. Cuba and the International Atomic Energy Agency approved a comprehensive safeguards agreement; on-site inspections occurred in each of the past five years. In 2018, Cuba ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and, in 2021, it ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

U.S.-Cuba security regime. A U.S.-Cuba security regime began with the 1965 migration and the 1973 air piracy agreements. In the late 1980s, U.S.-Cuban negotiations helped to end wars in Africa’s southern cone.

In the 1990s, cooperative and professional military-to-military relations developed around the U.S. Guantanamo naval base and between their coast guards. Illegal migration interdiction and counter drug trafficking cooperation unfolded.

In 2016, the U.S. and Cuba signed agreements to cooperate regarding travel and civil aviation security, countering illegal drug traffic, Coast Guard operations, maritime delimitation, and migration, among others. The U.S. returns, and Cuba accepts, interdicted unauthorized migrants.

The U.S. 2021 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* indicates, “Cuba’s intensive security presence and interdiction efforts have kept supplies of illicit drugs down and prevented traffickers from establishing a foothold... regional traffickers typically avoid Cuba.”

Does this security regime exist in 2022? President Vladimir Putin has acted as if Russia is the USSR’s heir, especially regarding Russia’s neighbors. Putin has threatened to deploy Russian submarines, bearing nuclear weapons, adjacent to the U.S. east coast. Such submarines might rest and repair at Cuban ports; the old security regime bans such services. This century no Russian submarine has visited Cuba.

The pre-1990 and post-1990 security regimes relied on unilateral nonreciprocal concessions to stop doing what the adversary found objectionable. Cuba so acted first in 1975 and has continued. Russia did so until 2002. The U.S. did so last in 1970. The trilateral security regime has not been reaffirmed since the USSR’s collapse.

The reaffirmation of the security regime would seek the same objective as in the past: international stability. In practice, it would simply affirm the *status quo*: Russia and Cuba are not doing what the regime would prohibit; both would promise not to undertake actions to which the U.S. would object. The U.S. would do no more than acknowledge circumstances as they are.

For Russia, an incentive would be recognition as a rightful player in the Caribbean – rightful to agree not to act as the U.S. might object, constraining its future military deployments. For Cuba, an incentive would be to become a shaper of a regime over which it had had no authority, though at the cost of hypothetically constraining its international relationships. For the United States, the incentive would be to stop Russia and Cuba from undertaking what Russia has intimated, though at the cost of accepting a Russian role in the Caribbean and Cuba as an interlocutor – recognizing Russia’s and Cuba’s rights to abstain from unapproved military deployments and unacceptable relationships.

The security regime could still serve shared purposes or wither away. Its revival implies costs to the three governments, but it also promises a stability that each may value.

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