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**Developing Relationships with the Cuban Military, in the Context of
a Changing Cuba**

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On December 17th, 2014, President Obama announced that the United States would take the first steps toward normalizing relations with Cuba. This policy shift opens both opportunities and challenges for agencies of the U.S. government, including the military, as we move toward more normal relations.

Internal Changes in Cuba

To understand the challenges and the opportunities, it is important to understand first that Cuba itself is undergoing a process of internal reform. The internal changes – described euphemistically as “updatings” of the economic system--are intended to maintain political stability and the current political system, in which the Communist Party is the dominant force, while making the economy more productive, and generating economic growth.

Behind this reform process is the recognition by Cuban President Raul Castro that the Cuban economy needs significant changes. When Raul Castro succeeded his brother Fidel in 2006, he inherited an economy that had benefited from the Latin America wide commodities boom, and that was benefitting from a privileged relationship with Venezuela and its oil reserves. But it was an economy with deep structural problems, including extremely low levels of productivity, a low level of internal investment and difficulties attracting foreign investment, difficulties in access to international lending and credit, severe internal deficits in investment in housing and other social goods, and wage stagnation that led to disillusionment for a populace whose young people especially were aware of and eager for the advantages of the developed economies.

None of these issues had brought Cuba to a crisis, and the country was not on the verge of a social explosion. But Raul Castro appears to have concluded the structural problems were critical, and that Cuba could not put off addressing them indefinitely. Unlike his brother Fidel,

Raul Castro did not believe that calls to revolutionary commitment and sacrifice would be enough to address economic discontent in the long run.

Castro moved deliberately to address the issues. He began first by making changes in the senior leadership of the government and the Communist Party, ensuring that his supporters and allies were in key positions, so that he would have the political, institutional, and bureaucratic support to develop and implement a set of reforms.

In 2011, the Cuban Communist Party released a draft set of guidelines for an “updating” of the Cuban economic model. These draft guidelines went through a set of reasonably broad discussions at the grassroots level, involving Communist Party inspired community groups, trade union locals, women’s groups, and others. Following this consultative process, the guidelines were revised, and then approved by the Party, and eventually by Cuba’s National Assembly.

The guidelines – there are 216 of them – propose a new model for the Cuban economy. They envision a shift away from a state-run economy to a more mixed model. A small and mid-size private sector will emerge, while the state will continue to control major industries and about half of the economy (in contrast to the existing model in which the state controls almost all the economy). State enterprises will shed surplus workers, and become more decentralized, and in the process become more efficient and more productive. (Those workers will presumably be absorbed in the new private sector). Centralized economic planning will be reduced, though certainly not disappear, and both state enterprises and local governments will have more decision making authority. Foreign investment will play a bigger –though not unrestricted --role in the economy, and modifications to the foreign investment law will be made to attract more investors. The model envisions a greater integration of the Cuban economy into the international economy.

In this conception, the Communist Party will continue to play the leading political role, in a somewhat modified decision making structure.

The implementation of this reform plan has been slow, and complicated. The Cuban government is not seeking a program of “shock therapy” or overnight change; Raul Castro has repeatedly described his approach to reform as “without hurry but without stopping.” And reform in Cuba, as in most economies, creates winners and losers, and thus supporters and opponents. So, state enterprises have shed workers far more slowly than was originally envisioned, and they have gained less autonomy than had been expected by this date. Foreign investments, though widely discussed, have been slow to be approved. Currency unification has been repeatedly postponed. But the reform process has been moving ahead, and is expected to continue.

For the Cuban leadership and economic planners, it is clear that an improved relationship with the United States is critical to their long-term re-integration into the western hemisphere and the broad international economy. International banking and finance is closely tied to the United States, investors look to U.S. credit rating agencies and U.S. based insurers, and much commercial activity is tied to U.S. trading networks. Moving toward a more normal relationship with the U.S will facilitate Cuba’s reintegration into the international economy.

Changes in the U.S.-Cuban relationship

And so, as the Obama Administration began to deliberate about changing its approach to Cuba, the Cuban political leadership came to conclude that an improved relationship with the United States was a necessary complement to its internal economic restructuring. The December 17th announcement was made in that context, and the next steps in the normalization process will take place in the context of the reform process in Cuba.

The overall improvement in relations is good for the national interest of the United States. It removes a long-standing irritant in our relations in the region, even with close allies and friendly governments. It takes away what was for many Latin Americans a symbol of historic U.S. heavy-handedness in the region. It will depolarize a number of political issues, particularly discussions about the future of the OAS and its relationship to CELAC and other multi-lateral bodies. It will benefit the U.S. in other ways. While it may produce a short term uptick in illegal migration, as Cubans who fear that normalization will end their special preferences under the Cuban Adjustment Act try to come to the U.S., its long term impact is likely to reduce migration flows, and particularly to reduce the fear of mass migration events.

It will likely reinforce and contribute to the process of economic reform in Cuba, and it will likely support modest political reforms, as reduced U.S.-Cuban hostility makes it harder to characterize reformers as undermining national unity. The economic reform process in Cuba will generate its own pressures for political opening, as a small but real private sector emerges and as access to information and new information technologies increases.

Thus the U.S. will be contemplating new relationships with the Cuban government in the context of an ongoing and dynamic process of internal reform, which will have some political as well as economic implications.

The Cuban Military

What does this mean for developing relationships with the Cuban military?

Too little is known about the Cuban military. FIU Latin America and Caribbean program director Frank Mora has written about the Cuban military, Canadian analyst Hal Klepak has published on the subject, as has NDU professor Alex Crowther. The DIA has produced some classified material. But it is still an understudied institution.

This is particularly problematic because what is known about the Cuban military suggests what a critical institution is it in the Cuban governance structure today, and reminds us that it is likely to continue to be so in the near future.

The Cuban military is the leading force in national defense. Though far smaller than it was in the 1970s and 1980s--both the number of troops and the size of the budget today are only about a third of what they were in the late 1980s-- and no longer focused on projecting power abroad, the Cuban military remains the key element in a system of national defense and protection.

The military serves as a guarantor of the domestic political order, and are widely perceived as loyal to the government and the political order. (When for example then-President Fidel Castro fell ill, and Raul Castro became acting president, army troops were put on alert.) That said, there is little history of the Cuban military carrying out domestic repression. In the only known incident, in 1994, in the midst of serious economic difficulties, riots ensued along the Havana waterfront and troops were called out to calm the situation. And though the military presence served to calm the situation, then-Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro was uncomfortable deploying the military, reportedly commenting that the people needed more foodstuffs not more bullets. While the ultimate guarantor of the political order, it is not clear that troops would be willing to systematically repress citizens or fire on Cuban civilians, in the probably unlikely event of a major internal crisis in the near future.

The Cuban military is the second most important actor in the Cuban political system, after the Cuban Communist Party. President Raul Castro was the head of the military and the Minister of the Armed Forces since the earliest years of the Cuban revolution. His closest advisors are military men who he has brought into positions of trust in the governmental

structure. Most senior officials in the military are members of the Cuban Communist Party, and exercise influence both as military officers and as Party members.

Along with its direct political role, the Cuban military is a key actor in the Cuban economy. Senior military officials who have shown their competence and are close to President Castro have been placed in charge of a number of important ministries dealing with the economy. More fundamentally, the armed forces are involved in production and services in the Cuban economy. In the 1980s, a number of Cuban officers studied abroad, earning economics and business management degrees in order to effectively manage the enterprises that engaged in production for the military. When the national budget was sharply cut in the early 1990s, the military responded by expanding the production of military industries, and moving into agriculture, consumer goods production and other industrial sectors to make up the shortfall. Today, a substantial share of state enterprises are owned and managed by the Ministry of the Armed Forces (making the Armed Forces a force for improved economic management and economic reform.)

Finally, the Cuban military is generally a respected institution in Cuban society. Most Cubans have done military service, and view the armed forces positively. Its prestige is less than it was years ago (like most Cuban institutions), and it faces challenges ensuring that its members and its retirees have adequate housing and salaries (also like many Cuban institutions), especially when compared to individuals working in the emerging private sector. Nonetheless it remains relatively high levels of respect in society.

So the Cuban armed forces have defense and security roles, as well as key economic and political roles, in the Cuban system.

Both because so little is known about the Cuban military and how it functions, because of its important roles in both national defense and the economic and political system, and because it will play a significant role in the economic and political reforms that will take place in Cuba in the years to come, it is important for the U.S. military to engage with and develop relationships with their Cuban counterparts.

U.S.-Cuban Military Contacts

There are some U.S.-Cuban military contacts. There are monthly meetings at the fence line of the Guantamano naval base between the U.S. base commander and the Cuban military commander for the Guantanamo region. Both sides view these talks as useful and professional, but they are focused on issues related to the naval base and local security issues, and deliberately do not touch larger issues in the U.S.-Cuban relationship.

The Coast Guard has had a liaison officer in Havana since the late 1990s, whose job is to serve as a point of contact between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Cuban Border Guard on issues related to counter-narcotics, search and rescue at sea, and related maritime security issues. Over the years, the successive Coast Guard liaison officers have developed a relatively high level of communication and professional trust with their Cuban counterparts, and the U.S. government has come to view the Border Guard and the Cuban government more broadly as serious and professional in addressing counter-narcotics issues. In the last two years, Coast Guard – Border Guard contact has expanded, including a visit to a Cuban port by a U.S. Coast Guard cutter, a professional exchange in Cuba on identifying forged documents, a professional exchange in the United States, and a tabletop exercise in the U.S. in which Cuban officials participated.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several delegations of retired U.S. military officials traveled to Cuba, and had dialogues with Cuban military research centers and some contact with

active duty Cuban military officials. But those visits were suspended when relations became more difficult under the George W. Bush administration, and have not been revived since. The U.S. organization that organized the visits has closed, and several of the Cuban research centers that focused on military and security issues have closed as well, in response to Cuban budgetary pressures.

WOLA has taken a number of retired Coast Guard officials, congressional staff who follow security issues, along with academic experts on security issues, to look at drug cooperation and related security issues in Cuba, and has had a number of discussions with Cuban academics, officials in the Ministry of the Interior, and in the Ministry of Foreign Relations. In addition, WOLA staff have spoken at events in Cuba on security issues, with Cuban military officers in attendance.

These contacts – at the fence line, through the Coast Guard, and through NGOs like WOLA – are positive, but they are limited. Given the December 17th announcement, it may be possible to build deeper contacts and greater engagement.

Encouragingly, there are signs that the Ministry of the Armed Forces would be interested in greater dialogue with their U.S. counterparts.

In December of 2014, under a Treasury Department license, WOLA organized a short course at the Center for the Study of International Policy (CIPI) for University of Havana graduate students and alumni in the field of international relations. CIPI is a research center linked to the Cuban Foreign Ministry, many of its students will become Cuban diplomats, and many of its alumni work in international relations in various Cuban government ministries. WOLA brought a retired Coast Guard officer, and former senior DHS official, to teach a course on how U.S. policy is formulated; the idea was, as U.S. –Cuban relations improved, to offer an

introduction to U.S. policy making that might help professionalize contacts. The course was heavily oversubscribed; participants included graduate students, Foreign Ministry staff, Ministry of the Interior staff, and several officials from the Ministry of the Armed Forces. Student evaluations and subsequent discussions with Cuban Foreign Ministry officials indicated that the course was very positively received, and that other courses like it would be well received as well. The interest suggests that within the Cuban government, including the Ministry of the Armed Forces, there is interest in understanding how the U.S. government works, and interest in contact, direct or indirect, with U.S. officials who have security related responsibilities.

Beyond that, WOLA's informal discussions with Cuban academics who follow security issues, and who are close to some in the Armed Forces, suggest that the Cuban military sees counter-narcotics issues as a major issue they will have to face in the next few years, and would be interested in dialogue with their U.S. counterparts about it.

Overall, there are at least modest signals that the Cuban military would be interested in greater contact with the United States. In the context of the gradual improvements in relations, which are now taking place, the U.S. military ought to explore these possibilities.

Opportunities for Engagement

What are the opportunities for greater engagement in the near term? There are at least three issues on which the U.S. might engage the Cuban military.

The first, and most obvious, is counter-narcotics. Through the Coast Guard and the Cuban Border Guard, there are already relationships and contacts. These could be expanded directly, through more formal cooperation arrangements, through bi-lateral discussions and exchanges, through invitations to Cuban participation in multi-lateral events. They could be pursued more cautiously through invitations to academic events, exchanges with retired military

officials, or participation in study programs. In either case, there are relatively easy opportunities in this area to expand U.S.-Cuban military to military contacts.

The second is in the area of counter-terrorism. At key moments (for example in the immediate aftermath of September 11th), the U.S. and Cuba have had contacts about counter-terrorism issues. But, in part because Cuba has been included in the list of “state sponsors of terrorism,” this contact has been extremely limited. If, as is widely expected, President Obama removes Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, that formal impediment will be gone. Cuba, having experienced a number of incidents in which regime opponents planted bombs in civilian hotels in the late 1990s, views itself as strongly committed to the battle against terrorism. Recently, Cuba became a member of the South American arm of the Financial Action Task Force, which sets international standards to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing. U.S. Southern Command staff could explore exchanges, trainings, and other activities with Cuban military and security officials in the area of counter-terrorism.

The third area has to do with disaster planning and response. The Cuban military is actively involved in disaster planning and response inside Cuba, particularly in regard to hurricanes. Internationally, along with Cuban doctors, Cuban military units have carried out disaster emergency response activities in a number of countries, including Haiti and Pakistan. In Haiti and in Pakistan, U.S. and Cuban units did some informal cooperation, and reportedly U.S. troops supporting Ebola efforts in Africa have had contacts with Cuban medical personnel. Given that disaster response is an area of interest for the defense ministers of the Americas, and for the U.S. military, and given Cuba’s interest and experience, exchanges of experiences, professional exchanges, joint exercises, might all be areas of possible cooperation and dialogue.

What are the problems in moving ahead in these or other areas?

The first of course is that U.S.-Cuban relations, while improving, are still distant and formal. While the evidence suggests that both sides would like to see the relationship continue to improve, it is going to do so slowly. Initiatives that sound like a good idea on paper will have to be carefully tested politically on both sides before they move ahead.

Second of course is that the U.S. government has both legal and policy limitations on contact with Cuban government officials and Cuban Communist Party officials, and any program of military to military contacts or exchanges would have to seek policy changes, policy waivers, or legal exceptions, and would have to be carefully reviewed by policy makers and by counsel. Beyond these two issues, U.S. officials would have to consider several others.

First would be a set of human rights related issues. The Cuban military is not a major source of human rights abuses; recent State Department human rights reports on Cuba criticize actions by Cuban National Police, and by members of the General Directorate of State Security, both divisions of the Ministry of the Interior. But they do not cite abuses by troops or by officials of the Ministry of the Armed Forces, and generally the Ministry of the Armed Forces is not directly involved in the kinds of internal security issues that often produce human rights abuses. Nonetheless, the Cuban armed forces are part of the governmental structure in Cuba, which has been widely criticized for its human rights record. Steps toward military to military engagement would likely draw criticism (even if the engagement were about counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism or disaster assistance), and officials supporting such engagement would have to be prepared to respond and defend the engagement.

A related issue has to do with the blurred line in Cuba between military and civilian roles. The United States has a long history of clearly defining the role of the military in terms of

national defense, and a tradition in which the military do not engage in politics, but serve an elected civilian government. The United States has urged governments in this hemisphere, many of which have had military governments over the years, to develop clear rules about the separation of military and civilian roles. Human rights advocates have urged the U.S. government to be cautious in its dealings with militaries and governments that do not have such clear rules, so as not to send a message of U.S. tolerance for military involvement in politics. In Cuba, the military is deeply involved in the political process; active duty military officers serve on the Council of State and the Council of Ministers, and are in high-level positions in the Cuban Communist Party. While many analysts believe that the military is loyal to, and subservient to the Party and the government, and not an independent actor as it is in other countries, and that therefore the involvement of military officials in the government is not the threat to civilian rule that it might be in other countries. Nonetheless, U.S. military engagement with the Cuban military would have to be sensitive to the perception that it was condoning a role for the military in politics and civilian affairs.

Similarly, there are issues related to the Cuban military's involvement in the economy. While that involvement has made the military, in some ways, an internal force for economic reform, it has also increased the power of the military relative to economic managers and civilian government officials. Like the involvement of the military in politics, the United States has a long tradition of disapproving of military involvement in the economy, because of the undue power that comes along with it. (And in a country in the process of economic change, the troubling prospect looms that as sectors of the Cuban economy move from state to private hands, military officials could assume oligarchic control of enterprises.) Engagement with the Cuban

military would have to be sensitive to this issue, and to the perception that we condone military involvement in the economy.

All these issues can be seen through a slightly different lens than that of the relationship with countries where we are actively providing financial assistance, training, and political support. Engagement with the Cuban military would take place in a different context. Nonetheless, these are real issues that would have to be considered.

Conclusion

In the new political context of U.S.-Cuban relations, and the process of change in the Cuban economy, it is in the interest of the United States to explore and develop contacts with the Cuban military, which will be a political and economic force in Cuba for the foreseeable future. The principal issue areas that could be explored have to do with counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and disaster planning and response. Contacts both direct and indirect (through academics and others) could be explored, as could professional exchanges, trainings, observations, and some joint or multi-lateral exercises. Developing any of these areas will require patience and political sensitivity, but it is in our interest to do so.