

## 2

### A Model Servant

#### The Revolutionary Armed Forces and Cuban Foreign Policy

HAL KLEPAK

Any political science text dealing with the role of the armed forces will tend to emphasize their central role as servants of the foreign policy of a given state. The reality is often that, but it is surely equally the case that in vast portions of the world their key roles have been focused internally as much or more than externally.

This is true in many countries but it has been, often sadly, particularly the case in Latin America. There the armed forces have often been the political arbiters between conflicting interests, parties, or groupings of any number of kinds. They have also often been the central pillar of the state or even the direct governors of that state—and usually only in a secondary way the servants of national foreign policies.

In the case of Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, or FAR), however, over the half century of a government led by Fidel and now Raúl Castro, those forces have indeed been the direct servants of foreign policy in many and varied ways, as required by a nation and political system under siege by the most powerful country in the world, a country that sits a mere 150 kilometers away. This argument in no way denies the FAR's exceptional missions related to natural disaster preparation and relief, management of key industries and programs of the revolutionary government in a variety of economic fields, involvement in support of social projects as varied as hospitals and education, and so much more; but its missions of deterring foreign attack and supporting the government's other international objectives have been even more central not only to its structure and way of going about business, but to its members' being and way of seeing themselves.

This foreign policy role evolved over a half century, during which time FAR's flexibility was tested as Cuba's foreign policy needs changed, with the armed

forces in turn responding to those changes. An analysis of this evolution and those responses will lead us here to some tentative judgments about what role the forces might also play in the future.

## The Early Years of Revolutionary Consolidation

When the *Ejército Rebelde* entered Santiago and Havana on January 1, 1959, it may have appeared to be a small and rather ragtag affair, but it had considerable political, administrative, and even economic experience behind it, in addition to amazing military successes against the dictatorship. It had, after all, in a very difficult campaign lasting twenty-five months, just bested a large regular army backed almost without qualification by the might of the United States. During that time it had expanded the territory under its control, always termed romantically “Cuba Libre” after the insurgents’ practice in the two nineteenth-century wars for independence; and it had administered that territory fully in varying periods over those two years.<sup>1</sup>

While it has so far proven impossible to determine with any exactness the strength of the rebel forces as of January 1, by any standards they were clearly small.<sup>2</sup> In the strategic sense the relatively small size was important. While Fidel did not intend after victory to maintain a large standing army along the usual Latin American model, a number of factors led to a different outcome in the long or even mid-term.

The size and political status of the former armed forces obliged Fidel essentially to abolish these military forces and retain only those officers and other ranks that had impeccable “popular” credentials. Thus Fidel and the new government could not rely on a professional corps that could be readily incorporated into the *Ejército Rebelde*. In addition, the nature of the reform program that the revolutionary government quickly began to implement soon led large portions of the bourgeoisie and bureaucracy to leave the island, usually in hopes that the United States would quickly rid the island of the reformers and bring back traditional upper-class rule. A percentage of them were willing to support such a move with their own efforts, including in the military field.

When these issues were combined with international factors such as a growing U.S. opposition to Fidel’s experiment and the lining up of pro-U.S. governments in the Caribbean and Latin America against Havana, the need for a significant defense force and effort became ever clearer. By September 1959 the threat was real enough, and Fidel formally named his brother Raúl minister of the armed forces, promoting him to the new rank of army general. He ordered him to establish regular forces along revolutionary but nonetheless largely tra-

ditional lines. Thus were born the formally constituted revolutionary army, navy, and air forces, still existing today.

Their international role became obvious quickly. In the early months of the new government they had been vitally necessary in running newly nationalized industries, organizing the distribution of holdings of those leaving the country, facilitating the agrarian reform that had become the hallmark of the revolutionary process, and generally being placed anywhere the *comandante en jefe* needed someone he could trust. Now they were needed to provide, as quickly as possible, a force not only to deter (or even defeat) foreign invasion and U.S. sponsorship of armed opposition at home, but also to build, as of December 1959, a new reserve force, the *Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarias*, to help in both those tasks.<sup>3</sup>

It was not long before those jobs were to become linked to others related to the international context of the revolution. Like many other revolutionary governments before and since, Fidel's opted to break out of the increasing isolation that U.S. power was imposing on his country; and he chose to do this through a policy of assisting leftist movements elsewhere—movements that were aiming to replace governments aligned with Washington with ones more open to the survival of the Cuban revolutionary experiment.

This approach, known to some as the “export of revolution” phase in the evolution of Cuban foreign policy, stimulated and supported armed insurrection in several countries of Latin America in the early and mid-1960s, and it grew in scope as the United States succeeded in co-opting all Latin American governments except Mexico into its policy of unseating the Cuban revolution by virtually any means possible. From 1961 to 1967 Havana found itself steadily blocked from participation in inter-American institutions and eventually suspended from almost all of them, as well as its relations with all of Latin America except Mexico broken.<sup>4</sup> Its response—which was never termed “export of revolution” in Cuba, where the policy was seen much more as one of active defense against a determined enemy—meant that the FAR was deeply involved in training and aiding leftist insurrection in much of the region for most or all of this period.<sup>5</sup> Foreign guerrillas, and especially their officers, were a common sight in Cuba, and they established some of the relationships with Cuba that are still very much a part of the links with the island enjoyed by new leftist governments in the region decades later.

The strains of this task were significant at a time when Raúl Castro was also taking in and training tens of thousands of men and women keen to defend the revolution from its enemies within and without the country. The expansion of the reserves would have been a daunting undertaking even if the FAR was not

already deeply involved in running the nation and its reforms, building itself up for traditional national defense roles, and training foreign guerrillas. The combination of these jobs was a challenge indeed for a force that some three or four years earlier had numbered perhaps less than three thousand personnel and had never constituted a regular armed force at all.<sup>6</sup>

As if this were not enough, a further massive obstacle turned out to be arming the new FAR, its even newer reserves, and to some extent its allies on the continent. The attitude of the U.S. government ensured that Havana never had a chance of obtaining arms from that country, which had been the traditional source of almost all its armaments since the first formal occupation of the island in the wake of the U.S. intervention in the War of Independence of 1895–98.<sup>7</sup> When Havana sought arms from Belgium and the United Kingdom, countries that had initially favored selling them to Cuba, its efforts were soon frustrated by U.S. calls on its allies to show solidarity with its effort to “contain Cuba.”<sup>8</sup>

In this context Cuba turned to the only source of support and weapons available to it, the Warsaw Pact. By late 1960 the first highly secret accords had been signed and the very first weapons received. The military aid came just in time, as barely had the FAR been able to begin training with the equipment than the United States launched Cuban American “exiles” into the April 1961 maelstrom that came to be known as the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Fidel had been proven right in his assessment that the United States would not long stand idly by while the revolution undid the Americans’ totally dominant position on the island and brought about what the new government called Cuba’s “full independence.” Funded, organized, and supported by the CIA, the exile force was sent forward to make a landing and seize a town from which it could then announce the existence of a new Cuban government and call on U.S. assistance to defend itself against the inevitable fidelista counterattack. When the new president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, heard of the plan, he decided to reduce U.S. direct assistance so that the campaign would appear more like an all-Cuban affair. The U.S. government withdrew major elements of U.S. naval and air support from the exiles, although considerable support remained in place.

The result was unqualified disaster as the force proved unable to seize a single hamlet and was soon bested by local militia forces and eventually by regular elements led by Fidel himself. The gamble of preparing for national defense as a priority had paid off, but no one in the FAR or Fidel’s entourage believed that this was the end. It was taken as a given that the United States would not accept what Cubans call “imperialism’s first defeat in the Americas” and would now turn to more direct military means to unseat the revolution.<sup>9</sup>

## The Soviet Connection Deepens

In the months after the spring of 1961 Cuba therefore signed more accords with Moscow to beef up its naval, air, and land forces and began a process of “Sovietization” of the FAR, pursued in earnest in the early 1970s and continuing at least until the 1980s, which left the force unrecognizable as a Latin American military institution. Indeed, the armed forces probably became the most visible sign of the linkages in foreign policy that were to be the hallmark of much of Cuba’s presence in the world from the mid-1960s until the 1980s.

This linkage was to be shaken by what Cubans saw as Soviet adventurism during the missile crisis of 1962 and treachery after it, and by the conservatism of that country’s leadership later on—during a time when the issue of world revolution was debated. Yet it was to stand the test of time, particularly because Cuba had nowhere to turn in its desperate strategic straits and Moscow could hardly say no to a country whose strategic position so close to the United States gave the Soviets so much nuisance value in Washington.<sup>10</sup> Cuban support for revolution worldwide troubled Moscow—which was nervous about its central relationship with Washington during a period when the “balance of terror” had never been so obvious—just as Soviet timidity about that relationship annoyed Havana, which believed its policies to be much more truly communist than those of the self-satisfied apparatchik in the supposed motherland of world communism.

Be that as it may, the formal linkages between the two countries soon strengthened again and even stood the strains of that litmus test of socialist solidarity, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in spring 1968. When Cuba proved itself almost alone as a virtually unquestioning ally during this trying time, the USSR knew how to reward such loyalty over the following years—providing sophisticated weaponry on a lavish scale, training massive levels of Cuban airmen, sailors, and soldiers, and offering help in everything from administration to uniforms for its Caribbean military collaborators. The FAR grew again as a central pillar of that political linkage. It was essential for the revolution’s survival in the face of a continued U.S. determination to end the anomaly of a socialist state in the Western Hemisphere.

From the late 1960s until the early 1980s the “alliance”—actually a grouping far less formal than that and one where Cuba was never considered seriously for membership in the Warsaw Pact, which would have been a real guarantee of Soviet direct support against U.S. attack—served each partner well; and nowhere was this relationship more important than in the military sphere. After the death of Che Guevara in 1967, Cuba became less engaged in support of leftist movements in Latin America and therefore less troubling for Moscow’s relationship with the United States. Equally, Cuba’s powerful position in the

Non-Aligned Movement gave Moscow much more leverage in that important body than anything else it had in its quiver of political influence. On a variety of occasions Cuba could act in ways that furthered Soviet goals without involving the USSR directly.

This possibility was most visible in Africa, where in both the Horn and Angola the Cubans were to make their mark in ways that Moscow saw as being largely positive. With Soviet influence waning in much of the third world after the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, anything troubling the Western powers in those areas was likely to be favored by the Soviets. Still, it is important not to make too much of this pattern. Havana was obviously pleased when Moscow saw its activities as helpful, but its decisions were its own and usually only obliquely related to Soviet desires. Even as ferocious a critic of the Castro government as its most senior military defector, Brigadier General Rafael del Pino, admitted that Cuban-Soviet military relations were “indifferent and at times antagonistic. . . . They [the Soviets] do not have the slightest influence on the decisions Cubans make.”<sup>11</sup>

In any case, the military connection with the Soviet Union remained key for Cuba’s access to the Soviet assistance that to a considerable extent made possible its relatively high standard of living and many of its social programs. It also helped greatly in allowing Cuba to continue to, in the words of Canada’s most important Cubanist John Kirk, “consistently punch above its weight in international affairs”; for example, in its support for the Sandinista movement before and after it took power in Nicaragua in 1979.<sup>12</sup>

### The Connection Weakens

The context of international relations was, however, steadily evolving. By the late 1970s or early 1980s the balance of terror had achieved a status of mutual assured destruction (MAD, as the strategic jargon of the day termed it), assuring Moscow that its long-awaited goal of having concrete status as a military superpower instead of one merely *par courtoisie* had indeed been achieved; yet, its overall power position relative to the United States had declined.

Soviet assistance, other than in the military field, was less and less sought after by third world countries, which had become increasingly content with their relations with former colonial powers and with the United States itself. The USSR’s influence in the Middle East was continually eroding. The breakup of the unity of the communist world in the years after the beginning of the Sino-Soviet schism in 1959, then the disastrous impact of the 1968 Prague Spring, both meant that Moscow was losing ground internationally. Even more important and striking than this political retreat was the Soviet inability to markedly

improve its economic production and convert itself into a power in more than merely the military and vaguely ideological sense.

When in the elections of 1980 the Republican candidate for the presidency, Ronald Reagan, campaigned on a platform of “rolling back communism,” then won those elections and began to apply policies aiming at just that effect, the long-term impact would be shattering. U.S. defense budgets soon completely outstripped those of the Soviet Union, which tried unsuccessfully in the early 1980s to compete. President Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika were attempts at answering the deepest challenges that the new context presented, but they were clearly, as history was soon to prove, too little and too late. While virtually no one saw Soviet collapse as being around the corner, it was soon clear that Moscow would do almost anything to reduce tensions with the United States at a time of deep and sustained crisis at home and in Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Fidel and Raúl were well aware of the evolving thinking going on in the USSR regarding defense and international commitments. As early as the 1980 U.S. presidential campaign it was clear to the Cuban leadership that the Soviet Union, except briefly in 1962, had never committed formally to a defensive alliance with Cuba in case of a U.S. attack on the island, and it was less inclined than ever to risk disturbing its central relationship with Washington for peripheral issues such as the Cuban link, however valuable it had been on occasion.

The Cuban single approach of a deterrence posture by now had been in place for twenty years. While accepting that defeating the United States was not a practical option, the Cubans could deter their neighbor by making an invasion so expensive in blood and treasure that for Washington the game would not be worth the candle. Now they had to acknowledge that they would need to maintain such a posture essentially without the Soviet factor coming into play. To do so, Cuba would need a defensive force much greater and more sustainable than in the past.

The then recent Vietnamese experience beckoned to Raúl with special clarity as a campaign based on a huge mobilized reserve force, combined with a regular force that was hard-hitting and mobile, and using the depth of the country as an essential element of the strategy. It would be the Guerra de Todo el Pueblo (War of All the People) that would henceforth deter a U.S. attack. While much of this approach could already be seen in the organization of the first revolutionary militias in 1959, and indeed in the setting up of a universal male compulsory military service system as of 1963, the scale and extent of the new reserves would represent another degree of commitment altogether. The Milicias de Tropas Territoriales (Territorial Troop Militias) were to be com-