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CUBAN MILITARY CULTURE

By Frank Mora Brian Fonseca and Brian Latell

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FIU

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School of International
& Public Affairs



The FIU-USSOUTHCOM Academic Partnership Military Culture Series

Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (FIU-JGI) and FIU's Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (FIU-LACC), in collaboration with the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), formed the FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. The partnership entails FIU providing research-based knowledge to further USSOUTHCOM's understanding of the political, strategic, and cultural dimensions that shape military behavior in Latin America and the Caribbean. This goal is accomplished by employing a military culture approach. This initial phase of military culture consisted of a year-long research program that focused on developing a standard analytical framework to identify and assess the military culture of three countries. FIU facilitated professional presentations of two countries (Cuba and Venezuela) and conducted field research for one country (Honduras).

The overarching purpose of the project is two-fold: to generate a rich and dynamic base of knowledge pertaining to political, social, and strategic factors that influence military behavior; and to contribute to USSOUTHCOM's Socio-Cultural Analysis (SCD) Program. Utilizing the notion of military culture, USSOUTHCOM has commissioned FIU-JGI to conduct country-studies in order to explain how Latin American militaries will behave in the context of U.S. military engagement.

The FIU research team defines military culture as "the internal and external factors—historical, cultural, social, political, economic—that shape the dominant values, attitudes, and behaviors of the military institution, that inform how the military views itself and its place and society, and shapes how the military may interact with other institutions, entities, and governments." FIU identifies and expounds upon the cultural factors that inform the rationale behind the perceptions and behavior of select militaries by analyzing its historical evolution, its sources of identity and sources of pride, and its role in society.

To meet the stated goals, FIU's JGI and LACC hosted academic workshops in Miami and brought subject matter experts together from throughout the U.S. and Latin America and the Caribbean, to explore and discuss militaries in Latin America and the Caribbean. When possible, FIU-JGI researchers conduct field research in select countries to examine these factors through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys. At the conclusion of each workshop and research trip, FIU publishes a findings report, which is presented at USSOUTHCOM.

The following Cuban Military Culture Findings Report, authored by Brian Fonseca, Brian Latell and Frank Mora, is the product of a working group held in Miami on December 2, 2015, which included six academic experts in Cuban military history and culture—Brian Fonseca, Hal Klepak, Brian Latell, William LeoGrande, Frank Mora, and Marifeli Pérez-Stable.

The views expressed in this findings report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Southern Command, FIU-JGI, Florida International University, or the institutional affiliations of the participants.

On behalf of FIU-JGI and FIU-LACC, we wish to acknowledge and thank all of the participants for their contributions, which made the Cuban Military Culture workshop a notable success.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*—FAR) have traditionally been the most respected, best managed, influential, and powerful official institution in Cuba.

- The FAR are and have always been the central pillar sustaining the communist regime. Time and again, they have proven their loyalty to Cuba and the Castros, especially at moments when the regime needed their support and expertise the most.
- The FAR is the nearest thing to a true meritocracy among official institutions. It has attracted poor and rural youths into its ranks, many of whom have been promoted to senior officer grades.
- Beginning with the stunning victory against an American sponsored exile invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the Cuban military continued triumphant during bloody campaigns on distant African battlefields.
- In Angola, Cuban troops fought heroically against well-equipped forces led by South Africa. In the Ogaden War in the late 1970s the Cubans fought victoriously on the side of revolutionary Ethiopia.
- In short, during the 1970s and 1980s the armed forces were arguably the best and most experienced fighting force of any small nation, with the exception of Israel. Their pride was commensurate with their feats.
- The FAR's reputation for loyalty and efficiency has made it the institution of choice for all social and political experiments of the regime since its inception. The armed forces have been the preferred laboratory for socioeconomic experimentation and policy innovation. They have demonstrated exceptional flexibility in serving the Castro regime in a variety of fields.
- Never a traditional military or even a typical communist military, the FAR has been, as in the words of Raúl Castro, "the vanguard of the state."¹

Traditional FAR culture has been characterized by exalted status, confidence, high morale, strict discipline, belief in the leadership of the Castro brothers, and an assertive nationalism antagonistic to the United States.

- From its founding in 1959 until 1989 the FAR, and auxiliary uniformed entities, enjoyed remarkable success and a high degree of internal unity, stability, and leadership continuity.
- Created five years before the Cuban Communist Party, about two-thirds of the members of the party's original Central Committee were military officers or veterans of the Castros' guerrilla struggle.
- Hierarchically structured and monitored by a proficient counter-intelligence arm, the military has never been disrupted by coup plotting, barracks revolts, or junior officer uprisings.
- Until his retirement in 2006, Fidel Castro endeavored to inculcate in the FAR's ranks a fear and loathing of the United States as Cuba's implacable enemy. Under Raúl Castro that priority has been reduced.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and an ensuing economic crisis in Cuba, the FAR entered into a spiral of decline and contraction. Today, it is about a tenth of its previous maximum strength and faces an uncertain future.

- Institutional integrity has eroded as many officers and retirees have been encouraged to engage in for-profit enterprises under the leadership of Raúl Castro's powerful son-in-law, a general.

¹ Juan Carlos Espinosa, "Vanguard of the State: The Cuban Armed Forces in Transition," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 48, no. 6 (November/December 2001), 19-30.

- Signs of unwelcome nepotism have intensified as Raúl's only son, Colonel Alejandro Castro Espin, has recently assumed a prominent leadership role at the nexus of intelligence and military functions.
- Tensions between troop commanders assigned to static national defense and entrepreneurial officers earning hard currency have increased leading to some resentment at the growing inequalities. There is some anecdotal evidence of an increase in corruption, sully the reputation of the military.
- As resources, budgets, and capabilities have declined, and a clique of aged three star generals block promotions of younger aspirants, doubts about military purpose and missions have no doubt multiplied.

President Obama's recent visit in April 2016, and particularly his speech to the Cuban people, has unsettled some in the leadership. The concerns of hardliners are reflected in an anti-American editorial attributed to Fidel Castro.²

- An astute Cuban dissident has recently observed that she has "the impression that Castroism has lost a lot of strength."³
- According to the *Associated Press* in Havana, the party leadership is "under highly unusual public criticism from their own ranks for imposing new levels of secrecy on the future of social and economic reforms."⁴
- With the establishment of diplomatic relations last year, and the president's successful visit, main tenets of Cuban anti-American nationalism have been called into question, even neutralized.
- During the recent VII Communist Party Congress there was some importance given to the need for rejuvenating the political leadership. Final personnel changes have yet to be announced; however, the top leadership of the party and government will remain the same. There were no changes announced in the military hierarchy. It remains to be seen how willing Cuba's geriatric leadership will be to implementing deeper reforms enabling a more vigorous and unencumbered private sector.

² Fidel Castro, *Brother Obama*, March 28, 2016, [Granma](#).

³ Yoani Sanchez, *Yoani Sanchez on Castro and Obama's Key Moment*, Havana Times, April 1, 2016.

⁴ Andrea Rodriguez and Michael Weissenstein, *Unusual Dissent Erupts Inside Cuba Communist Party*, AP, March 30, 2016.

THE CUBAN MILITARY IN PERSPECTIVE

The Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*—FAR) have been the most powerful and competent official institution in Cuba, the one truly indispensable force dedicated to preserving the Castro brothers' revolution.⁵ Rarely employed to quell popular unrest or as a tool of repression, the military has been broadly respected by the populace. A substantial percentage of Cuban men have served in uniform, a favorite means of upward mobility for poor and rural youths, no small number of whom have risen into senior ranks. Traditionally, officers lived modestly with close ties to the people, and until recent years few were sullied by corruption.

Over the last quarter century the FAR and its aged commanders have struggled with unprecedented uncertainty. Greatly reduced in size, resources, and capabilities, the military has been little more than a static home defense force against an illusory enemy. Yet, since the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States, even the previously galvanizing mission of defending the homeland against a lurking neighbor has been largely neutralized. Meanwhile, jealousies in the officer corps, and jockeying for privilege and promotion, may already be undermining institutional unity.

Nonetheless, over the next several years, the military high command—including upwardly mobile younger generals—is likely to play crucial roles as national policies and the civilian leadership change. If in a post-Castro government civilian political leadership were to falter or divide, military leaders would undoubtedly assume the reins of power, either directly or through civilian figureheads.⁶ Nonetheless, one can expect the military's role as the vanguard of the state is likely to strengthen and grow in importance as the first generation of revolutionary leaders, the so-called *historicos*, pass from the scene.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE FAR

The FAR was established in October 1959, nine months after the triumph of the Castros' revolution, out of the ragged remnants of their guerrilla units. Raúl Castro took charge as armed forces minister, and remained in place until 2008, continuing to serve until the present as Cuba's only four-star general. As

⁵ It is important to note the methodological challenges of studying the Cuban military. The FAR is the most secretive in terms of information provided or available about the institution, budget and other matters of any military in the Americas. Relevant data and other sources of research are difficult to obtain as the regime protects information deemed to bear on "sensitive and national security matters." Moreover, some sources of information are not reliable because of biased or ideological content.

⁶ One observer states that "No other institution will be able to force through policies a united and disciplined military command did not support," James Bruno, *How Obama's Cuba Deal Is Strengthening Its Military*, *Politico Magazine*, March 17, 2015.

confrontation with the United States intensified in 1959 and 1960, the imperative was to swiftly build up reliable national defenses.

The first fruit of those efforts was the stunning Cuban victory in April 1961 at the Bay of Pigs where a brigade of CIA trained Cuban exiles was promptly routed, by mostly raw Cuban militia. Fidel Castro, earning respect in his capacity as commander in chief, directed Cuban forces from the battlefield. The victory was accomplished solely with Cuban resources and ingenuity, a matter of enduring pride.

With that success, a militant new and anti-American nationalism was conceived. The Castros consolidated in power, the legend of revolutionary Cuba's invincibility grew, and Fidel Castro assumed a titanic stance appealing to most of the rest of Latin America. Massive quantities of advanced Soviet military hardware, including batteries of surface-to-air missiles, flowed to the island, and in October 1962 the Missile Crisis erupted.

Fidel Castro again played a central role, later admitting he helped to cause the shoot down of an American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft resulting in the death of the pilot.⁷ Such was his antipathy toward the United States, so much of which was institutionalized in the FAR. The mythology of the Cuban David heroically staving off the predatory American Goliath became entrenched in Cuban military culture and doctrine. Today, with an American embassy functioning in Havana, anti-imperialist rhetoric continues but as a diminishing element of Cuba's revolutionary ethos.⁸

In the mid-1960s regular and reserve Cuban forces were pitted in the central Escambray mountains against a determined counter-revolutionary movement that the regime claimed was covertly supported by the United States. Regaled through decades of Cuban government propaganda, the *Lucha Contra Bandidos* (Struggle against Bandits), was a brutal, sustained campaign that terrorized civilian populations.

It is believed to have been the only major exception to the FAR's otherwise unblemished record of avoiding lethal repression of Cuban civilians. The effort eventually succeeded in eliminating the threat, and it has stood ever since as a warning that the communist regime would deploy whatever force necessary to suppress domestic opposition.

On occasion, notably in the early 1990s as the Cuban economy drastically contracted in the absence of Soviet support, Raúl Castro made clear to the Cuban populace that, if necessary, military force would

⁷ Fidel Castro interview with Robert McNeil, February 20, 1985.

⁸ On April 4, 2016, for example, shortly after President Obama's visit to the island, a letter from Raul Castro was publicized by Granma on the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the FAR's Central Army. Castro congratulated its personnel for their history of "confronting enemy aggression." There was no mistaking that Raul meant the United States. Coming so soon after the widely praised Obama visit, the comments may have been calculated to reinforce traditional anti-American attitudes in the military.

be unleashed again to preserve order. There is no reason to believe a half century since the campaigns in the Escambray, that any doubts about the brutality inflicted on civilians linger in the FAR.

Beginning in the 1960s officers also played a crucial part in Fidel Castro's evangelizing determination to promote guerrilla movements in other Latin American countries. Large numbers of young Latin Americans received guerrilla warfare training at Cuban military bases, guided by FAR instructors. The trainees were equipped with light weapons and learned clandestine and commando tradecraft. Importantly too, once in the field in their own countries they were assisted by Cuban military volunteers who served as expert advisers.

For example, several of the subsequently most distinguished Cuban generals were covertly infiltrated into the Venezuelan backlands in the mid-1960s where they advised local guerrillas and fought with them. General Arnaldo Ochoa admitted during his trial for drug trafficking in 1989 that he had been among them. Three star general Abelardo Colome Ibarra, Raúl Castro's right-hand man since the late 1950s, also fought covertly in Venezuela. Others who became senior generals performed similar apprenticeships there, and in a few other Latin American countries.

The FAR was, therefore, an essential player in these formative examples of Cuban revolutionary internationalism. Participation in covert missions became a badge of honor, a nearly required credential for promotions into the trusted senior ranks. To volunteer as a guerrilla internationalist in the 1960s was therefore, also an essential ingredient in the evolution of Cuban military culture. Survivors of those missions are enormously proud of what they did, even if none of their efforts in the 1960s boosted Latin American guerrilla movements into power.

In the 1970s, the military was transformed and greatly enlarged under Soviet tutelage with new military doctrines compatible with Moscow's. Cuban officers, Raúl Castro included, received extended military training in the Soviet Union, becoming proficient in the use of advanced Soviet weapons systems, including MIG jet fighters, submarines, sophisticated artillery, and other ground and air defense equipment. For most of the approximately 30 years of the Cuban-Soviet military collaboration, Moscow provided the FAR—virtually free of charge—with nearly all of its equipment, training, and supplies, worth approximately \$1 billion annually.

The 1970s also marked the apogee of Cuban military adventures abroad, all of them recounted in regime histories and propaganda as incomparable successes. During the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to military training and assistance from the USSR (e.g. attending professional military education institutions such as the M.V. Frunze Command and Staff College and the Voroshilov Academy of the Armed Forces General Staff as well as FAR senior military schools, such as the elite *Academia Superior de las FAR Máximo Gómez*), they became highly trained professional soldiers receiving invaluable and formative

combat experience during Cuba's international and military operations in the Third World, particularly in Latin America, Vietnam, Angola and Ethiopia. In distant battlefields across the African continent, the FAR served the regime with distinction and success unrivaled by any other Cuban government entity. During this period of distant force projection, the FAR grew into the largest military force in Latin America, vastly larger than those of countries Cuba's size anywhere in the world. By the end of the decade, uniformed FAR personnel in all categories totaled between 472,000 and 510,000.⁹ Overseas activism enhanced the prestige and self-confidence of the FAR while adding to its influence at home. This professionalism and experience instilled an enormous sense of pride within and for the FAR, greatly enhancing its commitment for the Revolution and its leadership.

In the summer of 1989 when General Ochoa and three other officers were tried and executed for treason, the Ministry of Interior (MININT) was convulsed by massive purges and put under the authority of the FAR leadership. The MININT, then and now, has been responsible for Cuban foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence, internal security, and the national police.

Yet, suspecting disloyalty and perhaps even conspiracy, the Castros unleashed a sweeping purge, a cleansing of the second most powerful institution in Cuba. The Minister of Interior was imprisoned and later died there under suspicious circumstances. His deputy, a decorated general, was also expendable, as were hundreds of others imprisoned. A former intelligence officer later wrote that "everyone I knew in the [ministry], without exception, has been executed, locked up or retired from power."¹⁰ After the purge and restructuring of the MININT, the ministry became a new, fully redesigned and staffed institution serving the interests, patterns and directives of the Ministry of the FAR (MINFAR) and its then defense minister, Raúl Castro. For all practical purposes, the MININT belongs to the FAR. It practically became the fifth army of the FAR, after the three regional commands and the Youth Labor Army (EJT).¹¹ The purges and reorganization of intelligence functions under FAR leadership resulted in the last major augmentation of its praetorian missions and responsibilities. The Castros installed general Colome Ibarra as interior minister and trusted FAR officers in top positions throughout the ministry.

Finally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc of communist nations between 1989 and 1991, and the termination of economic and military subsidies, the FAR was compelled to play a progressively more central role in the Cuban economy. Raúl Castro underscored at the time, "the principal economic, political, ideological and military responsibility of the FAR is to continue enhancing

⁹ Brian Latell, *The Cuban Military and Transition Dynamics*, University of Miami, 2003, p. 11.

¹⁰ Juan Antonio Rodríguez Menier, *Inside the Cuban Interior Ministry*, Jamestown Foundation 1994, p. 64.

¹¹ Frank O. Mora, "Cuba's Ministry of Interior: The FAR's Fifth Army," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2007), p. 222-237.

the efficiency of production, particularly foodstuffs and sugar...beans are now more important than cannons.” As a result of the material and political challenges to society and revolution during the “special period,” the leadership turned, once again, as it did in the early 1960s, to the armed forces in a mobilization campaign to protect the revolution by contributing its expertise and manpower to mending and restructuring the economy. In other words, the technical capabilities of a loyal and disciplined institution, under the unquestionable authority of Raúl Castro, contributed to the regime’s decision to rely on the FAR to implement Raúl’s initial proposal for economic modernization.¹² As one Latin American diplomat serving at the time aptly described, “the reality of Cuba in 1995 is that the military is one of the few, if not the only, institution that really and truly works.”

As to be expected, there were costs. *Espirit de corps* was undermined as troops were put to work in the fields, sowing, weeding, and harvesting crops. It was necessary in those years of extreme economic hardship for the FAR to essentially support itself. Since then, selected active duty and retired officers have been encouraged to engage in for-profit enterprise activities, mostly in tourism, to generate hard currency for the government. These developments have undermined the traditional FAR culture of selfless service.

SOURCES OF IDENTITY AND PRIDE

Created five years before the Cuban Communist Party, about two-thirds of the members of the party’s original Central Committee were military officers or veterans of the Castros’ guerrilla struggle. Like all the other revolutionary organizations, the party descended from and was dominated by men in the olive green uniforms of the rebel army and then the FAR.

In the five decades since its first congress, the party has grown stronger and separate from the FAR, with a smaller, though still substantial, percentage of military in top positions. As of April 15, 2016, five of fourteen Politburo members were active duty generals.¹³ 20 members of the 116 person central committee were active or retired FAR or Ministry of Interior generals.¹⁴

The high degree of institutional stability and unity the military has sustained is a source of considerable pride. There have been no known coup plots, barracks revolts, or junior officer uprisings that have been typical in the rest of Latin America. This has enabled the Castro brothers to proclaim that their

¹² Frank O. Mora, “The FAR and Its Economic Role: From Civic to Technocrat-Soldier,” *ICCAS Occasional Paper Series*, University of Miami (June 2004).

¹³ This assumes that Colome Ibarra retained his seat after he resigned as minister of interior. He is not likely to retain it after the Seventh Communist Party Congress in mid-April 2016. The others are: Raul Castro, Leopoldo Cintra Frias, Raul Espinosa Martin, and Alvaro Lopez Miera, the latter three are three-star generals.

¹⁴ Some of these two star generals are likely to be promoted.

military is genuinely reflective of the Cuban people and responsive to it. That claim is strengthened by the fact that only two serious discontinuities in command and control have occurred since January 1959.

The first was in October of that year, the second thirty years later. In each case a respected military hero was disgraced; Huber Matos imprisoned for 20 years in the first; and General Ochoa executed on trumped up charges in 1989. Though disruptive and damaging to officer corps morale, the Castros controlled both episodes with no enduring damage to stability in the institution or beyond.

Although the FAR has been greatly diminished in size and capabilities since the early 1990s—down to about 40,000 to 50,000 today—considerable residual pride derives from its notable record.

- Decision-making audacity: In October 1963, Cuban infantry, including 22 tanks, under the command of Efigenio Ameijeiras, a trusted guerrilla veteran, were secretly transported to Algeria. They were ordered to fight with the revolutionary government there against forces of neighboring Morocco. However, a truce was reached in time to preclude warfare. When Fidel Castro received the request for assistance from the Algerian leader, he decided almost instantly to do so. He instructed Ameijeiras to provide the Algerians whatever support they needed. Ameijeiras recalls he was told by Fidel to place himself “at the Algerians complete disposal, to go wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted.”¹⁵
- Massive distant force projection: Beginning in the summer of 1975 large Cuban expeditionary forces were dispatched to Angola to consolidate a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist regime. The Cubans fought well-trained and equipped South African forces and triumphed, earning the grudging respect of their enemies. The initial intervention was achieved without Soviet support of any kind. Cuban troops were transported by ship and propeller-driven Cuban aircraft that required two fueling stops along the route to southwest Africa.
- Coalition warfare: Cubans fought under the command of Soviet generals on the side of revolutionary Ethiopia during its Ogaden border war with Somalia in the late 1970s. With Cuban pilots flying Soviet MIG combat aircraft overhead, the Castro brothers’ warriors distinguished themselves.
- Joint regular-irregular operations: In Nicaragua in 1979 FAR personnel, working in tandem with Ministry of Interior intelligence officers and commandos, helped to bring the Sandinista Marxist guerrillas to power and to consolidate their pro-Cuban regime.

These successes, and others less prominent, contributed to the perception in Cuba and beyond that the FAR was one of the most audacious, adroit and professionally-led militaries anywhere in the world. In the 1970s and 1980s it was arguably the best and most experienced fighting force of any small nation, with the single exception of Israel.

Raúl Castro’s tactical and managerial skills, combined with the strategic brilliance of Fidel Castro (who continued as commander in chief until his retirement in July 2006), provided the leadership that

¹⁵ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976*, University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 44. Ameijeiras was “furious . . . he was fuming,” when the offensive to be spearheaded by the Cuban tanks was called off. So instilled in the Castro brothers fighting spirit, “he wanted to fight.” p. 47.

made those victories possible. But, Cuban commanders, from senior field generals down through the disciplined ranks, became proficient at adapting and improvising, often achieving battlefield success far from home and against great odds. Tens of thousands of uniformed Cubans served in Africa, as many as 50,000 in Angola at the height of their engagement.

If anecdotal evidence and published records can be trusted, most of the Cuban veterans were persuaded by what Fidel Castro preached. He insisted that Cuban internationalist altruism, audacity, and valor in combat, were decisive in forcing the independence of Angola and Namibia, and, as he said, making “a significant contribution to the liberation of Zimbabwe and to the toppling of the hated apartheid regime in South Africa.”¹⁶

In speeches and interviews, Castro insisted on blaming the United States for many of the problems he said Cuba chose to fight against in Africa. Despite his exaggerations, the propaganda was heady validation for the thousands of Cuban soldiers who fought in Africa, and presumably, justification for the large numbers of Cuban casualties. Even today, pride in the FAR for the Africa campaigns runs deep. Promotions usually depend on past Africa experience.

Castro has always insisted too, that Cuba intervened in Angola and Ethiopia without first consulting the Soviets. Whether precisely true or not, the claim appealed to Cuba’s militant nationalism and to the FAR’s pride at being able to achieve major victories alone. Even recently, in the aftermath of President Obama’s visit, Castro expounded again in print on his preposterous assertion that American presidents had helped the South African dictatorship to acquire nuclear weapons.¹⁷

As he approaches his 90th birthday, the elder Castro is portrayed as persisting in pathological antipathy toward the United States. His enmity has been inculcated in many of his senior military officers who in the past rarely doubted what their commander in chief asserted. These attitudes and perceptions were also reinforced at the senior military educational institutions, such as the *Antonio and Jose Maceo Escuela Interamas* and the *Academia Superior de las FAR Máximo Gómez*.

During the Africa conflicts, Castro persuaded FAR personnel—many of them Afro-Cubans—that they were fighting for noble causes, assuming an internationalist responsibility that more timid and reactionary nations shirked. The Africa wars instilled in the dozens of thousands of Cuban veterans a sense of collective exceptionalism, the belief that they had achieved something truly historic. Leonardo Andollo, the youngest man to achieve general officer rank in the FAR, is probably typical; he has described his experiences in Ethiopia as “transcendental.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro” My Life, A Spoken Autobiography*, Scribner, 2006, p. 331.

¹⁷ Fidel Castro, *Brother Obama*, March 28, 2016, Granma.

¹⁸ Luis Baez, *Secretos de Generales*, Barcelona, Ed, Losada, 1997, p. 376.

By 1991, Cuban forces had been withdrawn from Angola, and international military missions had ended. Fidel Castro has been retired since 2006, only communicating since then in short editorials that have likely had considerably less impact on military thinking than his lengthy speeches and monologues of the past. Logically, therefore, it would seem that today younger FAR officers are less indoctrinated in both internationalist necessities and anti-American venom, though clear evidence of this is scarce. President Obama's visit, and especially his well-received speech in Havana to the Cuban people, may well have given greater impetus to a broad reevaluation of the American "enemy" by more and more FAR officers.

STRESSES AND DIVISIONS IN THE FAR

At least three fault lines may have created cracks in the FAR's traditional unity in recent years:

- Officer-businessmen who engage in running for-profit tourist industries and other enterprises are believed to be resented by their peers assigned to traditional missions of national defense.
- The loss of inspiring military missions, severe resource constraints, decline of professionalism, and shrinking of the military services, have no doubt spurred jealousies and tensions in the officer corps.
- Generational stresses have also resulted from the promotion bottleneck caused by Raúl Castro's preference to retain in the same positions the aged generals he has relied on for decades.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and precipitous contraction of the Cuban economy, favored FAR officers and retirees have been encouraged to engage in for-profit activities for the good of the institution. The now extensive military enterprise system is overseen by the dollar-oriented *Grupo de Administración Empresarial*, SA (GAESA), run by Raúl Castro's son-in-law, Luis Alberto Rodríguez López Callejas. In 2005, a knowledgeable author observed that "[t]here are some 230 factories and companies involved."¹⁹

Since this change in the FAR's mission, opportunities for corruption have multiplied many fold. Some officers have been disgraced for corrupt practices, although the regime is careful rarely to publicize malfeasance by military personnel. Nonetheless, a few officers with access to hard currency flows are known to have violated the tradition that they maintain standards of living comparable to those of the populace. A colonel who has remained anonymous is a good example of what has occurred in the FAR.

¹⁹ Hal Klepak, *Cuba's Military 1990-2005: Revolutionary Soldiers during Counter-Revolutionary Times*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 80.

He controls a large and attractive apartment building in the upscale Vedado neighborhood of Havana. He lives comfortably in the penthouse unit he is said to own.²⁰

Although evidence is scarce, troop commanders are believed to have been alienated as businessmen-officers have enriched themselves. Proof of rampant corruption is difficult to confirm; however, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that, with relatively easy access to dollars, fuel, food and vehicles, corruption started to be a bit more visible starting in the early 2000s.²¹ Frank Mora observes that “there is much rancor, suspicion, and jealousy between FAR bureaucrats and commanders in the field.”²² It is impossible to determine how serious these disparities and tensions may be today, about a quarter century after the military began to engage in for-profit activities. In the end, however, it does not seem that the military’s role in the economy and signs of corruption have negatively affected institutional cohesion or support for the Revolution. The truth is that we at this time do not know the full effect of the FAR’s involvement. Juan Carlos Espinosa and Robert C. Harding argue that “the question remains whether these economic activities increase loyalty and cohesion of the FAR and the regime, or whether they promote individualism, capitalist ambitions and regime disloyalty.”²³

The second presumed fault line in the FAR derives from its contraction, resource constraints, and loss of internationalist missions after the end of the Cold War. Hal Klepak observes that “[A]ll manner of cuts in personnel, fuel, training, equipment, weapons, deployments, links to the outside world, and much else have left the forces suffering severely.”²⁴ The military budget was slashed in half from 1988 to 1992 and troop strength declined nearly two-thirds during the same period. Spare parts for aircraft, ships, vehicles and other equipment became scarce, increasing equipment downtime and the cannibalization or mothballing of existing equipment. As a result, military training and preparedness declined significantly—conditions that have not improved much since the early 1990s. As it has steadily diminished in recent years the once proud FAR has surely suffered a distinct decline of morale and sense of purpose.

Specifically, in the aftermath of President Obama’s visit to Cuba, commanders no longer have a credible enemy to despise and fear. Those sentiments that Fidel Castro did so much to promote have likely been steadily eroding. Looking forward, moreover, defense mobilizations, exercises, and war gaming for

²⁰ Brian Latell, *After Fidel, Raul Castro and the Future of Cuba’s Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 242. A former American diplomat in Havana who knows the building and one of its foreign tenants described the case in 2005.

²¹ Frank O. Mora, “A Comparative Study of Civil-Military Relations in Cuba and China: The Effects of *Bingshang*,” *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002), 185-209.

²² Frank O. Mora, “The FAR and Its Economic Role: From Civic to Technocrat-Soldier,” *ICCAS Occasional Paper Series*, University of Miami (June 2004).

²³ Juan Carlos Espinosa and Robert C. Harding, “Olive Green Parachutes and Slow Motion Pinatas: The Cuban Armed Forces in Comparative Perspective,” unpublished paper 2010.

²⁴ Klepak, p. 73.

a hypothetical American invasion will seem farcical to participants and the population at large. It is questionable whether the high command will continue to schedule them.

The civilian population will likely become increasingly skeptical of regime propaganda portraying the United States as its implacable enemy. In that regard, communist party members, probably including influential ones, may come to view the military as anachronistic and an unnecessary burden on the strained national budget.

Finally, a serious generational divide characterizes the FAR leadership. Many two- and all the three-star generals are close collaborators of General Raúl Castro, some having worked closely with him since the guerrilla days in the late 1950s. They are mostly elderly, in their upper seventies and eighties. A much-decorated two-star general recently retired at the age of 86.²⁵ The defense minister is about 74, the chief of staff a couple of years younger. The two vice-ministers are in their mid- to upper-seventies. All are three-star generals. A few other three stars have retired. All of them were promoted in 2001. Since then no other three stars are known to have joined their exclusive ranks.²⁶

The promotion bottleneck is largely a reflection of Raúl Castro's insistence that loyal contemporaries who have served with him for decades continue to surround and support him. Obviously, he does not feel as confident of the loyalties of the younger two-star generals. But now 84 years old, pressure on him to rejuvenate the high command is intensifying. He has said he plans to retire from the presidency in early 2018, and expects some other elderly officials to step down as well. It is not clear, however, that he will give up his four-star rank, or that he expects his three-star colleagues to retire.

The regime has taken costly steps to assuage the morale of presumably disgruntled middle ranking officers, for example, by building modern housing and recreational facilities for them. *The New York Times* reported in February 2014 on "a housing development called Project Granma, featuring hundreds of comfortable apartments in a gated complex." It was "to have its own movie theater and schools."²⁷

Benefits have probably also been augmented in recent years as hard currency revenue collected by the government has increased. But in a shrinking military that is likely to continue contracting, the prospects for capable young officers are bleak. The generational divide is of long standing and seems to defy solution. It may even contribute to political instability over the next several years. In the final analysis, however, at the moment what unites the officer corps far exceeds any real or potential tensions or cleavages. Much is at stake—careers, institution (of which they have a great pride and affection), and

²⁵ *14yMedio*, March 31, 2016.

²⁶ Frank O. Mora, "Generations in the General Officer Corps of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) of Cuba: Backgrounds, Perceptions and Common Purpose," *Cuban Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 2006).

²⁷ Damian Cave, *The New York Times*, February 11, 2014.

revolution—all could easily fall apart if they were to allow their relatively minor grievances and differences get the best of them.

Nepotism could be an emerging fourth fissure inside the armed forces. As already mentioned, Raúl Castro's son-in-law, Luis Alberto Rodríguez López-Callejas, is at the top of the hierarchy that controls military enterprise and hard currency earning activities. As of April 15, 2016, he is a one-star general with excellent prospects for promotion. He also serves as a member of the Communist Party Central Committee and appears to be a prominent candidate for promotion.

Raúl Castro's only son, Alejandro Castro Espin, is a colonel in the interior ministry with the important responsibility of coordinating policy between the armed forces and internal security organs. With a thickening resume as a dogmatic and hard line scholar, itinerant regime spokesman, and adviser to his father, he is probably on the short list to be promoted to one-star general. Groomed for leadership roles, he is a wounded (self-inflicted) veteran of the Angola wars. His book, *Imperio del Terror*, is a brooding 300-page anti-American screed that he is said to have researched for a decade. It catalogues 50 years of what he describes as American terrorism and aggressions against Cuba. Recently issued in a new edition, and translated into several foreign languages, the book has received scant publicity in the Cuban media. However, Castro Espin has promoted it aggressively in Moscow, Athens, and possibly other cities. He has been at his father's side during several recent foreign trips, including sensitive meetings with American leaders.

His ascendance has been rapid, but only since Raúl Castro officially became president in 2008. This may be because Fidel Castro was opposed to any appearance of favoring family members other than Raúl. Born in 1965, Castro Espin is probably resented by career military officers. Some who knew him in the past describe him as limited in abilities and intellect. One person who knew him particularly well, has said that “many in the military hate him, others criticize him, and still others mock him.” If so, Cuba's dauphin could have poor prospects once Raúl is unable to protect him from conniving rivals.²⁸

Ultimately, what maintains institutional cohesion is not solely a matter of shared interests and goals; it also has to do with a strong symbolic or emotional link to the origins of the revolution and those that led it—i.e. *comandantes*—, many of which are still alive, and in the case of Raúl, very much in control. The link between the *historicos* and the armed institution they created from the disorganized but committed band of guerrillas that made up the Rebel Army, remains strong in the eyes of all Cuban officers. This bond and the history of the FAR's heroic accomplishments, home and abroad, is something that Cuban officers strongly identify with. Some joined the rebels in the Sierra, most did not. Many

²⁸ Brian Latell, *Another Castro in the Wings*, Latell Report, University of Miami, March 2015.

participated in a number of international missions, others only had limited experiences with proletarian internationalism. Some officers were more directly affected by the Special Period than others. Many went abroad and received educational and operational training in the USSR during the Cold War, while others received their foreign educational exposure in China, Vietnam and, in cases of the technocrats, western capitalist countries. Again, differences in age, background, professional trajectory, and experiences abound, but these dissimilarities combined is not enough to overwhelm or curb the tremendous influence and impact of history, leadership, interests and purpose that binds FAR officers to each other, the revolution, and the governing first generation of revolutionary leaders.

THE FAR AND CUBAN SOCIETY

Historically, the FAR has been perhaps the most respected official institution in Cuba, and even today, diminished and reduced in so many respects, the military is still admired. There are many reasons for its still relatively respected status:

- The FAR grew out of the guerrilla and nativist 26th of July Movement led by Fidel Castro that initially enjoyed enormous popularity.
- A large percentage of the male population has served in uniform, many in international missions. Their exploits in African theaters of battle and elsewhere have been enthusiastically chronicled.
- No Cuban schoolchild could be unaware of the feats of Operation Carlota, when the Cubans were dispatched to Angola to battle South African forces.
- Their humiliation of the Kennedy administration and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs without foreign assistance rallied the populace and established the foundation of Cuba's revolutionary nationalism.
- The FAR was never subordinated to the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, and rarely participated in joint exercises with other communist nations. The Castros insisted on maintaining its operational independence.
- Though highly dependent on Soviet largesse for equipment and supplies, decision-making and overseas operations were always strictly Cuban.
- Historically, it has been recognized as the best managed large institution.
- The FAR is more meritocratic and representative of the many hues of the Cuban populace than any other official institution. In short, it is not susceptible to being seen as elitist.
- The FAR was instrumental in helping Cuba survive the calamitous end of Soviet subsidies.
- Cubans generally are aware that the continuity of leadership in the FAR, and its institutional integrity and stability are unparalleled anywhere in Latin America, and most of the Third World.

But as noted, the FAR's standing with the populace increasingly reflects its reduced status, missions, and capabilities. Its elderly commanders may be remembered favorably for their exploits decades earlier, but today they are increasingly viewed as doddering anachronisms. If younger generals are promoted to the Politburo at the Seventh Party Congress, the leadership will have taken an important

step toward rejuvenating the stale military leadership. In addition, if a new round of promotions to three-star rank occurs soon, generational tensions will be at least partially assuaged.

CONCLUSION

The FAR remains inheritors of “proud traditions by any standards. They are loyal to the regime and to the country. They are vital to both.”²⁹ Their main mission remains deterring and defending against external attack but the enhanced role of the military in the economy is having an impact as senior officers seem to know as much about business as soldiering.

When the Castro brothers decided to allow trusted officer and retirees to lead and manage for-profit enterprises, they knew the risks. Opportunities for corruption, stresses in the upper ranks, and civilian resentment of high-living officers could begin to undermine many of the traditional strengths of the exalted FAR. Tinkering with capitalist accumulation was hardly consistent with the selfless internationalist values that had been promoted for many years. In addition, Fidel Castro’s traditional insistence that Cuba be an egalitarian society of equals had to be suspended.

But the Castros concluded that the economic crisis was so severe they had no good alternative. They were loath to allow civilian officials to lead economic reform efforts because they could emerge as focal points for popular opposition to the regime and possibly become the core of a new middle class. They thought that FAR officers could be better depended on to eschew capitalist values and temptations. They gambled that their officers would be less likely to resort to corruption or to defect as decorated air force General Rafael del Pino did in 1987. And, by allowing officers to become richer and live more comfortably, their loyalty might be better assured.³⁰

It has not worked out as well as hoped. All of the worst outcomes the Castros presumably feared have in fact occurred. But, it is even more problematic than they probably imagined back in the early 1990s. For the reasons described here, the FAR is now unsettled and unsure of its direction. Hal Klepak elucidates further:

This kind of disciplined and hierarchical force, loyal to its chain of command and highly professional, has done impressive things in the past and is showing itself capable of doing the same today and almost certainly in the future. But the strains of transition could be even more daunting than those of day. The FAR’s personnel are frustrated on a number of scores even if as an institution they show distinct loyalty... they are frustrated by some important bottlenecks in

²⁹ Hal Klepak, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces: Loyalty and Efficiency in the Face of Old and New Challenges,” in *The Revolution under Raul Castro: A Contemporary Cuba Reader*, edited by Philip Brenner, Marguerite Rose Jimenez, John M. Kirk and William M. LeoGrande (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 81

³⁰ Rafael Del Pino was the only high level defection from the FAR in its history.

promotion brought about in large part by the cuts of the early 1990s. They are disappointed at no longer having the sophisticated tools they once had to do their job. They are upset by the loss of chances to prove themselves professionally abroad and to gain real experience off the island. And they are often annoyed with the conditions of work, pay, advancement, training and much else.

For a number of years, Cuban officers have participated in the fence-line talks with American military officers posted at the Guantanamo Naval Base. By all accounts the two sides have regularly interacted constructively. It is one more reason to conclude that the historic fear of the United States has declined and that the traditional culture of revolutionary nationalism is in flux.

Furthermore, given the experiences of many officer-entrepreneurs over the last quarter century, it seems reasonable to suspect that a starkly different consensus may have emerged in the upper command ranks. Observers of the FAR have concluded that many of the most influential officers actually now favor a disciplined, regulated free market economic system. Thus, ironically, by inducing officers to become private sector entrepreneurs, the Castros may have let the free market genie loose on Cuban society.

ATTACHMENT 1

The Most Notable FAR Failure

The Cubans suffered one humiliating defeat made all the worse because it occurred during the hated Reagan administration and in heated battle with American military forces.

In October 1983, in the small Caribbean island nation of Grenada, 700 to 800 Cuban military, intelligence, and reservist laborers fought in pitched battle when U.S. forces invaded to rescue American students held captive during a revolutionary upheaval. It was the only time during the Castro regime that Cuban military personnel fought American military forces.

Grenada at the time was ruled by a pro-Castro revolutionary movement that ruptured, and fell into violent discord. In broadcast instructions to the Cubans on the island, Fidel Castro insisted that they all fight to the death against the reviled American enemy. He must have seen an opportunity for Cuban warriors to deal terrible blows to the imperialist enemy, and had scant regard for the loss of Cuban life that inevitably would ensue.

Castro perhaps took solace from the reality that 24 Cubans did fight to the death, although all the others, including the colonel he had dispatched to command their last stand, fled the battlefield and were taken prisoner. Castro's bizarre orders, in effect demanding the Cubans commit mass suicide in the face of overwhelming American military superiority, undermined his previously impeccable standing in the FAR. His irrational hatred of the United States proved more powerful than his responsibilities to his own troops.

Some Cuban officers still on active duty surely remember that the captured Cubans were all treated with respect by American personnel and promptly repatriated to Cuba. In the eyes of some, therefore, Grenada demonstrated the magnanimity of the supposedly implacable imperialist enemy.

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