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# Cuban Armed Forces and the Soviet Military Presence

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*Any formulation of U.S. foreign policy, to be complete, would have to devote special attention to the challenge Cuba presents to U.S. interests, especially in the Third World. Cuba has developed an extraordinary capacity to influence events in such diverse regions as sub-Saharan Africa and Central America in spite of serious economic problems at home. Its ability to project power far out of proportion to its size is directly related to its association with the Soviet Union and the Soviet support for the development of its military machine.*

*This study is being issued in the interests of contributing to better public understanding of the nature of Cuba's massive military buildup and how it contributes to Castro's ability to challenge orderly political and economic development in this hemisphere and elsewhere.*

## Summary

Cuba has by far the most formidable and largest military force in the Caribbean Basin with the exception of the United States. In all of Latin America, only Brazil—with a population more than 12 times that of Cuba—has a larger military establishment. Increasing Soviet-Cuban military ties and the improvement of the Cuban Armed Forces have enabled Cuba to assume a far more influential world role than its size and resources would otherwise dictate.

Since 1975, the U.S.S.R. has undertaken a major modernization of all branches of the Cuban military, transforming it from a home defense force into the best equipped military establishment in Latin America and one possessing significant offensive capabilities. Equipment delivered to the ground forces has enhanced both their mobility and firepower. The Air Force, with some 200 Soviet-supplied MiG jet fighters, now is probably the best equipped in Latin America. The Navy has acquired two torpedo attack submarines and a Koni-class frigate, which will be able to sustain operations throughout the Caribbean Basin and will enable Castro to project power well beyond Cuba's shores.

As a result of this modernization program and Cuba's combat experience in Angola and Ethiopia, the Castro regime possesses a substantial regional intervention capability. Havana has increased its airborne-trained forces to a level of some 3,000-4,000 troops and also has improved its airlift and sealift capability. Although modest by Western standards, this capability is impressive in the Central American and Caribbean context. It would be employed most effectively in aiding a regional ally against an external invasion or in suppressing internal conflict.

Cuba does not have the ability to conduct an outright invasion of another country in the region except for the Caribbean microstates. Nor does Havana possess sufficient amphibious assault landing craft or aircraft capable of transporting heavy equipment.

On occasion Cuba has been reckless in using its capabilities. The most recent example occurred on May 10, 1980, when Cuban Air Force fighters, in broad daylight, attacked and sank a clearly marked Bahamian patrol vessel inside Bahamian territorial waters, killing four crewmembers. The following day, Cuban MiGs buzzed a populated island belonging to The Bahamas, and a Cuban helicopter carrying Cuban troops landed on the island in pursuit of the surviving crewmembers.

**The Cuban Military**

Since the mid-1970s, when Cuba intervened in Angola on a large scale and the Soviet Union began to modernize Cuba's Armed Forces, the Cuban military has evolved from a predominantly home defense force into a formidable power relative to its Latin American neighbors. The cost of Soviet arms delivered to Castro since 1960 exceeds \$2.5 billion. These arms deliveries, plus the annual \$3 billion economic subsidy, are tied to Cuba's ongoing military and political role

abroad in support of Soviet objectives. The recent deliveries of Soviet military equipment to Cuba are the latest in a surge of deliveries over the past year. Since January 1981, Soviet merchant ships have delivered some 66,000 tons of military equipment, compared with the previous 10-year annual average of 15,000 tons. These weapons represent the most significant Soviet military supply effort to Cuba since a record 250,000 tons was shipped in 1962. There are several reasons for this increase:

- The beginning of a new 5-year upgrading and replacement cycle;
- Additional arms to equip the new territorial militia, which Cuba now claims to be 500,000 strong but which it expects to reach 1 million;
- Increasing stockpiles, much of which is passed to regional supporters; and
- A convincing demonstration of Moscow's continuing support for the Havana regime.

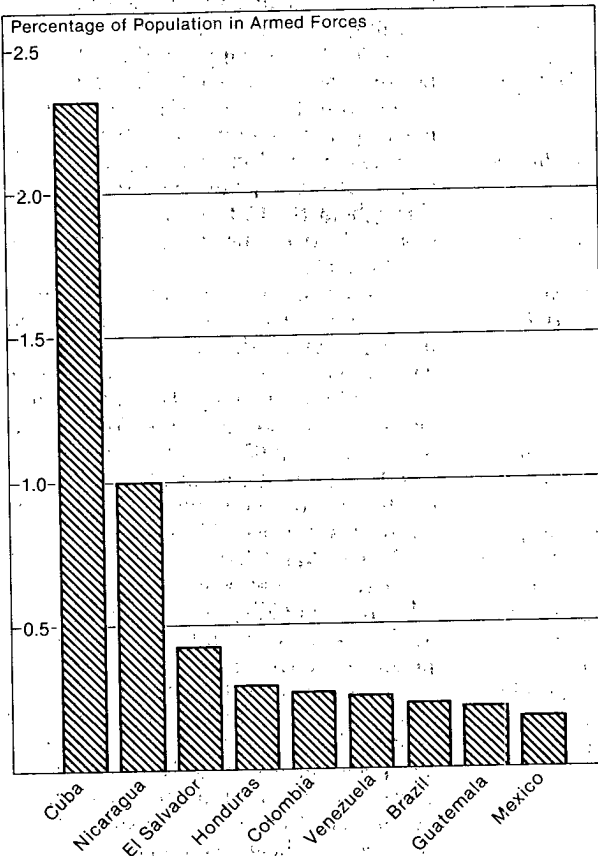
In addition to major weapons systems, large quantities of ammunition, small arms, spares, and support equipment probably were delivered.

Cuba's Armed Forces total more than 225,000 personnel—200,000 Army, 15,000 Air Force and Air Defense, and 10,000 Navy—including those on active duty either in Cuba or overseas and those belonging to the ready reserves, which are subject to immediate mobilization. With a population of just under 10 million, Cuba has the largest military force in the Caribbean Basin and the second largest in Latin America after Brazil, with a population of more than 120 million. More than 2% of the Cuban population belongs to the active-duty military and ready reserves, compared with an average of less than 0.4% in other countries in the Caribbean Basin. In addition, Cuba's large paramilitary organizations and reserves would be available to provide internal support to the military.

The quantitative and qualitative upgrading of the armed forces and their recent combat experience in Africa give the Cuban military definite advantages over its Latin American neighbors. Cuba is the only country in Latin America to have undertaken a major overseas mili-

**Relative Military Strength**

*For Selected Caribbean Countries*



*For Selected Latin American Countries*

Country	Population (thousands)	People in Military (thousands)	% of Population in Military
Cuba	9,800	227.0	2.32
Argentina	28,000	185.5	.66
Bolivia	5,500	26.6	.48
Brazil	124,780	272.6	.22
Chile	11,180	92.0	.82
Colombia	27,310	70.0	.26
Ecuador	8,250	38.8	.47
Paraguay	3,270	16.0	.49
Peru	18,075	130.0	.72
Uruguay	2,945	29.7	1.01
Venezuela	16,459	40.8	.25
Dominican Republic	5,835	22.5	.39
Guatemala	7,200	15.1	.21
Honduras	3,900	11.2	.29
Mexico	69,000	119.5	.17

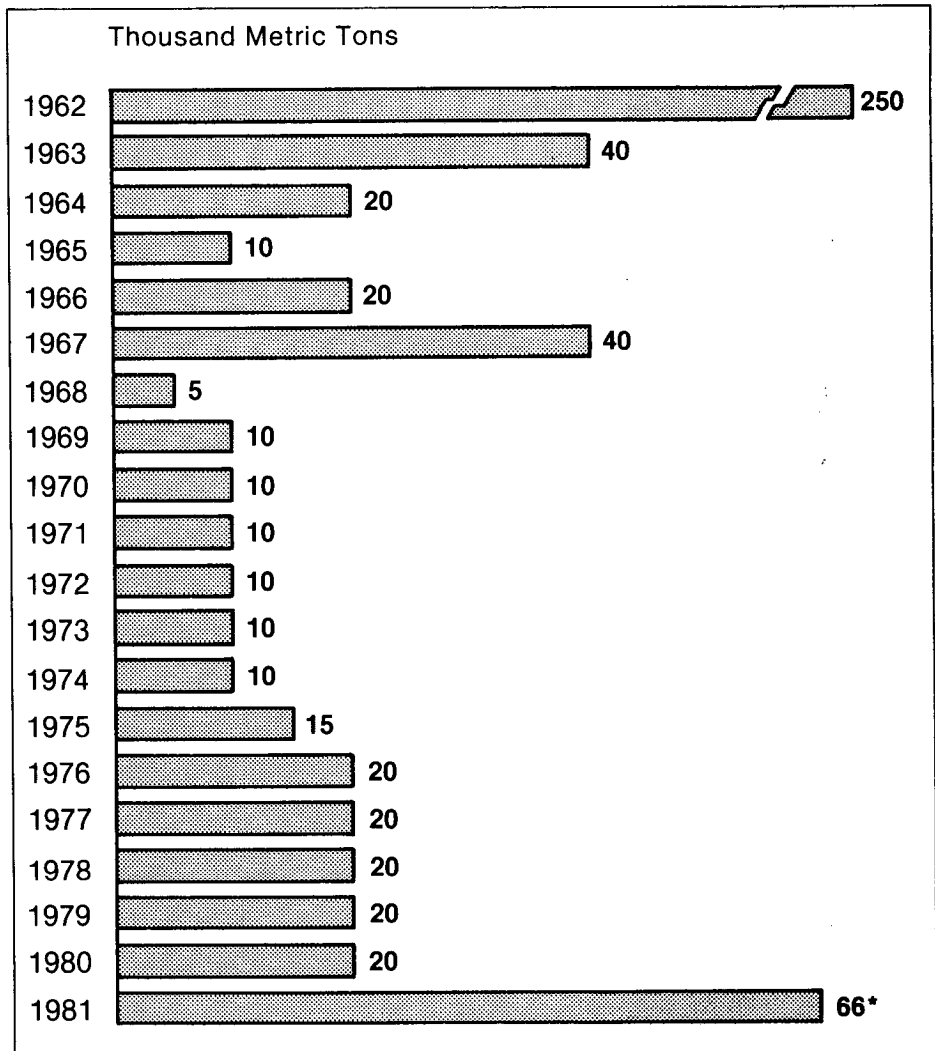
Source: *Military Balance, 1981-1982.*

tary effort since World War II, giving both Army and Air Force personnel recent combat experience in operating many of the weapons in their inventories. About 70% of Cuban troops who have served in Africa have been reservists. Reservists generally spend about 45 days per year on active duty and can be integrated quickly into the armed forces. Cuba's civilian enterprises, such as Cubana Airlines and the merchant marine, have been used effectively in support of military operations. Havana has dedicated significant resources to modernize and professionalize its armed forces and to maintain a well-prepared reserve. Cuba has demonstrated that, when supported logistically by the Soviet Union, it has both the capability and the will to deploy large numbers of troops and can be expected to do so whenever the Castro government believes it to be in Cuba's best interest.

Equipment delivered to the Army since the mid-1970s, including T-62 tanks, BMP infantry combat vehicles, BRDM armored reconnaissance vehicles, antitank guns, towed field guns, BM-21 multiple rocket launchers, and ZSU-23-4 self-propelled antiaircraft guns, have begun to alleviate earlier deficiencies in Cuba's mechanized capability and to provide increased firepower. In addition to its qualitative advantage, the Cuban Army has an overwhelming numerical superiority in weapons over its Latin American neighbors.

The Cuban Air Force is one of the largest and probably the best equipped in Latin America. Its inventory includes some 200 Soviet-supplied MiG jet fighters, with two squadrons of FLOGGERS (the exact model of the second squadron recently delivered is not yet determined). The MiG-23s have the range to reach portions of the southeastern United States, most of Central America, and most Caribbean nations. On a round-trip mission, however, Cuban-based aircraft would be capable of conducting only limited air engagements in Central America. If based on Central American soil—a feasible option given the closeness of Cuban-Nicaraguan relations—Cuba's fighter aircraft could be effectively employed in either a ground-attack or air-superiority role. A similar arrangement would be possible in Grenada once Cuban workers complete the construction of an airfield with a 9,000-foot runway there. If the MiG-23s were to stage from Nicaragua and

### U.S.S.R. Seaborne Military Deliveries to Cuba



\* Approximate figure

Grenada, their combat radius would be expanded to include all of Central America, including the northern tier of South America.

Cuban defenses have been strengthened by the additions of mobile SA-6 launchers and related radars for air defense, SA-2 transporters, SA-2 missile canisters, new early warning and height-finding radar stations, and electronic warfare vans.

The Cuban Navy, with a strength of about 10,000 personnel, remains essentially a defensive force. However, its two recently acquired Foxtrot-class sub-

marines and single Koni-class frigate, once fully integrated into the operational force, will be able to sustain operations through the Caribbean Basin, the Gulf of Mexico and, to a limited extent, the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>1</sup> The primary vessels for carrying out the Navy's defensive missions are Osa- and Komar-class missile attack boats, whose range can extend well into the Caribbean. They are armed with SS-N-2 STYX ship-to-ship

<sup>1</sup>The Koni has an operating range of 2,000 nautical miles without refueling or replenishment. The Foxtrots have a range of 9,000 nautical miles at 7 knots per hour and a patrol duration of 70 days.

missiles. Cuba has received, in addition, Turya-class hydrofoil torpedo boats, Yevgenya-class inshore minesweepers, and a Sonya-class minesweeper. Although not equipped for sustained operations away from its main bases, the Cuban Navy could conduct limited interdiction missions in the Caribbean. Cuba also has a 3,000-man coast guard organization.

By Western standards, Cuba's capability to intervene in a hostile environment using its indigenous transport equipment is modest, but it is considerably more formidable in the Central American context. As in 1975, when a single battalion of Cuban airborne troops airlifted to Luanda, Angola, at a critical moment and played a role far out of proportion to its size, a battle-tested Cuban force interjected quickly into a combat situation in Central America could prove to be decisive. Moreover, since the Angolan experience, Havana has increased the training of airborne forces, which now consist of a special troops contingent and a landing and assault brigade, and has improved its air and sealift capacity. Introduction of sophisticated Soviet weapons geared toward mobility and offensive missions has improved Cuban ability to conduct military operations off the island.

Cuba still lacks sufficient transport aircraft capable of supporting long-range, large-scale troop movements and would have to turn to the Soviets to achieve such a capability. Cuba is able to transport large numbers of troops and supplies within the Caribbean, however, using its military and civilian aircraft. Since 1975, the Cuban commercial air fleet has acquired seven IL-62 long-range jet transport aircraft and some TU-154 medium-to-long-range transport aircraft, each capable of carrying 150-200 combat-equipped troops. By comparison, Cuba conducted the 1975 airlift to Luanda with only five medium-range aircraft, each having a maximum capacity of 100 troops.

Cuba has recently acquired the AN-26 short-range transport. The most effective use of this aircraft from Cuban bases would be in transporting troops or supplies to a friendly country, but it is capable, with full payload, of airdropping troops on portions of Florida and Belize; Jamaica, Haiti, and The Bahamas; and most of the Dominican Republic. If based in Nicaragua, the AN-26s could reach virtually all of Central America in either a transport or airdrop role. In addition, more than 30 smaller military and civilian transport planes, including those used in Angola,

could be used to fly troops and munitions to Central America.

The Soviet military deliveries also could improve Cuban ability to conduct military operations abroad. In Angola, for example, the mobile SA-6 surface-to-air missile system operated by the Cubans could provide a valuable complement to other less effective air defense systems. The new equipment would enable Havana to continue assistance to Nicaragua. The MiG-23 and MiG-21 fighters probably would be most effective in aiding the Sandinista regime. Deployment of a few dozen MiGs would not seriously reduce Cuba's defenses, and Cuban-piloted MiGs would enable Nicaragua to counter virtually any threat from within the region.

In early 1982 Cuba also received some Mi-24 HIND-D helicopters, the first assault helicopters in Cuba's inventory which also includes the Mi-8 HIP. The Mi-24—armed with a 57mm cannon, minigun, and rocket pods and carrying a combat squad—will provide Cuba with improved offensive capability.

Cuba's ability to mount an amphibious assault is constrained both by the small number of naval infantry and by a dearth of suitable landing craft. Cuba would, however, be capable of transporting large numbers of troops and supplies—using ships belonging to the mer-

chant marine and the navy—to ports secured by friendly forces, if the United States did not become involved.

### Cuba's Paramilitary Organizations

Cuba's several paramilitary organizations involve hundreds of thousands of civilian personnel during peacetime and would be available to support the military during times of crisis. Although these groups would be far less combat capable than any segment of the military, they do provide the civilian population with at least rudimentary military training and discipline. Their primary orientation is internal security and local defense.

The extent to which the military is involved in the civilian sector is further indicated by its activity within the economic sphere. In addition to uniformed personnel, the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) employs more than 30,000 civilian workers in factories and repair facilities in Cuba and in building roads and airfields in Africa. Many of them are employees of MINFAR's Central Directorate for Housing and Construction which, in addition to military construction, builds housing and apartment complexes for military and civilian personnel of both MINFAR and the Ministry of the Interior. The Youth Labor Army also

### Strength and Missions of Cuba's Paramilitary Organizations

Organization	Subordination	Strength	Mission
Youth Labor Army	MINFAR (Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces)	100,000	Civic action force, receiving little military training in peacetime. One wartime mission would be to operate and protect the railroads.
Civil Defense Force	MINFAR	100,000	"Military" units would assist in providing local defense; non-military would provide first aid and disaster relief.
Territorial Troop Militia	MINFAR	More than 500,000 at present; still forming	Regional security/local defense.
Border Guard Troops	MININT (Ministry of the Interior)	3,000 full-time, plus unknown number of civilian auxiliaries	Help guard Cuban coastline.
National Revolutionary Police	MININT	10,000, plus 52,000 civilian auxiliaries	Responsible for public order in peacetime; could help provide rear area security during wartime.
Department of State Security	MININT	10,000-15,000	Counterintelligence and prevention of counter-revolutionary activities.

contributes to economic development by engaging in agricultural, industrial, construction, transportation, and other projects.

### The Soviet Presence

The Soviet military presence in Cuba includes a ground forces brigade of about 2,600 men, a military advisory group of 2,000, and an intelligence-collection facility. There also are 6,000-8,000 Soviet civilian advisers in Cuba. Military deployments to Cuba consist of periodic visits by Soviet naval reconnaissance aircraft and task groups.

Soviet ground forces have been in Cuba since shortly before the 1962 missile crisis. Located near Havana, the ground forces brigade consists of one tank and three motorized rifle battalions as well as various combat and support units. Likely missions include providing a small symbolic Soviet commitment to Castro—implying a readiness to defend Cuba—and probably providing security for Soviet personnel and key Soviet facilities, particularly for the Soviets' large intelligence-collection facility. The brigade almost certainly would not have a role as an intervention force, although it is capable of tactical defense and offensive operations in Cuba. Unlike units such as airborne divisions, it is not structured for rapid deployment, and no transport aircraft able to carry its armed vehicles and heavy equipment are stationed in Cuba.

### Cuban Advisers

Nation	Total Number (Estimated)	
	Military	Civilian
Angola	20,000-25,000	6,000
Ethiopia	11,000-13,000	600
Nicaragua	2,000	4,000
South Yemen	200-300	100
Grenada	30	300

The Soviet military advisory group provides technical advice in support of weapons such as the MiGs, surface-to-air missiles, and the FOXTROT submarines; some also are attached to Cuban ground units. The Soviets' intelligence-collection facility—their largest outside the U.S.S.R.—monitors U.S. military and civilian communications.

Since the naval ship visit program began in 1969, 21 Soviet naval task groups have deployed to the Caribbean, virtually all of them visiting Cuban ports. The most recent visit occurred in April and May 1981 and included the first by a Kara-class cruiser—the largest Soviet combatant ever to have visited the island. Soviet intelligence-collection ships operating off the east coast of the United States regularly call at Cuba, as do hydrographic research and space-support ships operating in the region. In addition, the Soviet Navy maintains a salvage and rescue ship in Havana for emergency operations.

Since 1975, Soviet TU-95 Bear D reconnaissance aircraft have deployed periodically to Cuba. Typically, these aircraft are deployed in pairs and stay in Cuba for several weeks at a time. The

flights traditionally have been associated with U.S., NATO, and Soviet exercises; the transit of U.S. ships to and from the Mediterranean; and periods of increased international tension.

The Soviets apparently sent a considerable number of pilots to augment Cuba's air defense during two periods—early 1976 and during 1978—when Cuban pilots were sent to Angola and Ethiopia. They filled in for the Cuban pilots deployed abroad and provided the Cuban Air Force with sufficient personnel to perform its primary mission of air defense of the island.

### Threat to Hemispheric Strategic Defense

Cuban military ties with the Soviet Union, the Soviet presence in Cuba, a large Soviet intelligence-collection facility, and the periodic Soviet air and naval presence pose not inconsiderable military threats to U.S. security interests in the hemisphere. Because of Cuba's proximity to vital sea lanes, the Soviets or Cubans in wartime could attempt to interdict the movement of troops, supplies, and raw materials in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea and could strike key facilities in the area. ■

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