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The Soviet-Cuban alliance in Africa and the Caribbean

JIRI VALENTA

THERE are two extreme views regarding the Soviet-Cuban alliance. The first portrays Cuba as a surrogate of the USSR, simply implementing Soviet orders; the second depicts Cuba as a totally unconstrained, autonomous actor. As the present writer has argued elsewhere, Cuba is neither of these.[1] The frequently heard view that Cuban policy is necessarily subservient to that of the USSR is unsophisticated and obscures the fact that there exist mutual constraints and leverages in the Cuban-Soviet alliance. Thus, while the USSR plays the dominant role in the alliance with Cuba and exercises great influence upon Cuban foreign policy in general and Cuban policy in the Third World in particular (with Cuba enjoying only a small degree of relative autonomy), Cuba likewise provides inputs, albeit limited, into Soviet decision-making regarding the Third World.

Soviet African policy in particular has been dependent to some extent on the willingness of Fidel Castro and his colleagues to provide ground forces for the Soviet enterprises in Africa. In Angola and Ethiopia, unlike in Afghanistan, the Russians were cautious about committing their own troops in direct military fashion. The use of Soviet combat units might have elicited a firmer response from the United States with resulting detrimental consequences for the USSR. Furthermore, the similarity of the physical environment of Africa, particularly Angola, to that of Cuba and the presence of a substantial number of blacks and mulattos in the Cuban forces (40 to 50 per cent in Angola, although this percentage is higher than in the Cuban armed forces as a whole) were additional factors favouring the use of Cuban troops.

Because Cuban willingness to deploy regular troops in Africa became indispensable to the Soviet Union's African policies, Cuba gained the status of a privileged ally and was able to insist on adjustments in Soviet-Cuban economic and political relations. In the aftermath of the invasion of Angola in 1975, and again after the intervention in Ethiopia in 1978, the Cubans obtained favourable agree-

[1] See Jiri Valenta, 'The Soviet-Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1975', *Studies in Comparative Communism* (Los Angeles), Spring/Summer 1978, pp. 3–33; 'Soviet Decision-Making on the Intervention in Angola', in David Albright, ed., *Communism in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); 'The Communist States and Conflict in the Horn of Africa', in J. Valenta and D. Albright, eds., *Communist Countries and Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming) and 'Comment: the Soviet-Cuban alliance in Africa and future prospects in the Third World', *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos* (Pittsburgh), Vol. 10, July 1980, pp. 36–43.

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ments from the USSR. These ensured continuation into the 1980s of Soviet subsidies of Cuban sugar and nickel production and of prices paid for petroleum.[2] The Russians also provided for the modernization of Cuba's armed forces with sophisticated Soviet weaponry. Furthermore, Soviet policy decisions regarding the Third World and particularly Africa began to reflect, at least marginally, Cuba's convictions about the necessity of undertaking military operations in the Third World. After all, these policies were only possible because of Cuban willingness to provide the forces. Castro, who is the current President of the non-aligned movement, exercised some influence on the USSR both directly (by consulting with Soviet leaders) and indirectly (by serving as a broker between the Soviet and Third World leaders, many of whom see Castro as brave, courageous and charming). Thus Castro's Cuban policy cannot be viewed as totally subservient to that of the USSR.

Cuba's dependence on the USSR

On the other hand, it would be far-fetched to think of Cuba as an autonomous or even semi-independent actor. Cuba's emergence as a major power in Africa in the 1970s has been possible mainly because of growing Soviet military and economic power and Soviet exploitation of changes in the international system; it has taken place in a context of global interaction between the Soviet Union and the United States. Favourable to this course of events was the USSR's assumption of a new global role in the 1970s. From a Khrushchevian, basically regional and premature global power, the USSR has gradually emerged under Brezhnev's leadership as a fully developed, globally oriented super-power. The acquisition of strategic parity with the United States in the early 1970s and immeasurably improved conventional capabilities helped to make possible the Soviet-Cuban ventures in Angola and Ethiopia. The Russians had clearly learned from their experience in 1960 in the Congo (now Zaire) during which the lack of air- and sea-lift capabilities, inexperienced personnel and poor co-ordination led to serious difficulties and ultimately to the failure of the Soviet operation. Thus, Cuban ascendance in Africa has been possible primarily because of Soviet logistic support, co-ordination, military-strategic cover and weaponry, but also because of Soviet subsidizing of the Cuban economy with an estimated $7 million per day. Trade with the USSR accounts for over 60 per cent of Cuba's foreign commerce. According to the trade agreement signed in Moscow in November 1980, trade between Cuba and the USSR in 1980–5 will amount to $35 billion—a 50 per cent increase over the aid level of 1976–80.[3] To facilitate the solution to Cuba's energy problem the Russians have already built one electro-nuclear power plant in Cuba, and they plan to build another plant by the end of the 1980s. They also plan to develop 'a nuclear research centre'.

Also contributing to the Soviet Union's and Cuba's ascendance in the mid-

[2] For a detailed study of Cuban economic dependence on the USSR, see William M. LeoGrande, 'Cuban dependency: a comparison of pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary international economic relations', *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos*, Vol. 9, July 1979, pp. 1–28.
[3] Radio Havana, 1 November 1980.

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1970s were conditions and attitudes in the United States: public and congressional fears of a new Vietnam nightmare, the weakening of the American presidency following the Watergate affair, and the unwillingness of US policy-makers to use military power in the Third World in the assertive manner demonstrated only a decade or two before in Lebanon (1957), Zaire (1960) and the Dominican Republic (1965). The unusual congruent opportunities afforded by the disintegration of the Portuguese colonial empire in 1974–5 and the subsequent occurrence of various local conflicts, such as that in the Horn of Africa in 1977–8, were vigorously exploited by the USSR and Cuba.

Another important factor suggesting the Soviet preponderance in the Soviet-Cuban alliance is the growing Soviet military and security presence in Cuba in the late 1970s. At present, there are 2,800 Soviet combat soldiers in Cuba. In addition to protecting sophisticated communications facilities in Cuba, which are capable of intercepting US microwave telephone conversations, they are training the Cuban armed forces for overseas missions and for combined Soviet-Cuban military operations. In 1970, facilities for servicing visiting Soviet submarines were built by the Russians in Cienfuegos—a potential submarine base which allows the Soviet Union to establish a permanent naval presence in the Caribbean. Since 1977, two squadrons of Soviet Air Force fighter units (MiG-27s—a version of the MiG-23 known as the Flogger D) have assumed patrol missions and ground attack roles while Cuban pilots serve in Africa. Soviet reconnaissance planes (TU-95s) conduct regular missions monitoring US naval activities in the Atlantic.

Thanks to the Soviet-supplied MiG-23s, Cuba has the best-equipped air force in Latin America. Moreover, the Russians have helped to build a small but very modern and efficient Cuban coastal navy. In the last few years, they have equipped the Cubans with several guided-missile attack boats, more than a dozen Turya-class patrol boats, several landing craft and two Foxtrot Whiskey-class submarines. The Cuban army meanwhile has been equipped with T-62 tanks of Soviet origin. The Soviet arms transfer to Cuba is relatively advanced in the overall context of the Soviet arms aid programme. It is viewed by some analysts as a type of Soviet 'reward' for Cuban performance in Africa. As a result of the organizational shuffle of 1970–1, there is close co-operation, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean, between the Soviet Union's Secret Service (KGB) and Cuba's *Dirección General de Inteligencia* (DGI). In 1979, there were 2,500 Soviet technicians, engineers and other specialists participating in 250 projects in Cuba.[4]

Soviet-Cuban interventions in Angola and Ethiopia

Cuba's dependence on the USSR in military and security operations in Africa was first demonstrated in the Angolan crisis of 1975–6. The view that the Soviet role was confined primarily to the supply of weaponry is not entirely correct. Although it is true that the Russians were cautious about committing themselves in a direct military fashion in Angola, for fear of the American response, they did take over the air- and sea-lift in early November 1975, transforming it into a massive operation during which both the Soviet Air Force (Military Transport

[4] Radio Paris, 6 May 1980.

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Aviation) and the Soviet Navy were operationally effective. Soviet naval deployment provided physical and psychological support to the Cuban combat troops, protected the Cuban staging area at Pointe Noire against local threats, served as a strategic cover for established Soviet sea and air communications and worked as a deterrent against possible US naval deployment. The Soviet navy deployed at least one anti-carrier warfare (ACW) task force in the Central Atlantic and kept additional ships in reserve near the Strait of Gibraltar. This presence was also supported by long-range naval reconnaissance aircraft (TU-95s) deployed over the Atlantic Ocean from bases in Havana and Conakry and possibly by electronic intelligence satellites.[5] It is quite possible that, had Moscow not become actively involved in Angola and had the South Africans been encouraged actively by the United States to continue their blitz campaigns, the Cubans would have been defeated.

The alliance between the Russians and the Cubans was even tighter in the case of the intervention in Ethiopia in 1977, where four Soviet generals ran the entire operation from start to finish. While in Angola during the original stage of the operation the Cubans temporarily functioned as an autonomous actor, during the conflict in the Ogaden between Somalia and Ethiopia Cuba functioned as a very subordinate actor, if not a Soviet proxy.[6]

Without substantial military and economic help from the Soviet Union, Cuba could not have engendered or sustained this kind of military commitment in Angola and Ethiopia. Clearly the Soviet leadership determines the limits of Cuban options in Africa: although Cuba could choose *not* to get involved in a large-scale military operation with the USSR (the war in Eritrea), it could not undertake a substantial military operation not entirely approved and supported by the Russians. Cuba is also highly vulnerable to Soviet politico-economic coercion, which the Soviet Union had already used to its advantage in the late 1960s. Obviously old habits do not die easily and the Russians are likely to use this leverage again should the need arise.

Cuban global policy is also affected by Soviet influence over the internal and external policies of Cuba's clients. Cuban policies in client states are influenced and constrained by the USSR, which does not always support the same government factions in client states as does Cuba (as illustrated by the 1977 coup against the Angolan leader, Agostinho Neto). In the case of the second invasion of Shaba in 1978, it has been argued that another Communist actor, East Germany, was more involved than the Cubans. Available, albeit circumstantial, evidence suggests that the East Germans, concerned about activities of the West German rocket firm

[5] For an overall assessment, see Jiri Valenta, 'The Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola', *U.S. Naval Proceedings* (April 1980), pp. 51–7. For a more detailed version of the same article see Steven Rosefielde, ed., *World Communism at the Crossroads: Military Ascendancy, Political Economy and Human Welfare* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980). For a detailed analysis of Soviet naval deployment during the Angolan crisis see Charles C. Petersen and William J. Durch, 'Angolan Crisis Deployments', in Bradford Dismukes and James M. McConnel, eds., *Soviet Naval Diplomacy: From the June War to Angola* (Arlington: Center for Naval Analysis, 1978), pp. 4–29 to 4–47.

[6] Jiri Valenta, 'The Communist Countries and the Conflict in the Horn of Africa', J. Valenta and D. Albright, eds., *Communist Countries and Africa, op. cit.*

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OTRAG (which was developing satellite-launching capabilities in a large area of Shaba), had trained anti-Mobutu FLNC forces and perhaps encouraged it to stage an invasion of the province. While GDR involvement has never been definitely proved, indications are that the East Germans, and not the Cubans, were the foreign element behind the invading forces.[7]

Impact of Afghanistan

In the 1980s, Cuban ascendancy in the Third World is likely to be somewhat less spectacular than in the 1970s. In the wake of Afghanistan, many Third World countries have become less willing to accept Castro as a leader of the non-aligned world and a defender of progressive Third World regimes. Indeed, the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan has already begun to have a detrimental political effect on Cuba's anti-imperialist strategy in the Third World and on Castro's ambitions to refurbish his image and replace Tito as the recognized leader of the non-aligned movement. Immediate and obvious proof of this was the collapse of support by the non-aligned nations for the election of Cuba, and the subsequent selection of Mexico, as Latin America's representative to the UN Security Council. It is not surprising, given this turn of events, that the Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations, Roa Kuri, voted against the resolution condemning the USSR while at the same time signalling frustration over Soviet policies in Afghanistan and making no effort to support or defend the Soviet rationale for the invasion. The Cuban leadership, obviously displeased with the invasion, decided, as in the case of the Czechoslovak invasion of 1968, to give only implicit and qualified support to the USSR. The Cuban press and Cuban diplomats have tried thus far to avoid the subject as much as possible, often having no clear instructions as to what stand they should take. In March 1980, Cuba even tried to mediate between the new regime in Afghanistan and the regime in Pakistan. Unlike other Soviet allies, the Cubans did not object to the United Nations' right to deal with the Afghan question. All these factors illustrate well Cuba's dilemma as both titular leader of the non-aligned movement and Soviet ally.

Revolutionary opportunities in the Caribbean basin

Castro noted in the spring of 1980 that he saw the new targets for Cuba's support as lying in the Western Hemisphere in the Caribbean basin (the Caribbean and the Central American mainland): particularly Grenada, Nicaragua and El Salvador.[8] This should come as no surprise. With respect to revolutionary opportunities available to the Cubans in the Third World, Africa is losing its former attraction.

[7] Colin Legum, *Observer* (London), 21 and 28 May 1978, and Shannon Butler and Jiri Valenta, 'East Germany in Africa—An Unpublished Paper'. There is a growing body of literature dealing with the East German involvement in Africa. See Melvin Croan, 'New country, old nationality', *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1979–80, pp. 142–60, 'New Africa Corps?' *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1980, pp. 21–37, and George A. Glass, 'East Germany in Black Africa: a new special role?', *The World Today*, August 1980.

[8] Fidel Castro, Speech to the closing session of the Third Congress of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), 8 March 1980, reprinted in *Granma Weekly Review*, 16 March 1980, pp. 2–4. See also Anthony Payne, 'Giants and pygmies in the Caribbean', *The World Today*, August 1980.

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Unlike in the mid-1970s, when Castro proclaimed that there were more opportunities for revolutionary change in Africa than in Latin America,[9] in early 1980—following Zimbabwe's peaceful alternative to civil war (ruling out Cuba's participation in yet another African war which had been anticipated by many analysts) and the revolutionary situations in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Grenada—Castro's strategy seems to be changing. The Zimbabwe situation may encourage a similar solution in Namibia and may even affect South Africa in the long run, whereas the revolutions in Nicaragua and Grenada and the explosive situation in El Salvador and other countries in the basin may open up opportunities for Cuba closer to home. In 1979–80, Cuba and the USSR strove to broaden their foreign policy in the Caribbean basin. Cuba, with Soviet economic backing, played a pivotal role. Of the Caribbean islands, it is Grenada where the Cubans have been most successful. Thus in 1980, Prime Minister M. Bishop's revolutionary regime agreed to allow 300–350 Cubans to enter the small island country. Some of these are at work building, with Soviet earthmoving equipment, an international airport capable of handling inter-continental jets (which could be used for airlifts to Africa) as well as Soviet Backfire bombers (Cuba will finance half the cost of the airport project). The USSR and Cuba will also provide aid for the development of the fishing industry in Grenada. Other workers serve as military advisers and, according to yet unconfirmed reports, are also training guerrilla forces from neighbouring Trinidad and Tobago. Also, Cuba supplies the guns for Bishop's militia. Disturbances in some other islands in the Caribbean have raised the fear of new Grenadas elsewhere in the region.[10]

Cuban and Soviet policies in Central America were encouraged by the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. After that, in 1979–80, the USSR and Cuba extended telecommunications aid to Nicaragua and their press agencies have established a direct link with the Nicaraguan news agency. Aeroflot now runs regular flights to Nicaragua. Cuban technicians are involved in building new roads in Nicaragua. The Soviet Union and East Germany have provided various kinds of economic and technical assistance and donations to the country, including hundreds of trucks and some helicopters, and have sent dozens of experts in fishing, mining and geology. According to unconfirmed reports, Soviet engineers are building a military airport on the country's Atlantic coast.[11] The Cubans sent at least 1,200 civilian personnel, including doctors, technicians and teachers, and perhaps also some military personnel, to Nicaragua. US intelligence also believes that Cuba is sending a limited quantity of arms and military instructors to forces of the left in El Salvador (whose regime is expected by Cubans to fall soon) through neighbouring Honduras.[12] Nicaraguan and Cuban instructors have been recruiting the guerrillas

[9] See Jiri Valenta, 'The Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola, 1975', *loc. cit.*, p. 23.

[10] See George C. Abbott, 'Grenada: maverick or pace-maker in the West Indies?', *The World Today*, April 1980.

[11] This report was denied by the Soviet Ambassador to Nicaragua, G. Shlyapnikov: *La Prensa* (Managua), 30 July 1980.

[12] *Washington Post*, 26 and 28 March 1980; *Radio Havana*, 11 March 1980 and *Baltimore Sun*, 28 and 30 March 1980; *Daily Telegraph* (London), 24 November 1979 and 21 January 1980; *Trinidad Guardian* (Port of Spain), 9 January 1980. See also James John Guy, 'El Salvador: another domino?', *The World Today*, August 1980.

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in other central American countries, e.g. Guatemala and Costa Rica. The Cubans clearly see their country as the training centre for revolutionary movements in Central America.

Internal and external constraints

Indeed, there exist a number of internal and external constraints which can mitigate against the assertive Cuban and Soviet exploitation of revolutionary opportunities in the Caribbean basin. First, the Cuban economic situation is the worst ever, despite massive Soviet economic support. In 1980, for the first time in its history, Cuba has had to import a large quantity of sugar instead of exporting it.[13] The economic malaise, to which the costly African adventures have certainly contributed, have caught up with the traditional Cuban export industry—tobacco production. The economic troubles led to a radical reorganization of the Cuban government in early 1980 and the rationing of essentials and contributed to public resentment because of the soaring cost of living. This culminated in open dissent in the spring of 1980: over 10,000 Cuban dissidents sought asylum in the Peruvian embassy in Havana and subsequently emigrated to the United States. Castro later exploited the affair by allowing over 100,000 Cubans, many of them asocial elements, to join the sea-lift of Cuban refugees from 1 May to 27 September 1980. Cuban economic difficulties, however, failed to elicit any kind of major anti-war movement, or, for that matter, any visible opposition or even a political debate. Despite the difficulties arising from its alliance with the Soviet Union, Cuba in 1980 succeeded in maintaining its overseas commitments and somehow was able to expand them.

Local conditions in the Caribbean basin, however, may not favour revolutionary upheaval and its exploitation by the Cubans and the Russians. This is particularly true of the Caribbean where the islands of Dominica, St Lucia, St Vincent and St Kitts-Nevis rejected a radical leftist orientation. The most crucial setback for Cuba was, of course, the defeat of the socialist regime of Mr Michael Manley in Jamaica and the election in October 1980 of the more pro-Western Edward Seaga. In the last few years, Soviet economic backing allowed the Cubans to expand their influence in that important country, which accounts for nearly half the population of the English-speaking Caribbean. Jamaica was offered financial credit by Cuba (perhaps with Soviet help) and the assistance of several hundred Cuban civilian teachers, technicians and construction workers as well as, according to reports, some security officials to train the Jamaican security forces. The fall of Manley's regime, was, as admitted by the Cubans and the Russians, a setback for Cuban and Soviet policies in the Caribbean basin. Indeed, one of the first steps taken by Seaga was to expel the Cuban Ambassador, Ulíses Estrada Lescalles, whose background in the intelligence service seemed more impressive than his diplomatic qualifications. This is not to say that their efforts have been entirely frustrated and that Cuba will cease to exploit future opportunities in the region.

The vigorous Cuban involvement in Africa and the Caribbean basin can also be constrained by the Russians themselves whose support, as we have seen, deter-

[13] *El Tiempo* (Bogota), 17 July 1980.

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mines the limits of Cuban assertiveness in the Third World. Indeed, in 1980 Soviet leaders appeared to be less willing to back Cuba's role in Africa and the Caribbean basin because of new developments of greater importance. Considering Soviet preoccupation with the Polish crisis, the continuing resistance of Muslim rebels in Afghanistan and the ongoing war between Iran and Iraq, their interest in the early 1980s may be centred on Eastern Europe and the strategic 'arc of instability' to the south of the Soviet borders in Asia (e.g. Afghanistan and Iran) and countries in the Persian Gulf. Thus, Soviet national security decision-making, particularly any shift in Soviet priorities, may affect Cuban military commitments on the African continent as well as Cuban exploitation of future opportunities in the Caribbean basin.

How will new developments in the international system following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Polish crisis affect Soviet and Cuban overseas commitments? The continuous Soviet preoccupation with Afghanistan and Poland could impose some hard choices on the Soviet leadership with regard to its strategy in the Third World, including Cuba. In the political and strategic realms, the considerable worsening of Soviet-American relations introduces new, as yet unknown, variables. How would a continued Muslim rebel resistance in Afghanistan and US-Chinese support with military supplies (albeit limited) affect Soviet efforts to stabilize the situation? Is the Soviet Union perhaps getting bogged down in Afghanistan in the way the United States was involved in Vietnam? What effect would these variables have on the Soviet-Cuban commitment in other parts of the Third World, particularly Angola and Ethiopia, where the situations have been only temporarily stabilized? How long can Soviet-backed Cuban deployment be maintained and how effectively? These questions, for which there are no pat answers, may well be the same ones posed by foreign policy experts in the USSR who may feel that Caribbean and Central American anti-US nationalism simply cannot be exploited as vigorously as the Cuban leaders believe, at least not in the foreseeable future.

Another and the most important factor in the prediction of Soviet and Cuban commitments in the Third World is the future course of US policy vis-à-vis the USSR and Cuba. In the wake of the Vietnam débâcle, Cuba and the Soviet Union did not seem to be too much constrained by the United States where the public and Congress did not favour a forceful response to their assertive behaviour. Indeed, this was well demonstrated during the Angolan and Ethiopian wars and during the 'mini-crisis' over the Soviet brigade in October 1979. Yet, it would seem that the political mood in the United States is changing, as has been demonstrated to some degree by the election of the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, who earlier in 1980 suggested a naval blockade of Cuba as a response to the invasion of Afghanistan. The Carter Administration had already initiated a policy of hard-line containment of Cuba and the USSR in the Caribbean as a response to the discovery of the Soviet brigade. Cuba had become the target of an intensive intelligence surveillance, including the resumption of reconnaissance flights by American aircraft. To offset the presence of the Soviet brigade, the United States established a permanent Caribbean Contingency Joint Task Force (CCJTF) headquartered

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in Key West, Florida, with the ability to call on whatever forces may be necessary to deal with the Soviet and Cuban military challenge in the Caribbean basin.

Cuban leaders themselves have indicated that they view seriously the worsening of the international situation following the invasion of Afghanistan as well as emerging shifts in US policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and Cuba. Castro himself released all Americans who were serving prison terms in Cuban jails in October 1980. This and other intriguing goodwill gestures (sending back to the US recent Cuban refugees who skyjacked US jets to Cuba and ending the sea-lift of Cuban refugees) were indications that he was seeking to help and placate President Carter whom he considered less dangerous than Reagan. After 20 January 1981, it will be up to this man whom Castro seems to fear and to his advisers to decide what strategy should be elaborated to cope with burgeoning anti-US local nationalism in the Caribbean basin and how to deal with possible Cuban and Soviet efforts to exploit this situation.

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