

Cuba, Counternarcotics, and Collaboration: A Security Issue in U.S.-Cuban Relations

BY PETER KORNBLOH

On 1 October 1996, U.S. Coast Guard officials boarded a Miami-bound freighter, the *Limerick*, in international waters north of Cuba. As the officials began a search for smuggled drugs, the ship's crew opened bilge valves in an attempt to scuttle the Honduran-registered vessel. Everyone on board had to be evacuated as the *Limerick* listed to the side and drifted into Cuban waters. Through faxes to Cuban authorities, the Coast Guard requested permission to pursue and search the ship. Although the Cuban government demurred, Cuban officials did salvage the ship. The Cuban Border Guard towed the ship to Santiago de Cuba and began a lengthy search. Aided by support from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and information provided by the Coast Guard, Cuban authorities eventually discovered some seven tons of cocaine hidden in secret compartments.

U.S.-Cuban cooperation on the *Limerick* yielded one of the largest cocaine drug busts in the history of counternarcotics operations. In what became the first joint U.S.-Cuban drug smuggling investigation, U.S. officials were invited to inspect the ship and to verify and take evidence gathered for prosecuting the smugglers. The U.S. Department of Justice requested that four Cuban officers provide testimony at the Miami trial of the *Limerick's* captain and chief engineer, who were subsequently convicted on drug-running charges.

The experience with the *Limerick* has convinced law enforcement officials on both sides of the Straits of Florida of the need and potential for official bilateral collaboration in the war on drugs. The United States currently has counterdrug international maritime agreements with numerous nations in the Caribbean, but not with Cuba, the region's largest and geographically most important island. Although Havana has repeatedly voiced its interest in an official accord to formalize collaboration on counternarcotics, the Clinton administration has authorized only small, limited steps toward cooperation on "a case-by-case" basis.

The administration's approach to collaboration has been constrained by opposition from conservative sectors of the Cuban American community and their supporters in Congress. These policy actors, who generally oppose any type of cooperation with Fidel Castro on the grounds that it would put Washington on a "slippery slope" toward unjustifiably improved relations, have argued that the regime is not a suitable, trustworthy partner in the war on drugs. They point to court papers from the 1980s and early 1990s, that appear to implicate certain Cuban officials in smuggling operations, to bolster their position that the Cuban leadership is tainted by drug corruption.

Yet, despite vigorous opposition from a handful of powerful congressional legislators, counternarcotics cooperation between the United States and Cuba has gradually increased. As the United States escalates the war on drugs by pouring

more than \$1.3 billion into Colombia, stopping the transit of narcotics through the Windward Passage remains integral to overall U.S. strategy. "We can't close off the Caribbean [from drug traffic] without dealing with Cuba," one senior U.S. law enforcement official told the *Washington Post*. Cuba "is a major hole that needs to be plugged." The question for the future, as another official frames the issue, is whether Cuba will be "a bridge to drug smuggling, or a barrier."

DRUG TRADE GEOPOLITICS

Three key factors have contributed to Cuba's involvement in dealing with the escalating problem of drugs: geography, economic crisis, and the rise in tourism on the island. The combination of these factors has resulted in a surge of smuggling through the air and sea corridors over and around Cuba and the first discernible presence of drugs on the island itself since the Cuban Revolution. The drug problem has created a call for international assistance to bolster Cuba's inadequate resources for countering the operations of traffickers, as well as a growing realization among Cuban officials that the Revolution's gains in ridding Cuban society of illicit drug use are now in jeopardy.

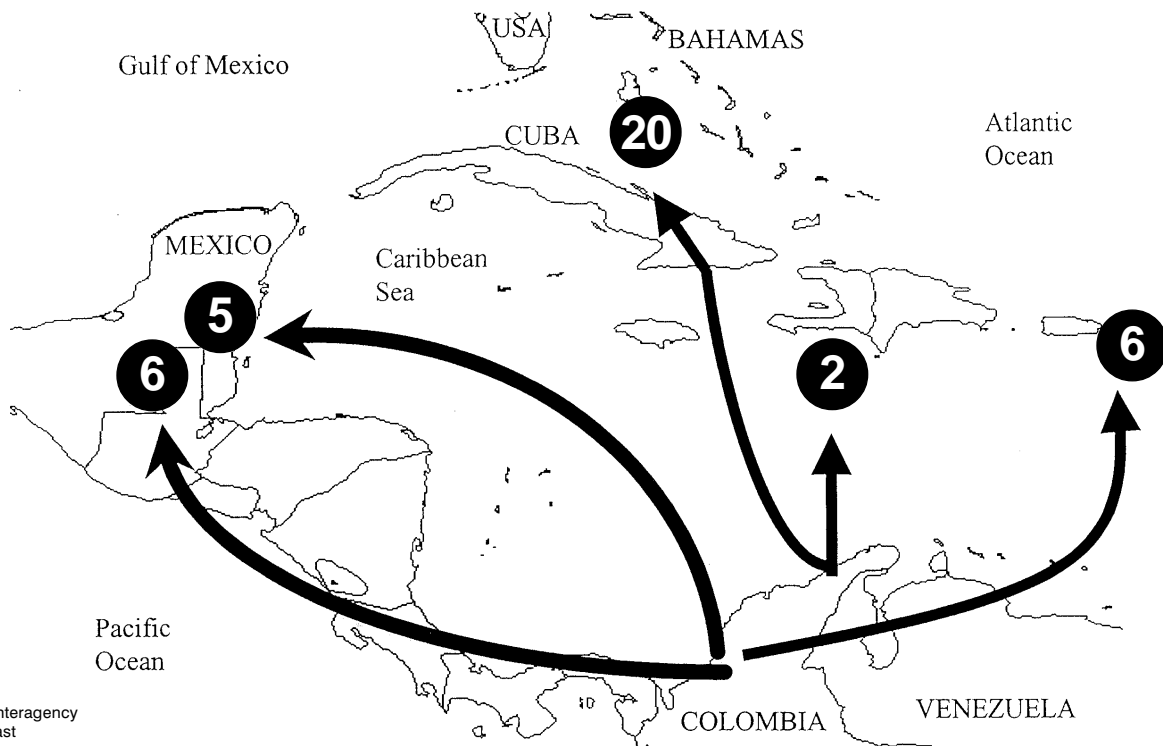
The same geographic position that made Cuba so important to U.S. strategic planning at the beginning of the twentieth century has left

the island vulnerable as a transit point in the drug smuggling trade—and, some say, has made the country indispensable in the international effort to stop it. Cuba is situated in the corridor to the Caribbean, astride the major sea-lanes of communications into and out of the Western Hemisphere. It is also centered between South America and the southern United States. "The potential is high" for drug transit, as Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Rand Beers testified before Congress, "because Cuba's geography places it on a direct line between drug export centers in Colombia and many of the importation gateways in the southeast United States." The newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, *Granma*, has made the same point: "The fact is that Cuba, geographically situated between the producing countries and the United States, the largest narcotics consumer in the world, is becoming an ideal stopover for the infiltration of this evil merchandise into other nations."

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The Colombian cartels have traditionally shipped their goods both by air and sea, searching for smuggling routes of least resistance. Over the last

DRUG FLIGHTS IN THE SECOND HALF OF 1997



Source: Joint Interagency Task Force - East

twenty years, air corridors across the Pacific side of Central America and into Mexico for drops and overland smuggling into the United States, as well as transshipment through Puerto Rico, have been favored by drug runners. But as cooperation and coordination between the United States and other countries in the region have grown, Cuba has increasingly become a pathway for illicit narcotics. Small planes fly out of the Guajira Peninsula in northern Colombia, cross over Cuba, or over Cuban waters on the eastern side, and drop bales of cocaine to speedboats waiting near the islets and keys that ring Cuba's northeastern coast. These boats transship the cocaine directly to the United States or through the Bahamas. "Go-fast boats" (low-slung speedboats favored by smugglers) carrying cocaine and marijuana travel with near impunity around the eastern tip of Cuba, into the Bahamas and beyond; their cargoes are destined for shipment or transfer to the United States or Europe.

In 1997, the Joint Interagency Task Force East (JIATF East), a counternarcotics unit based in Key West and made up of Coast Guard, DEA, Customs, and Department of Defense personnel, recorded a major upswing in suspected drug flights over Cuban airspace. Out of thirty-nine "detects" originating from Colombia, the Cuba route was dominant, accounting for twenty flights (see map). Overall, JIATF East identified twenty-one suspect planes overflying Cuba in 1997, and a dramatic increase to thirty-nine such flights in 1998. (In 1999, the number of flights dropped off to around ten.)

During that same period, JIATF East intelligence recorded an increasing number of "suspect go-fast events"—incidents in which speedboats from Jamaica known as "canoes," or "Edward Dano boats" from Colombia, were suspected of using the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola to ferry cocaine or cannabis to the United States or the Bahamas, or for transfer to other smuggling vessels. An increased operational U.S. presence detected twenty-seven such craft in 1999 (as compared to four in 1997 and six in 1998). At least five entered Cuba's territorial waters to avoid detection and pursuit.

Both the law enforcement and intelligence communities acknowledge that the lack of normal U.S.-Cuban relations has enhanced the usefulness of Cuban airspace and waterways for smugglers. The United States has no accord with Cuba comparable to its maritime agreements with a number of other Caribbean nations, which allow the Coast Guard to pursue boats and planes into territorial waters and airspace and interdict narco-traffickers.

Drug smugglers are well aware that the best way to evade U.S. detection, pursuit, and interdiction is to run as close to Cuba as possible.

Smugglers are also aware that Cuba's border patrol lacks the fundamental resources to pursue them effectively on its own. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left Cuban military, police, and border guard forces with severely diminished capabilities and without basic necessities. "We lack material resources" to confront the technologically sophisticated boats, planes, and communications and radar systems used by the Colombian cartels, concedes one Cuban counternarcotics specialist.

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Indeed, during the "Special Period" of economic malaise over the last decade, the constriction of the Cuban military has put it at a critical disadvantage in combating drug smugglers. According to a comprehensive intelligence report on Cuban military capabilities prepared by the Defense Intelligence Agency, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Department of State, and the U.S. military's Southern Command in 1998, "the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 triggered a profound deterioration of the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR)," forcing Cuba to cut its military's size and budget by 50 percent. Most army equipment "is in storage" or "cannibalized" because of a shortage of parts. Only a dozen or so naval vessels are combat capable. Most of Cuba's small air force is grounded. "Economic support and sustainment tasks," according to the report, "have become as important as protecting the national territory."

This deterioration has had an evident impact on Cuban counternarcotics capabilities. Cuba, which has some forty-two thousand square miles of territorial waters and more than four thousand keys and small islands off its coast, lacks adequate supplies of the equipment (including basic radar, aircraft, launches, and search and seizure packs) required to patrol successfully against smugglers. As of early 2000, for example, Cuba possessed only four rum-maging kits (shared among some forty Border Guard officials) to search suspected cargo ships. Few planes are available for intercepting drug overflights; fuel is scarce for Cuban patrol boats; and most Cuban Border Guard launches do not have functioning engines. Those that do are not fast enough to catch the smaller "go-quicks," as they are referred to in Cuba, used by smugglers to pick up bundles of drugs dropped from the air.

Those bundles, if not picked up by smugglers or

intercepted by Cuban authorities, drift westward with the currents and come up on shore as far away as Pinar del Río. During the first half of 1999, according to estimates by Cuban authorities, 4,539 kilograms of drugs washed up on the northern coast. Initially, the government counted on Cuban citizens to turn in all such contraband, but even Castro has complained that some Cubans have been retaining drugs found on the beach instead of turning them over to police.

Those drugs are sold, surreptitiously, to foreigners who are flocking to Cuba—another means for individual Cubans working outside the peso economy to gain access to dollars. In response to its dire economic situation, the government has opened Cuba's doors to tourism with remarkable success. In 1999, some 1.7 million tourists visited the island; within the next five years, authorities predict, tourism will reach 2 million visitors annually.

Even as they bring much-needed hard currency to Cuba, tourists are creating a small but apparently growing internal market for narcotics. In addition to carrying drugs into Cuba, foreigners also distribute, purchase, and use illegal substances while there—a practice that is threatening to spread throughout Cuban society. In a speech given on 5 January 1999, Castro acknowledged that over a three-year period 1,216 persons had been jailed on possession and trafficking charges, among them more than two hundred foreigners.

Cuba has remained virtually drug-free—until now.

The influx of drugs onto the island threatens to undo one of the achievements of the Revolution—the eradication of drug use from Cuban society. Unlike the other major islands in the Caribbean, and indeed many of the world's industrialized nations, where drug use and collateral crime and corruption are rampant, Cuba has remained virtually drug-free—until now. The domestic threat posed by narcotics has clearly caught the attention of Cuban officials, starting with Castro himself. "The harm that this. . . is beginning to cause isn't only a matter of prestige," he stated in a national address on crime in early 1999, "but also [of] the foothold that this mortal poison is gaining among our youth."

THE CUBAN POSTURE

There is considerable evidence that Cuba is reenergizing its fight against the encroachment of drugs. Over the last several years, authorities have reorganized the government bureaucracy, drafted harsh new criminal codes, expanded

counternarcotics operations, and reached out to other nations (including the United States) for support in the war on drugs.

Cuba first established a "National Drug Commission" in the early 1990s. But in June 1998, faced with a public policy crisis generated by rising crime and escalating smuggling, the powerful Council of State moved to reorganize the Commission's structure and functions. The minister of justice was appointed "drug czar" of the country and tasked with coordinating the various agencies—customs, immigration, the Tropas Guarda Fronteras (Border Guard), and the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Public Health, Culture, and the Interior among them—in implementing an integrated National Plan to fight narcotics.

Meant to be a comprehensive education and use-prevention program, the five-year plan was distributed throughout the Communist Party regional and local governing bodies in September 1999. Initial phases of the plan called for identifying vulnerable sectors of Cuban society—citizens who work near the ports and marinas, for example, or who live in coastal communities where drugs wash ashore, or who reside in Havana or Santiago de Cuba, the cities most frequented by foreigners—and conducting specially targeted campaigns in schools, factories, and Communist Party organizations to increase public awareness of the dangers of drugs. With the support of the United Nations International Drug Control Program, Cuban authorities are disseminating video tapes and literature with the equivalent of a "just say no" message, as well as implementing treatment programs for users throughout the island. "This is just like AIDS," affirmed Rafael Fernandez, one of the high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Justice responsible for government initiatives to educate Cubans against drug consumption. "You need programs to beat it."

The Cuban authorities have also changed their penal code to add harsher sentencing structures for drug-related crimes and to create laws to address novel criminal activity such as money laundering (previously unheard of in Cuba). In February 1999, the Cuban National Assembly passed new penalties for producing, transporting, trafficking, or smuggling narcotics and adopted the first legislation outlawing laundering of drug monies in Cuba. Sentences were increased to twenty years to life in prison for drug-related activities, and the death penalty was added for major traffickers using Cuban territory as a transit point. By the end of 1999, the Assembly was considering an even tougher "narcotics law," according to *Granma*, in order to "prevent the island from being turned into a drug market."

The Cuban military is actively participating in the effort to keep Cuba from developing an internal drug market. The Ministry of the Interior has created a National Antidrug Department, which is now the leading law enforcement agency on narcotics in Cuba. Emphasis has been placed on intercepting smugglers coming through Cuban airports in Havana, Veradero, and Santiago de Cuba, as well as interdicting trafficking operations along the northern coast.

Although recognizing the enormity of the challenge and Cuba's lack of resources, officials of the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) claim a number of major victories over smugglers. Little official data is available from the Cuban government, but counternarcotics officials cite interception or interruption of approximately forty-two tons of cocaine and cannabis, including some twenty-four tons that washed ashore, between 1995 and 1999. They have also participated in breaking up several smuggling rings operating out of Cuba. According to the DEA, U.S. Coast Guard, and European authorities, Cuba's major achievements include the following:

- The seizure and search of the *Limerick* in 1996, yielding some seven tons of cocaine, one of the largest drug busts in the history of Caribbean operation.
- Interception of a go-fast boat en route from Colombia to Haiti in February 1996 and confiscation of 360 kilograms of cocaine.
- Interception and seizure of 180 kilograms of cocaine found aboard the freighter *Spiritus*, also in February 1996.
- Breaking up an international smuggling ring, consisting of eighteen foreigners trafficking drugs from Jamaica to Britain through Havana, in November 1998. Cuban authorities seized approximately thirty-eight kilograms of cocaine hidden in suitcases and plastic clothes hangers. Seven Canadians, four Britons, and seven Jamaicans were arrested.
- The interception of a smuggling plane at Romano Key in June 1999. A Cuban air patrol forced the plane to jettison 449 kilograms of cocaine. Both the drugs and the go-fast boats waiting to transport them were then captured by the Cuban Border Guard.
- Passing intelligence on to the U.S. Coast Guard in early November 2000 about a go-fast vessel traveling with no lights at high speed in the Windward Passage. The Coast Guard diverted a patrol cutter to intercept this boat, which turned out to be ferrying one thousand pounds of marijuana. Three smugglers were arrested, and Cuban officials are collaborating with the U.S.

Department of Justice in their prosecution.

These operations have become the source of national pride for Cuban forces, supplanting the cold war-era military actions in Africa and Central America. Castro himself elevated this issue to the highest prominence in 1999 by devoting his annual speech commemorating the founding of the 26 July movement to a "Statement on Drug Trafficking." "No other country has ever done what we have done, nor with greater selflessness," he declared. "That is a source of pleasure for us."

Antidrug operations have become the source of national pride for Cuban forces. . . .

Castro used the occasion of his speech to appeal to the United States, and other nations, for collaboration. He recounted a meeting in Havana in June 1999 with "a prestigious Republican lawmaker"—later identified as Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania)—in which the Cuban president made it clear that serious talks should be held between both countries on drug smuggling interdiction:

I clearly expressed to him that three possible forms of cooperation could be established: modest cooperation, larger and more effective cooperation, or a comprehensive cooperation. That for the first two, our own resources sufficed, but for a highly effective comprehensive cooperation we needed some technical and communications means that were not within our reach.

Many tons of drugs "could be intercepted through serious, responsible, and efficient cooperation between Cuba and the United States," Castro concluded. "We were ready to do it for nothing," he told Specter—meaning no demands to tie such an accord to the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba. Even without an agreement, Cuba would continue to fight drug smuggling as best it could, Castro asserted, "because it is our duty to defend ourselves from the damage caused by drug trafficking; it is a national interest and an international duty."

COLLABORATION WITH OTHER COUNTRIES

Washington's Western allies agree with Castro that combating drugs is an international obligation. "Drug trafficking is a problem that does not recognize borders," states Britain's ambassador to Havana, Roger Ridgeway, "and fighting it is a responsibility shared by all the world's governments."

Although Cuba has no official agreement with the United States, the Castro government is a party to several regional and multilateral accords and more

**Memorandum of Understanding
Between
The Government of Canada
and
The Government of the Republic of Cuba
on
Cooperation in Combating Narcotics Trafficking**

The Government of Canada and the Government of the Republic of Cuba, herein referred to as "the Parties",

GUIDED by their international obligations, domestic laws and the limits of their authority;

RECOGNIZING the need for cooperation between the parties to effectively fight the illegal trafficking of narcotics;

UNDERLINING the importance of international cooperation in preventing and suppressing the illicit cultivation, production, distribution and abuse of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances;

DETERMINED to extend to each other the necessary cooperation to effectively combat illegal narcotics trafficking;

HAVE REACHED the following understanding

ARTICLE I

Areas of Cooperation

In accordance with the provisions of this Memorandum of Understanding, the Parties intend to cooperate in crime prevention and investigation of the following activities:

1. Illicit cultivation, manufacture, trafficking, transportation and abuse of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, and
2. Any form of organized crime and offenses related to illegal narcotics trafficking recognized in the legal systems of the two Parties.

ARTICLE II

Forms of Cooperation

1. The cooperation, referred to in Article 1, between the Parties, when requested, will take the following forms:
 - a. Exchange information on suspected illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances, means of concealment and the illegal diversion of chemical precursors and essential chemicals destined for either of the Parties;
 - b. Exchange information on routes customarily used by criminal organizations engaged in the illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances, and the illegal diversion of chemical precursors and essential chemicals, in the territory of either parties;
 - c. Exchange legislative experiences and practices to deal with the illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances;
 - d. Exchange information relating to training, practices and policies applicable to prosecutions of narcotics and psychotropic substances offenses;
 - e. Location, identification and surveillance of persons being sought by the police in connection with the illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances;
 - f. Interviewing and questioning of persons in connection with the illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances;
 - g. Location, identification and examination of objects and sites involved in an incident in connection with the illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances;
 - h. Exchange of records and documents in connection with the illegal traffic in narcotics and psychotropic substances; and
 - i. Cooperation in other areas within the scope of this Memorandum of Understanding. [...]

Term of the Memorandum

1. This Memorandum will take effect on signature. It will remain in effect for one year and shall be automatically renewed for equal periods, unless either Party informs the other Party, through written notification, at least three months before the expiration of this Memorandum, of their intention to terminate it.
2. Amendments to this Memorandum will be made only with the written consent of both Parties.

DONE at Havana, Cuba, this 7th day of January 1999, in duplicate, in the English, French and Spanish languages, each version being equally valid.

than twenty-five formal bilateral agreements, protocols, and memoranda of understanding with countries around the world on counternarcotics programs. Cuba is a member of the Caribbean Customs Law Enforcement Council, as well as the "Heads of Narcotics Law Enforcement Agencies" (HONLEA) group that has met in Havana. Cuba is a signatory to the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and works closely with the UN's International Drug Control Program (UNDCP). In February 2000, Pino Arlacchi, the head of the UNDCP, arrived in Havana to sign a two-year commitment to provide \$1.3 million in counternarcotics funding to Cuba—60 percent allocated to technical interdiction assistance and the remainder to public education campaigns against domestic drug use.

Accords with nations such as Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Panama, Jamaica, and the Bahamas commit Cuba to cooperate on exchange of information relating to suspects and shipments, on the seizure of suspected smugglers, and on providing evidence for criminal prosecutions. Bilateral agreements with larger industrialized nations such as Britain, Spain, France, and Canada include small but not insignificant aid and training programs for Cuban law enforcement and customs officials.

Britain's counternarcotics program in Cuba is currently the oldest and the largest *en force*.

Britain's counternarcotics program in Cuba is currently the oldest and the largest *en force*. Begun in 1995 with a focus on improving Cuban assets to interdict individual smugglers and shipments, the cost of British support and training currently totals \$420,000 annually—"relative peanuts," according to the British ambassador, compared to U.S. and Western European assistance in other nations. Equipment provided by Britain ranges from motorbikes for Cuban customs personnel to fax machines and copiers that facilitate communicating alerts to airport officials on suspect travelers arriving in Havana and Santiago de Cuba. The Cubans have also received drug testing kits to identify seized illicit substances, and rummaging kits for use by the border patrol in searching drug boats.

The British government has also set up resident training courses for hundreds of Cuban law enforcement officials in detection and interdiction techniques. One training session, for example, focused on airport and seaport "profiling"—the technique of focusing on certain flights and boats from designated countries, as well as on the profiles of individual travelers or cargo ships likely to be

carrying narcotics. Cuban officials, including the commander of the national police, have traveled to London for briefings and demonstrations of technology at Scotland Yard, and the director of the British national intelligence service has traveled to Havana. Last April, the British embassy hosted a course to train Cubans to be their own trainers so that Cuba can further expand its expertise on drug interdiction operations. "The students are very good," states Ambassador Ridgeway. Cuba "is our most positive experience in overseas training."

Canada has the second largest counternarcotics program in Cuba. Established by a Memorandum of Understanding (see box) signed in 1997 and renewed in January 1999, the Canadian program emphasizes general cooperation as well as training on evidence handling and investigative techniques. Among other aspects of fighting the drug trade, the Memorandum of Understanding between Canada and Cuba calls for the two countries to "exchange information relating to training, practices and policies applicable to prosecutions" and for cooperation on "location, identification and examination of objects and sites" relating to a narcotics crime.

Canada has stationed an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at its embassy in Havana to facilitate cooperation and handle training sessions for Cuban authorities. This year, Canadian-run seminars have covered the development of "sequence of evidence" techniques—skills that enhance the successful presentation of evidence in trials of suspected smugglers, especially those prosecuted for smuggling drugs into Canada. "The cooperation is beneficial for both sides," states one embassy official.

The French have concentrated on enhancing the ability of Cuba to inspect and control its airport facilities. Like the British, France is providing training to the Cubans in "profiling" arriving flights, cargo, and individual travelers—orienting customs officials on routes, passenger characteristics, and behavioral traits that are "red flags" for possible involvement in narcotics trafficking. French authorities are also providing the Cubans with specially trained dogs—cocker spaniels, shepherds, and labradors—used to detect the scent of drugs in luggage; Cuban officials have been brought to Paris for orientation in the use and care of these animals. In the spring of 2000, the French were preparing to invite Cuban officers to Paris for a two-to-three-week training session on detecting money-laundering activities in Cuba.

Spain signed a bilateral counternarcotics protocol with Cuba in early 1998 under which it is conducting a series of training courses. An eight-day course held earlier this year educated two dozen police

officers in combating narco-trafficking and money laundering. Spain also works with Cuba on case-by-case investigations into drug-related crime. As of early 2000, the Spanish government planned to detail an interdiction specialist to its embassy in Havana as a liaison to the Cuban authorities.

"You cannot fight drug trafficking unless you have cooperation between nations," one European diplomat in Cuba told a visiting fact-finding delegation in February 2000. "We *have* to cooperate with Cuba." In a series of interviews conducted by the author with officials and diplomats from the major countries collaborating with Cuba on counternarcotics programs, a consensus emerged on several key points:

- Cuba is serious about combating the scourge of drugs. One Western European official characterized the Cubans as "committed to the fight." Another Western diplomat summed up the prevailing attitude as follows: "They are concerned and want to keep [drugs] from becoming a major problem."
- Cuban authorities are extremely receptive to foreign collaboration and training on drug programs. Repeatedly, foreign officials voiced their respect for the drive and dedication of Cuban law enforcement and customs personnel participating in antidrug training seminars. Cuba is "by far one of our most positive programs," according to one Canadian diplomat. The Cubans, as Ambassador Ridgeway has stated on the record, "are magnificent professionals. They have given a first class welcome in every sense to our cooperation, and we are very pleased with the results."
- Cuba needs substantive international assistance to fight drug traffickers. The lack of basic infrastructure—planes, boats, fuel, radar, and investigative equipment and trained personnel—puts Cuban authorities at a distinct disadvantage. "They are under-resourced," as one diplomat put it.
- Cuba would genuinely value an accord on counternarcotics with the United States. Western diplomats asserted that Havana has never sought to make "political capital" out of the existing accords and programs on counternarcotics, and they did not believe it would if similar accords were signed with Washington.

Privately, the diplomats interviewed all recognized the advantages to counternarcotics programs in the Caribbean that a formal accord between Havana and Washington would bring. But they also understood the historical complexity of U.S.-Cuban relations. "We have a normal relationship, no psychological baggage," as one ambassador noted in describing the difference between his country

and the United States. "The Cuba problem is not for us an internal policy problem."

THE U.S. POSTURE

Counternarcotics is a mutual security interest that the United States shares with Cuba, as it does with dozens of countries ranging from China to Canada. Whereas the United States has extensive counterdrug programs in other Caribbean nations, including the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, and Haiti, domestic political considerations have severely constrained the evolution of a substantive, formal program of collaboration with the Cubans. The anti-Castro lobby has consistently and forcefully opposed all forms of counternarcotics cooperation on the grounds that Castro is not a suitable collaborator in the war on drugs.

Nevertheless, over the last four years, the U.S. Coast Guard, the DEA, the U.S. military's Southern Command, and retiring "drug czar" Barry McCaffrey's Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) have all argued that, because of the island's geostrategically significant location in the Caribbean and its government's clear willingness to work professionally with other nations, Cuba merits greater consideration as a potential partner in counternarcotics operations. The Clinton administration has moved cautiously and haltingly to authorize small steps toward more formal collaboration.

The case of the *Limerick* in 1996 became both a catalyst and a precedent for advancing bilateral cooperation. . . .

The case of the *Limerick* in 1996 became both a catalyst and a precedent for advancing bilateral cooperation beyond an ad-hoc level. The professionalism of the Cuban authorities proved to U.S. officials that the two nations shared a common interest. The *Limerick* incident demonstrated that Cubans were "not just willing partners but effective partners," according to one such official. "Cuba's conduct in that episode," as the *Washington Post* noted in an editorial, "whetted the appetite of American drug enforcement officials for making cooperation with Havana systematic and routine, not just a matter of occasional opportunity."

Up to that point, U.S.-Cuban interaction on drug smuggling had been sporadic, often involving the use of telex and fax lines set up between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Cuban Border Guard in the early 1990s to deal with search and rescue missions for *balseero* (Spanish for "ferryman") migrants fleeing Cuba, as well as case-by-case drug operations. The fax system allowed the Department of State to monitor and authorize individual communications

with Cuba. However, this communications system proved cumbersome and slow as a tool for dealing with fast-moving drug traffickers.

In the wake of the *Limerick* case, which provided the first opportunity for real face-to-face working relations between individual U.S. and Cuban law enforcement personnel, the U.S. Coast Guard stepped up its communications with Cuba on smuggling operations. When a Coast Guard cutter spotted a Jamaican "canoe" heading toward Cuban waters, an "operational tipper" would be faxed to Cuba; similarly, the Coast Guard relayed information on suspected drug planes transiting Cuban airspace.

The limitations of this form of communication convinced U.S. personnel that policy needed to be broadened to allow for more substantive collaboration on pursuing, capturing, and prosecuting traffickers. In late 1998, Coast Guard officials offered a number of specific suggestions to the White House to improve U.S.-Cuban counternarcotics operations, drawing on the confidence-building measures already established between Cuban and U.S. border patrols. Later that year, facing evidence of escalating drug smuggling through Cuban territory, U.S. national security officials began to lay the policy, planning, and bureaucratic groundwork inside the Clinton White House for formalizing counternarcotics collaboration with the Cuban government. In the spring of 1999, authorization was obtained to meet with Cuban officials and negotiate expanded ties on drug interdiction operations.

That meeting took place in Havana on 21 June 1999. A U.S. delegation, led by Robert Witajewski (then Department of State deputy Cuba desk officer) and otherwise consisting of Michael Kozak (head of the U.S. Interests Section in the Swiss embassy in Havana), Steven Peterson (Department of State drug specialist), and two Coast Guard officials, met at the National Assembly with Dagoberto Rodríguez, head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' U.S. section, and a representative of the FAR, Col. Oliverio Montalvo. The U.S. side offered the following proposals:

- Upgrading the fax connection to an actual telephone system that would allow direct and instant communications between the Coast Guard and the Cuban Border Guard and the provision of real-time tactical information on smuggling operations.
- Coordinating radio frequencies to facilitate immediate and continuing ship-to-ship communications during actual interdiction operations.
- Stationing a counternarcotics specialist in Havana to coordinate with Cuban law enforcement on the island.
- Providing technical expertise to assist in joint boardings and searches of commercial vessels on a case-by-case basis.

U.S. - CARIBBEAN COUNTERDRUG MARITIME AGREEMENTS AS OF 7/10/00

	SHIPBOARDING	SHIPRIDER	PURSUIT	ENTRY TO INVESTIGATE	OVERFLIGHT	RELAY ORDER TO LAND
Antigua & Barbuda	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bahamas		✓			✓	✓
Barbados	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Belize	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Costa Rica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CUBA						
Dominica	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Dominican Republic	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Grenada	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Haiti			✓	✓	✓	
Jamaica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
St. Kitts & Nevis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
St. Lucia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
St. Vincent/Grenadines	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Suriname	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trinidad & Tobago	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Joint Interagency Task Force - East

(The United States had considered requesting Cuban permission for Coast Guard "hot pursuit" of suspected smugglers on a case-by-case basis, but decided to keep this proposal off the agenda because it was clear that the Cubans would oppose the idea.)

Within two weeks, the Cuban government passed a diplomatic note through the U.S. Interests Section in Havana stating that it accepted all four U.S. proposals.

By the standards of U.S. accords with the other major Caribbean islands (see box), these proposals were exceedingly modest. For example, the United States maintains a formal counterdrug maritime agreement with Jamaica that includes case-by-case pursuit, ship boarding, a "ship-rider" provision, in-country investigation authorization, permission to overfly the island, and a communications network to enhance collaboration. In addition, the United States has a number of other accords with Jamaica involving the provision of equipment, training, intelligence sharing, and collaboration in evidence handling and prosecutions.

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Even so, given the political sensitivity of any official contact with Cuba, U.S. officials have gone to great lengths to minimize the nature and impact of the Havana meeting. The negotiations were defined as "conversations" conducted "at working level" and the delegation was referred to as very "low-level." All references to "agreement," "ac-

cord," "collaboration," "training," or "equipment" have been omitted from official statements. The preferred phrasing is that the United States and Cuba, as the Department of State's 1999 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report puts it, "continued to work together on a case-by-case basis."

Even a low-level approach to Cuba has generated high-level protests from anti-Castro members of Congress and the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). Since denouncing the 1997 decision by the Department of Justice to use Cuban officials as prosecution witnesses in the *Limerick* trial, CANF and its key allies in Congress have opposed any collaboration with Cuba on drug interdiction. Shortly after word of the meeting in Havana became public, Senator Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina) and Representative Dan Burton (R-Indiana) wrote to President Clinton objecting to "the emerging notion that it might be possible for the United States to cooperate with the Castro regime in Cuba on counternarcotics matters."

Opponents of counternarcotics collaboration, who generally oppose all forms of cooperation with Castro's Cuba, have put forth three discernible arguments. The first of these is that the Cuban government cannot be a partner in the war against drugs because its leadership has been involved in drug smuggling. Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Lincoln Diaz-Balart, both Florida Republicans, have repeatedly accused Castro of being "part of this illegal operation." They, and others, have cited the case of Arnaldo Ochoa, a high-ranking Cuban general who was tried, convicted, and executed by his own government in

1989 on allegations of corruption and drug smuggling, as well as depositions from smugglers introduced in Florida courts in the early 1990s that named Raúl Castro as a coconspirator in specific drug trafficking operations.

The second argument, made repeatedly by Representatives Burton and Benjamin Gilman (R-New York), is that Cuba has become a significant transit point for drugs being moved into the United States and therefore should be put on the “majors” list—a designation that would require an annual presidential certification evaluating Cuba’s conduct. As evidence, they point to the December 1998 seizure of 7.2 tons of cocaine hidden in a container ship docked in Cartagena on its way to Europe via Cuba. The confiscated shipment, according to this argument, was ultimately destined for the United States, not Europe.

Finally, opponents of any U.S.-Cuban initiative on drug trafficking argue that Havana is insincere in its commitment to waging a war on drugs and seeks only the international legitimacy that a counternarcotics accord with the United States would bring.

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The Clinton administration has devoted considerable time and resources to addressing these allegations and objections. The intelligence community has conducted several major inquiries—both prior to Washington’s moving forward on increased collaboration and after—into charges that top Cuban officials are tied to drug trafficking. Although some evidence may have existed over a decade ago, there is no indication in recent years of any criminal activity relating to narcotics by members of the Cuban leadership. The 1998 interagency evaluation of the Cuban military, led by the Defense Intelligence Agency, found no evidence that Castro or his officials are currently corrupt; subsequent CIA intelligence reviews conducted before the June 1999 meeting in Havana arrived at the same conclusion. “There is no conclusive evidence to indicate that Cuban leadership is currently involved in this criminal activity,” the head of the ONDCP stated in August 1999. The Department of State’s 1999 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report concurred: “there is no evidence of high level involvement.”

Similarly, the CIA, along with the broader intelligence community and law-enforcement agencies, conducted an “all-source” review of the Cartagena case and determined that the Cuban government was not involved and that the shipment was not

destined for the United States. During a Senate hearing on “Cuba’s Links to Drug Trafficking,” Assistant Secretary Beers testified: “The preponderance of information indicates that it was destined for Spain. . . . Furthermore, our information reveals no high-level Government of Cuba complicity in this foiled smuggling operation.”

Proponents of collaboration believe that the argument that the Cuban government seeks to collaborate with Washington on drugs only for political gain and international legitimacy is contradicted by the record of cooperation so far, as well as by the experiences of Canada, Spain, Britain, and other nations that have active counternarcotics programs with Cuba. Sensitive to this charge, however, the Clinton administration has been quick to make it clear that collaboration on drugs does not reflect a softening of the overall U.S. posture toward Castro’s regime. The White House tabled the Cuban government’s suggestion for regular meetings on counternarcotics operations (comparable to those held between U.S. and Cuban officials on the migration accord) out of concern that Castro would use such talks to enhance his political image. Department of State spokesman James Foley pointedly rejected the notion that Cuba would be an “ally” in the war against drugs: “I would never use the word ‘ally’ and the ‘United States’ and ‘Cuba’ in the same sentence. [But] if it serves our interests to fight that scourge [of narcotics consumption in this country], to work on a practical or pragmatic basis with other countries in the world, we will do so because that’s in the interest of the American people.”

U.S. officials argue that the bilateral efforts have already proved effective. Since 1999, when it became clear that U.S. and Cuban law enforcement agencies were working in tandem, detections of suspicious activity in both the air and sea over and around Cuban territory have dropped off considerably, suggesting that the drug cartels no longer view Cuba as a smuggler’s ideal safe haven. Cuban officials, on the other hand, take the strong position that their own initiatives and interdiction programs, not the low-level collaboration with Washington, are responsible for the decline.

Regardless of where the credit lies, that success is likely to add ammunition for further formalizing a bilateral program on drugs. Indeed, the debate, both international and domestic, over upgrading U.S.-Cuban collaboration on narcotics appears likely to continue if not escalate in the coming months and years, as U.S. officials seek ways to block illicit substances from crossing the border, and the politics of Washington’s overall approach to Cuba in the post-cold war era continues to evolve. For example, a recent policy paper by a Council on Foreign Rela-

tions task force, "U.S.-Cuban Relations in the 21st Century: A Follow On Report," recommends development of "an active program of counternarcotics contacts with their Cuban counterparts," and "intelligence exchanges. . . useful for deterring and suppressing drug trading activities." Senator Specter has called for "immediate steps" to advance collaboration on drug interdiction. "We should be working much more closely with the Cuban government," he stated.

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In June 2000, Specter became the first Republican to offer legislation to enhance such ties, in the form of an amendment titled "United States-Cuban Mutual Assistance in the Interdiction of Illicit Drugs."

The Specter amendment would have provided indirect assistance to Cuba by underwriting some of the personnel and equipment costs of collaboration. It called for \$1 million to be made available to the Secretary of Defense

on behalf of the United States Coast Guard, the United States Customs Service, and other bodies, to work with the appropriate authorities of the Cuban govern-

ment to provide for greater cooperation, coordination, and other mutual assistance in the interdiction of illicit drugs being transported over Cuban airspace and waters.

The sum was meager compared to other U.S. assistance programs in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, the amendment, passed by the Senate, was removed from the legislation during the House-Senate conference on the bill because of "very political" opposition on the House side, according to a legislative aide.

The debate will continue under the new administration. There are sure to be other such amendments in the future, and if and when they come to a vote, they will provide an opportunity for further national discussion of the utility of collaborating with Cuba on one of the most pressing security issues of the twenty-first century—the transnational threat of illicit narcotics.

Peter Kornbluh is a senior analyst at the National Security Archive, a public interest research center, where he directs the Cuba Documentation Project. His books include The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962 (coeditor) and Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba (editor).

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