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Cuba's Reengagement With the Caribbean: Setbacks and Successes

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Since the end of the cold war, Cuba has placed a high priority on reengagement with the other countries of the Caribbean, making particularly strong headway in the political and diplomatic fields and achieving slower yet steady progress in the sphere of economic integration. The United States has acknowledged, with some concern, the success of Cuba's efforts. For example, William Crotty, U.S. ambassador to the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), recently criticized the intensification of diplomatic relations between Cuba and other Caribbean states, evident "in a growing number of visits by leaders of the region to Havana," urging those leaders to press for democratic reforms and to condition further improvement of relations on progress in this regard. Then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher too signaled disapproval of enhanced Cuban-Caribbean ties with his 1996 warning that final approval of the Caribbean Basin Trade Security bill could very much depend on "the region's actions regarding Cuba."

Cuba's achievements in the region have taken shape rather rapidly and unexpectedly. In the late 1980s and even the early 1990s, most political leaders and scholars were extremely doubtful of Cuba's ability to reengage with the rest of the Caribbean. Developments in the 1980s seemed to reinforce Cuba's isolation and its inability to adjust to dominant trends in the region. Cuba's virtual economic collapse between 1990 and 1993, coupled with Fidel Castro's unwillingness to adopt a pluralistic political system or undertake far-reaching economic reforms, made the outlook for regional integration seem even more bleak.

Despite these expectations, however, various developments have allowed Cuba to achieve a fair degree of success in the Caribbean. It is the goal of this paper to explain these developments and their implications.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Initial Efforts at Engagement

The Cuban Revolution's initial attempts at diplomacy in the Caribbean during 1959-1960 are exemplified by Havana's unsuccessful effort to forge a political alliance with Venezuela and Mexico, economically significant countries with revolutionary traditions of their own. Castro hoped that these states would support his new regime as well as collaborate in the struggle against Latin America's most hated dictators, the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo and Nicaragua's Somoza dynasty, and aid the cause of Puerto

Rican independence. During this period, the Soviet alliance was not yet on the agenda. Strong diplomatic cooperation with Mexico and Venezuela was the top priority.

Castro's political actions at this time were in line with the region's nationalist tendencies, particularly the Legión del Caribe initiative of the 1940s and early 1950s whereby many Caribbean liberal and leftist parties, and even some governments, tried to organize a common armed struggle against existing tyrannies. The Cuban leadership supported guerrilla movements against Trujillo and the Somozas. Other attempts against the governments of Panama and Haiti were conducted by groups of individuals, most of them Cubans, acting without the Cuban government's official knowledge or support.

It was at this early stage that Cuba began making its first inroads in the "colonial Caribbean." The first overture was made by Cheddi Jagan, the premier of what was then British Guiana (now the independent nation of Guyana), and his wife, Janet Jagan. Both welcomed and supported the Cuban Revolution, and Janet Jagan visited Havana in early 1960. The toppling of the Jagan government and the rise of Forbes Burnham in 1964 were perceived by Havana as due to interference on the part of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Cuba eventually established a small program to train and support some cadres from Jagan's party.

Meanwhile (perhaps due in part to U.S. pressure), nearly all of the independent nations in the Caribbean, with the sole exception of Mexico, broke diplomatic, consular, and trade relations with Cuba. In all cases, the break in relations was preceded by repeated physical attacks against Cuban embassies and personnel with the apparent acquiescence of local authorities. Guatemala and Nicaragua were even enlisted by the United States in preparations for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Havana's initial attempts at regional outreach faded with the growing external confrontation with the United States and domestic radicalization, which led to civil war in Cuba and the 1961 U.S.-supported Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles. In the course of approximately eighteen months, the Cuban leadership came to realize that the Cuban Revolution would not find any significant Latin American or Caribbean partners on which it could rely in its dispute with Washington. Cuba's isolation was becoming a dominant characteristic of hemispheric diplomacy.

From Insurgencies to Overtures

During the period from 1961 to 1972, regional dynamics interacted with confrontational cold war policies, attitudes, and developments, including the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, and Cuban governmental support for various insurgencies. Because most of the insular Caribbean and some portions of the adjacent mainland remained under the control of colonial powers not hostile to Cuba, those territories were initially rather detached from such developments. However, Cuba's anticolonial message did begin to gain a following.

That message took on radical overtones during and after the January 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana, which featured the active participation of guerrilla fighters and other leftist leaders. The Caribbean was represented not only by guerrilla fighters from Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and elsewhere, but also by leftist student leaders, intellectuals, and trade unionists primarily from anglophone colonial territories (including Cheddi Jagan of British Guiana). Radicals from Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, both independent since 1962, and activists from the French départements d'Outre-mer (DOMs), particularly Guadeloupe and Martinique, were also among the participants.

Consistent with their alliance with the United States, the independent governments in the Caribbean were extremely critical of the Tricontinental Conference. Strong statements against the conference in particular and Cuba's activism in general were made also by such Caribbean political leaders as Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago and Alexander Bustamante and Edward Seaga of Jamaica. Political leaders from the colonial territories that had previously achieved favorable political settlements with London, most notably Forbes Burnham of British Guiana, also voiced strong criticism of the conference.

Despite Cuba's activism in Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic in the 1960s, its policy of supporting insurgencies did not extend to the insular or mainland colonial territories. There were three main reasons for this. First, these territories (with the exception of British Guiana for a short time between 1961 and 1964) were not perceived as potential battlegrounds vis-à-vis the United States. Moreover, relations with Western Europe and Canada were considered too important to jeopardize by interfering with their colonies and friends in the Caribbean. Finally, the level of social and political unrest in the colonial territories was never perceived as being high enough to hold significant revolutionary potential.

This approach did not extend to Puerto Rico. Support for the island's independence movement was, and continues to be, a key element in Cuba's foreign policy. Puerto Rican groups engaged in any form of political or armed resistance to the island's association with the United States would eventually be supported by Cuba.

The period from 1961 to 1972 was dominated by an overwhelming preoccupation with security on the part of the Cuban leadership, combined with a conflictual and frustrating alliance with the Soviet Union. Cuba's regional strategy reflected its conviction that drawing the United States into regional conflicts would dilute overall U.S. power and Washington's ability to undertake major aggression against Cuba. This type of thinking was captured in Che Guevara's slogan, "To create two, three, many Vietnams."

After eight years of recurrent international involvements in 1961-1968, the Cuban government began to moderate its interventionist policies and take advantage of a more favorable regional situation: friendly governments in the former British colonies in the Caribbean, electoral processes in Chile and Uruguay, and nationalist/populist military regimes in Panama and Peru. This period thus witnessed a shift from extreme confrontation to friendly overtures.

Engagement in the 1970s

Between 1970 and 1972 a consensus was forged among the main English-speaking ex-colonies, which decided to break away from the policy of isolating Cuba. Leaders in London and Ottawa (especially former British Prime Minister Edward Heath and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, both of whom visited Havana) were supportive of these steps. In October 1972, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana became the first to establish full diplomatic relations with Cuba, a development facilitated in large part by Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley. Trinidadian Prime Minister Eric Williams and Guyanese Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, both of whom had opposed Fidel Castro's policies in the 1960s, put aside past grievances.

Although trade remained insignificant, several governments initiated state-to-state cooperation projects with Cuba. Manley and Burnham flew together in Castro's plane to the Non-Aligned Movement's September 1973 summit in Algiers. Manley and Castro worked closely to try to transform the 1973-1974 oil crisis into something that would benefit rather than hurt non-oil-producing Third World countries. They encouraged Middle Eastern oil producers to establish preferential prices and other compensatory measures such as cooperation projects, aid funds, and investments for Third World countries. (The attempt ultimately failed.) Manley, Burnham, and other Caribbean leaders from recently independent states were also supportive of Cuba's military and political actions in southern Africa. Despite the cold war implications, the Caribbean's sociocultural and historical roots made Cuba's actions in that part of the world popular.

During this period, the Cuban government also reestablished full diplomatic relations with Panama, Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia. In 1975, the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed to lift all mandatory sanctions isolating Cuba, a decision actively supported by the majority of anglophone Caribbean nations.

Meanwhile, insurgencies in Central America were developing rapidly, not only in Nicaragua but also in El Salvador, Guatemala, and, to a lesser extent, Honduras. Cuba provided particularly extensive support to Nicaragua's Sandinistas, who overthrew the Somoza government in 1979.

A New Isolation

Cuba's successful situation at the end of the 1970s was soon to be challenged by several negative developments. External factors included new U.S. policies toward the region under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, the Soviets' refusal to agree to certain Cuban requests, and the subsequent crumbling of the Soviet-Cuban alliance. Domestic difficulties included the Mariel boatlift, a growing dissident movement, and the drug trafficking trial of General Arnaldo Ochoa. Taken together, these events led to a reassessment of key policies.

In the late 1970s, Cuba took two risks that ultimately proved costly. As organized political violence erupted in Jamaica against the Manley government, Castro decided to help Manley build a security apparatus for his personal protection. That assistance was ultimately used as an excuse to break diplomatic relations with Cuba after Edward Seaga's electoral victory in 1980.

Cuba's second gamble was the decision to provide training and support to the New Jewel Movement in Grenada, led by Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard, which seized power in a 1979 coup. The revolutionary regime was ousted in 1983 following internecine struggles and armed intervention by the United States.

President Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), following on the heels of the Grenada intervention, sought to link Caribbean economies to U.S. markets under favorable conditions. The CBI was designed in part to isolate Cuba from its Caribbean neighbors. The military government in Suriname immediately responded by expelling the recently appointed Cuban ambassador and suspending diplomatic relations.

Another setback for Cuba was the Colombian government's decision to sever relations in the wake of a 1981 assault on Bogotá's Palacio de Justicia by armed commandos of the M-19 who were allegedly backed by Cuba. Although the Colombian government knew that Havana had ceased all support to Colombia's armed opposition since the establishment of bilateral relations, the assault generated domestic pressures from the military and conservative politicians that required a scapegoat, and Cuba filled the slot.

These developments took place in a larger geopolitical framework characterized by increased tensions in Central America heavily influenced by cold war antagonisms. Numerous works were written by U.S. analysts about supposed security threats in the Caribbean Basin, many of which portrayed the Soviet-Cuban alliance as the main problem.

In reality, however, Soviet and Cuban policies diverged in the 1980s. Indeed, the Cuban government was becoming increasingly anxious about its relations with Moscow, which deteriorated rapidly following Havana's strong criticism of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The two governments disagreed over the appropriate course of action in the Caribbean Basin. The Soviet leadership distrusted the Sandinistas because of their social democratic leanings and criticism of Soviet policies. They held a similar opinion of Prime Minister Bishop (the leader of Grenada's revolutionary government) and incurred Castro's resentment by taking actions in support of the October 1983 intragovernmental coup by Bernard Coard, which resulted in the murder of Bishop. Frictions arose regarding Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama as well.

Soviet leaders also completely dismissed Cuban anxieties regarding the potential dangers of the Reagan administration. The Soviets refused to pledge significant backing, reiterating a noncommittal stance that had been building since the October 1983 U.S. intervention in Grenada. Given the absence of Soviet support in this sector, Castro

concluded that the only way to improve Cuba's regional diplomatic/security situation was to increase Havana's involvement in the area's conflicts, a step that would give the Cuban government greater political leverage. On the basis of his country's experiences in southern Africa, Castro was also convinced that entering peace negotiations without such leverage would lead to defeat. He therefore decided to provide support, in the form of arms and advisers, to Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega's challenge to the United States. Thus, in the 1980s any "conspiracy" in the region was purely Cuban with no Soviet support.

In addition to its problems with the Soviet Union, Cuba suffered several other major blows during this period, including the culmination of the Esquipulas peace process in Central America, the 1989 U.S. intervention in Panama (to which Noriega failed to mount any effective resistance), the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas. Cuba's achievements in the region prior to 1979 were now mostly shattered or crumbling. At the same time, the Castro regime was confronted by widespread predictions of imminent collapse due to the decline in Soviet subsidies.

RENEWED OVERTURES TOWARD THE CARIBBEAN

The Cuban system did not collapse as anticipated. Instead, by 1994 various measures adopted to address the "Special Period" crisis touched off by the loss of Eastern bloc support had generated modest economic and political recovery. Cuba's foreign policy was crucial in this regard. Following the unexpected breakup of the Soviet bloc, Cuba realized its need for greater integration with the global economy and redesigned its foreign policy with that goal in mind.

One of the top priorities was reengagement with the rest of the Caribbean. In geographic terms, Cuba focused on the member countries of the San José Treaty Group (Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela), its largest trading partners in the region. These were judged to be strategic relationships, for several reasons.

In economic terms, these countries are major suppliers of raw materials, petroleum products, chemicals, semifinished goods, foodstuffs, cars, and other items. In addition to favorable credit and customs arrangements, they offer relatively low transportation costs. They are also a significant source of tourism income for Cuba.

Politically, the countries of the San José Group have strong ties with the United States, but are nonetheless leaders in mustering hemispheric and world condemnation of U.S. policy toward Cuba. The three are influential in regional bodies such as the OAS, the Rio Group, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), and the Ibero-American summit.

In the security arena, Cuba has had a certain amount of leverage with these countries, all of which have significant leftist opposition movements that have responded favorably to Cuban mediation.

To a lesser degree, similar considerations have influenced Cuba's relations with Central America (including Panama), the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and many of the former British colonial territories.

Many of the adjustments to its economic system that Cuba was forced to make after the loss of Soviet trade and subsidies had the effect of reducing obstacles to regional integration, particularly in the areas of trade and investment. These reforms included the decentralization of foreign trade, the creation of free zones and industrial parks, special agreements for the protection of investments, tariff and customs reforms, visa exemptions, preferential trade arrangements, banking reform, the use of the euro for hard currency transactions in trade and finance parallel to the dollar, new agrarian laws downsizing the state sector in favor of cooperatives, and the reduction of restrictions on self-employment.

Cuban ministers and technical experts were sent to almost every country in the Caribbean, even those with which no diplomatic relations existed (e.g., El Salvador and Honduras). Cuba's rehabilitation of its merchant fleet (among the largest in the Caribbean) and ports has permitted increased activity in the region and paved the way for maritime transport treaties with Mexico, Belize, the Netherlands Antilles, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. Air connections have multiplied, particularly with the San José Group but also with Central America, the Bahamas, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, the Cayman Islands, and the French DOMs.

The transformation of telecommunications in Cuba, with one billion dollars in projected investment in this sector between 1998 and 2006, will further enhance Cuba's ability to interact effectively with its Caribbean neighbors.

The Cuban government has also undertaken a number of policy initiatives specifically designed to increase interaction with the Caribbean and the most influential extraregional powers, including the following:

Reassurances to Caribbean nations that Cuba does not want to compete with them for tourism revenues; instead, Havana emphasizes the desirability of cooperation and coordination in the form of common policies, joint ventures, and multideestination programs, which are already under way with the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, and Guatemala.

Cooperation on antinarcotics efforts with many countries of the region, including the Bahamas, Colombia, Jamaica, and Mexico.

Willingness to facilitate negotiations in countries experiencing serious internal conflict. Cuba has already played a mediating role in Guatemala, Peru, and Colombia. Shortly after his January 1999 visit to Havana, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana lauded Castro as a fundamental actor in that country's peace process.

Immigration and extradition agreements with the Bahamas, Colombia, Mexico, and others.

Solidarity with member countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in the "banana war" between the European Union (EU) and the United States over allegations by Washington that EU import rules favor Caribbean banana producers at the expense of Latin American producers. The need to maintain good relations with CARICOM, the EU, and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries forced Cuba to take a position, which Havana had avoided doing in order not to offend Central American banana exporters. Cuba has promised not to export bananas and to support CARICOM/ACP claims. Castro has consistently argued that the "banana war" is being pursued on behalf of two giant U.S. fruit distribution companies.

Activism in the diplomatic arena to ensure that the Caribbean is represented in the United Nations Security Council with the appropriate frequency and to encourage closer cooperation in all multilateral institutions and agencies.

The small size of most countries in the Caribbean Basin has enabled Cuba to make the most of its limited resources in its regional overtures. Whereas a dozen Cuban doctors in a country of millions might hardly be noticed, they will have a significant and high profile impact in a small Caribbean nation. The most recent example of such outreach was the deployment of Cuban doctors, nurses, and health technicians to countries affected by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, including 110 to Honduras, 373 to Guatemala, 383 to Haiti, and 89 to Nicaragua.

Cuba has also been active in giving scholarships to foreign students. More than six hundred Caribbean students have graduated from Cuban universities during the 1990s, a large portion of them as doctors and engineers. Cuba recently created two schools of medicine focusing on foreign students. The Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina in Havana hosts eighteen hundred students from Latin America, while a smaller school in Santiago de Cuba hosts more than two hundred students from the Anglophone and francophone Caribbean, primarily Haiti.

THE CARIBBEAN'S RESPONSE

Even as Cuba was pursuing better relations in the region at the start of the 1990s, the region was becoming increasingly receptive to Cuba's overtures. Several countries (including Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guatemala, Jamaica, and Suriname) that had broken or suspended diplomatic ties with Cuba decided to normalize or improve relations. Even the government of Panamanian President Guillermo Endara moved toward closer ties. In the anglophone Caribbean, relations were established with Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Dominica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and other members of CARICOM.

By the early 1990s, there were growing similarities in voting patterns at the United Nations between Cuba and the Caribbean nations. Leaders at the 1990 CARICOM summit agreed to explore areas of cooperation with Cuba, beginning with a visit by the secretary-general and the CARICOM technical commission in 1991. Two years later, fifty-six businesspeople from CARICOM countries visited Cuba, following similar delegations from Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama.

The presidents of Mexico and Colombia, as well as vice presidents and several ministers, followed a similar course of action, while Castro visited Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela. All these countries actively supported Cuba's inclusion in the ACS as a founding member in 1994. Trade with Cuba, although still limited in extent, was becoming increasingly important for such countries and territories as Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curaçao, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Dominica. Commerce and cooperation with the San José Group was also growing.

Why this readiness for a new stage of friendly relations and active cooperation? Several factors converged to create the necessary conditions.

First, it was recognized that a collapse of the Cuban system followed by chaos and instability would have negative consequences for the entire region. The perceived alternative was to engage in a constructive relationship and facilitate Cuba's participation in the region, a position that echoed the views of Canada and the EU.

Another factor was Cuba's long-term potential as a major economic actor in the Caribbean. On the one hand, the threat of Cuba as a serious competitor motivated many regional actors to pursue a constructive relationship in order to facilitate cooperation and preempt conflict. On the other hand, Cuba represented a large potential market for Caribbean exports and investments. Many Caribbean entrepreneurs were eager to establish a foothold in Cuba during the early stages of its economic recovery, particularly before any normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations and subsequent competition from U.S. businesspeople. It was hoped, moreover, that profitable ventures in Cuba might compensate for sagging domestic markets in most of the other islands.

Also contributing to the Caribbean's warming to Cuba was a perception that the United States had neglected the region since the end of the cold war. In the past, aid and trade preferences offered by Washington had given the United States significant leverage in the region. The possibility that Washington might withdraw aid and technical assistance was a major deterrent to increased cooperation with Cuba on the part of Caribbean countries. In recent years, however, with U.S. aid to the Caribbean down to extremely low levels and CBI benefits virtually nullified by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the region's countries had little to lose by ignoring U.S. admonitions to isolate Cuba. In fact, open defiance of U.S. policy on Cuba became perhaps the Caribbean's primary means of expressing frustration with U.S. policy in general.

Another factor encouraging good relations was Cuba's contribution, through its scholarship programs, to the formation of human capital in various Caribbean nations.

Cuba's assistance to its neighbors in meeting this key challenge has been repeatedly praised by the region's heads of government and other high-ranking officials. In December 1997, for example, Grenadian Prime Minister Keith Mitchell publicly acknowledged Cuba's support for the development and well-being of his country, and contrasted Cuba's provision of forty-two scholarships in the fields of engineering, medicine, and computer sciences with the fact that the United States provided none. In January 1999, Saint Lucian Prime Minister Kenny Anthony made almost identical comments when comparing Cuban and U.S. involvement in the region.

Finally, Cuban rhetoric on the threat of globalization to small countries resonated deeply in much of the Caribbean, which began to experience the concrete impact of global competition on all of its key sectors, particularly agriculture and textiles.

The Caribbean's changing views in this regard are perhaps best summarized by a recent anecdote. When Castro visited Jamaica in 1998, he had a friendly meeting with his sworn enemy of thirty years, Edward Seaga, who noted, "We are not dealing with memories. We are dealing with the future."

TRADE AND DIPLOMACY BY SUBREGION

The San José Group

In spite of various delays in payments and credit renegotiations, trade between Cuba and the San José Group is increasing. Mexico's share has been the largest, jumping from US\$318 million in 1996 to US\$410 million in 1997 and still growing. Colombia and Venezuela follow, with figures around the US\$50 million level.

Agreements in the fields of cultural, scientific, and technological cooperation reflect the priority assigned to these three countries in Cuba's foreign policy. Systematic cultural exchanges number in the hundreds every year. Thousands of Cuban intellectuals and professionals have become official residents of these countries, especially Mexico.

In January 1999, President Andrés Pastrana of Colombia and President-Elect Hugo Chávez of Venezuela visited Cuba and signed several agreements to enhance trade and cooperation, confirming their interest in closer bilateral relations with Cuba. Moreover, Chávez is pursuing a policy beyond the San José Treaty aimed at extending oil import privileges to other Caribbean nations, including Cuba. Mexico views the initiative with considerable reservation due to potential conflicts with the United States. On this particular issue, the Cuban government has been extremely cautious, seeking to avoid any friction with Mexico, stating that "Cuba understands the reasons for her exclusion from the San José Treaty. . . but recognizes the importance of this treaty and the benefits to other brother countries."

Cuba has also been widening its political connections in Mexico by cultivating relations with the main leaders and lawmakers of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) as well as the more-established Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). The PAN's current presidential candidate, Vicente Fox, recently visited the island.

The Antilles and the Mainland

By 1995 trade with the Antilles had already surpassed US\$300 million, compared to US\$100 million in 1994, with 70 percent of that trade in petroleum and lubricants.

At present, trade with Trinidad and Tobago has risen to US\$50 million and trade with the Netherlands Antilles is approaching US\$120 million. Jamaica has become an important investor in Cuba through Super Clubs, Sandals, Air Jamaica, and other tourism ventures, and the Jamaican government has established a line of credit exceeding US\$50 million to fund Jamaican exports to Cuba. By 1998, trade with the Dominican Republic was around US\$50 million, and some joint ventures were being established with Cuba.

This trend reflects Cuba's needs in terms of petroleum, lubricants, chemicals, semifinished goods, raw materials, transport, foodstuffs, and capital, as well as Cuba's moderately recuperating export capacity.

Political relations have been fully normalized with all of the Antilles and the former colonial mainland territories, and relations continued to improve between 1994 and 1999. Scores of ministers from all of the islands as well as Belize, Suriname, and Guyana have visited Cuba, generally accompanied by delegations of businesspeople. During the same period, a host of heads of state and government visited the island, including those of Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, Barbados, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Former Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Roberto Robaina reciprocated with visits to all of these countries, and Castro himself made official visits to Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, the Cuban National Assembly has established relations with parliamentary institutions throughout the Caribbean, exchanging delegations almost constantly.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM)

Cuban authorities have given special attention to Cuba's association with CARICOM as one of the key components of Havana's Caribbean policy. A joint Cuban-CARICOM commission was created in 1993, after various consultations from 1990 to 1992. Since then, Sir Edward Carrington, the secretary-general of CARICOM, has visited Cuba several times, and in November 1999 Surinamese President Jules Wijdenbosch represented CARICOM in Havana at the ninth Ibero-American summit.

The Eighth Europe/Caribbean Conference, sponsored by the Caribbean Council for Europe, was held for the first time in Havana in December 1997, with support from CARICOM. At that meeting, Sir Edward Carrington and Sir Shridath Ramphal (the region's chief trade negotiator) clearly stated their position that "Cuba is part of the Caribbean; Cuba must be with us as the Caribbean makes its way into the wider world." They criticized the U.S. embargo and other measures taken to isolate Cuba, but emphasized the need for economic and political reforms in Cuba as well. Sir Shridath summarized that position in urging that "Cuba must not go into the twenty-first century as it was, and was treated, in the second half of the twentieth." The two leaders also advocated the inclusion of Cuba (one of Havana's major demands) in any project connected to the envisioned Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Both individually and as a group, the CARICOM countries have repeatedly condemned the U.S. embargo on Cuba. As Jamaican Prime Minister Percival J. Patterson stated in 1998, "We are implacably opposed to the economic blockade against Cuba, which is morally wrong and contravenes the right to sovereignty." CARICOM statements have been particularly strong since the passage of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which regional observers claim violates not only Cuba's sovereignty but that of other countries.

ACP/Lomé Convention

The potential for better bilateral relations between Cuba and the EU was significantly diminished in 1996 when the EU adopted its Common Position on Cuba, which linked establishment of a formal cooperation agreement to political reforms in Cuba. However, Cuba's relations with the Caribbean have kept some diplomatic doors open via the ACP route. Cuba hopes to gain access through the ACP connection to the benefits and preferences of the Lomé Convention, which administers aid and trade preferences between Europe and its former ACP colonies. The main push for Cuba's membership in the ACP came from CARICOM countries, and Cuba was granted observer status at the 1998 ACP meeting in Barbados.

Central America (Including Panama)

Cuba's trade with Central America has focused on two major players. One is Guatemala, the largest economy in the subregion, whose annual trade with Cuba exceeds US\$50 million. The two countries have signed ten different agreements regarding promotion and protection of investments and preferential trade arrangements, including lower duties and tariffs. Guatemalan President Alvaro Arzú visited Havana in October 1999, and it is expected that Castro will reciprocate in the near future.

The other key player is Panama. For twenty-five years, Cuba has used Panama's free zones to dodge U.S. embargo policies, gain access to sensitive technology, and conduct triangular trade operations. As Robaina commented in 1995, "our country needs to learn,

know, and explore. [Panama] is a connection center. . . in the type of business Cuba is opening to, but [in which it] has no experience."

By 1996, more than fifty Panama-based companies were established and doing business in Cuba or exporting from Cuba to other markets. One of the largest, Motores Internacionales del Caribe S.A., has exported more than fifteen thousand cars to Cuba in recent years, reaching sales of US\$59 million in 1997, US\$62 million in 1998, and US\$80 million to date in 1999.

Trade between the two countries moved from US\$150 million in 1994 to almost US\$400 million in 1996. By 1998, Panama-based companies were the fourth most numerous among the roughly two hundred companies operating in Cuban free zones and industrial parks, according to Cuban official sources.

Former President Ernesto Pérez Balladares visited Cuba during his term in office, and newly elected President Mireya Moscoso, in a recent meeting with Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Felipe Pérez Roque, expressed her readiness to visit Cuba.

In addition to these two countries, Honduras has been targeted for a major bilateral trade offensive with promising results in areas such as metallurgy, electronics, cattle raising, the sugar industry, and pharmaceuticals.

THE TOURISM SECTOR

One area that deserves particular attention is tourism, a vital sector in the economies of the region. Until the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Cuba generally avoided developing its tourism potential, receiving virtually no visitors from Western nations, and thus represented no threat to the industry in the rest of the Caribbean. With the end of Soviet subsidies, Cuba embarked on numerous large-scale tourism projects as a means of earning much-needed hard currency, with visitors climbing from a mere three hundred thousand in 1990 to 1.4 million in 1998 and an estimated 1.7 million in 1999, and 10 million tourists annually expected by 2010.

Cuba's growing success in this area has generated substantial concern among its neighbors. From Mexico to the Bahamas, there is increasing anxiety about the possible rise of Cuba as the dominant tourist hub in the Caribbean.

Fully aware of such concerns, Cuba has joined the Caribbean Tourism Organization, and Cuban leaders have expressed their commitment to a policy of cooperation in this area, pointing to various multideestination and joint-venture arrangements that have already been negotiated with Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Guatemala.

At the 1995 ACS summit, Castro took special care in arguing that Cuba is no threat to tourism in the other countries of the region and that coordination and benefit-sharing should prevail. During his last visit to Jamaica in July 1998, he reiterated this approach

under the slogan of "Partners and brothers, not competitors." Castro commented on this issue yet again in the course of the August 1998 Caribbean Forum (CARIFORUM) debates.

REMAINING OBSTACLES

Despite Cuba's significant progress during the past decade, some obstacles to improved relations remain, including the following:

Cuba's economic crisis has made many trade and cooperation projects infeasible, especially those involving the smaller economies of the Caribbean.

Cuba desperately needs investment and soft credit, which most countries in the region, with the exception of Mexico prior to the currency devaluation crisis of the mid-1990s, have not been willing or able to provide.

Cuba's domestic economic and political structures still differ greatly from those in the rest of the region. Its economic reforms have been limited in nature, scope, and pace, and the Cuban government maintains its refusal to move toward a pluralistic political setting.

Cuba's infrastructure and institutions, policies and experiences, were not linked to those of the Caribbean for over three decades. Cuba thus entered the 1990s lacking a modern banking system, commercial mechanisms, marketing skills, or transport and telecommunications to facilitate its Caribbean ties.

In many cases there are strong structural similarities in the Caribbean economies that make trade and complementarity extremely difficult. The small scale of many of the markets in the region and the frequent absence of advanced technology have not appealed strongly to Cuban needs and policymakers.

The existence in Cuba of high duties and tariffs, together with other impediments such as excessive governmental regulation, has created many difficulties for the free flow of trade, financial operations, and even cooperation projects.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Which factors will help decide the extent of Cuba's future success in reengaging with the region? One important consideration will be what happens on the island. Cuba's integration in the region is presently inhibited by the divergence of its political and economic structures from those of its Caribbean neighbors. The pace and extent of Cuba's internal reform process may therefore largely determine the pace and extent of its regional integration.

U.S. policy may influence Cuba's position in the region, but much less than in years past. U.S. disapproval of closer Cuban-Caribbean ties is evident in the previously cited statements by Ambassador Crotty in 1999 and Secretary of State Christopher in 1996. A small group in the U.S. Congress also continues to express opposition in this regard, manifested, for example, in legislation (H.R. 2296), proposed by Cuban American Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida) in July 1997, that would impose sanctions on Caribbean countries that support Cuban membership in CARICOM or the Central American Common Market.

Ultimately, however, the decrease in U.S. aid and trade preferences for the region has left the United States with much less influence over Caribbean countries' ties with Cuba. In fact, CARICOM ambassadors in Washington boldly voiced their condemnation of the aforementioned sanctions bill, just as they have vocally opposed U.S. isolation efforts in general during recent years.

Other factors that may influence Cuba's standing in the region include the following:

Cuba's relations with Venezuela under President Chávez. Depending on Chávez's own standing in the region, he could prove to be an important ally in pushing for Cuba's further reintegration into the Caribbean as well as Latin America.

The nature and results of Cuba's role in the Colombian peace talks. If Cuba is able to make a significant contribution to resolving the conflict in Colombia, the result is likely to be increased respect and legitimacy for the Cuban leadership.

Cuban participation in regional counternarcotics efforts. Continued interaction with the countries of the Caribbean in combating drug trafficking creates the potential for increasing overall familiarity and confidence between Cuba and its neighbors.

Cooperation in sectors such as tourism, education, and health. The balance between competition and collaboration in the area of tourism, and the extent of Cuba's willingness to share its achievements in the areas of education and health, are likely to condition relations in other areas.

The degree of social, economic, and political stability on the island. Particularly in the economic sphere, Cuba's status as a stable and reliable partner may influence the Caribbean's willingness to move toward greater integration.

CONCLUSION

Cuba has already achieved a significant degree of success in its efforts at regional reengagement. Relations with the San José Group, CARICOM, ACS, and the ACP countries are proceeding steadily, albeit with some obstacles.

Current circumstances seem to favor Cuba's continued integration into the Caribbean. Havana's hosting of the Ibero-American summit in November 1999 clearly raised its profile in the region, and the South-South summit (G-77 plus China) to be held in Havana in April 2000 is likely to provide further momentum to Cuba's quest for regional as well as international reengagement. Cuba's economic recovery too will contribute to increased commercial interaction and integration, and incorporation into Lomé would further strengthen that trend.

At present, the Caribbean appears extremely receptive to Cuba's inclusion in the region's political and economic systems. The extent to which such integration actually occurs will depend largely on Cuba's willingness to take the necessary steps toward compatibility with those systems.

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Cuban-Caribbean Cooperation in Drug Interdiction

Cuba and its Caribbean neighbors share a declared official desire to reduce the flow of narcotics through the region. By the end of 1998, Cuba had drug-related cooperation agreements with the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Venezuela. In 1999 Cuba signed accords with Colombia and Guatemala, and is currently negotiating such agreements with the Dominican Republic and the Cayman Islands.

The signing of the Colombian accord in January 1999 smoothed over the biggest public disagreement on the drug issue that Cuba has had to date with a Caribbean state. Just a month before, on December 3, 1998, 7.2 tons of cocaine were discovered within a ship about to leave Colombia for Cuba, apparently en route to Europe. On December 5, Cuban President Fidel Castro commented, "It is unfortunate that the information came to us by cable [from news agencies]. . . . With a little less sensationalism and a bit more professionalism, it might have been possible to capture [the Colombians' coconspirators in Cuba]." Castro argued that if the Colombian government had communicated with Cuban authorities before announcing the news to the press, Cuba might have been able to arrest two Spanish businessmen allegedly involved in the enterprise before they fled the country. As the plans for the Colombian-Cuban accord were finalized, Castro remarked, "Even though the collaboration comes a little late, thank you." Colombian President Andrés Pastrana subsequently criticized his own chief of police over the handling of the

matter. This is the only recent public disagreement between Cuba and its Caribbean neighbors over drug issues.

In addition to the growing list of bilateral interdiction accords, Cuba also participates in a number of regionwide institutions that address drug issues. The "Heads of Narcotics Law Enforcement Agencies" (HONLEA) group meets annually and includes representatives from all of the Caribbean (as well as the rest of the world). One of its recent functions was held in Cuba. Cuba is also a signatory of the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and cooperates extensively with the Barbados office of the United Nations International Drug Control Program. In addition, Cuba is a member of the Caribbean Customs Law Enforcement Council, and its participation in INTERPOL activities provides another point of contact with Caribbean drug interdiction officials. Cuba is not yet, however, a member of the Association of Caribbean Commissioners of Police or the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force. The latter focuses on the critical issue of combating money laundering in the region.

The European Union and the individual governments of the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Canada have signed their own narcotics interdiction agreements with Cuba and have encouraged Caribbean recipients of their aid to cooperate with Havana on this matter.

--Gillian Gunn Clissold