

CUBA'S ARMED FORCES: POWER AND REFORMS

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The exact place and role of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, FAR*) have been the object of numerous studies from very different perspectives, especially among U.S. and Cuban-American scholars.¹ In the past, Cuba's military potentials in its conflict with the United States, its alliance with the former Soviet Union, and Cuba's military involvement in numerous countries throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia under various forms (guerrilla warfare, intensive training in Cuba, advisory missions, and the deployment of regular forces) caught the attention of many authors. Nowadays, circumstances have changed dramatically and most of the approaches and contributions are essentially focused on the domestic dimensions of the FAR and their relationship with current and future developments inside Cuba.

This is the context to which my contribution relates, basically in two major areas: power and reforms. The fundamental goal of this presentation is to provide a rather personal insight² on the place and the role of the FAR. It is not aimed at debating existing views in the field nor any comparative approach with experiences from Europe, Asia or Nicaragua, which, in

many ways, are very different and meaningless, to the understanding of the very exceptional characteristics of the Cuban experience.

POWER

Let us go back to 1959 and recall one fundamental lesson: that real political power was not in the hands of the Revolutionary Government nor within the remains of the politically collapsed civil society. Real political power was in the hands of the Rebel Army (*Ejército Rebelde*), its leadership, and its Commander-in-Chief (*Comandante en Jefe*), Fidel Castro. Followed by a vast array of transformations and changes, before and after the 1980s, this fundamental trait remains very much the same: the FAR and their *Comandante en Jefe* continue to be the pillar of the current power structure, and once the *Comandante en Jefe* ceases to exist and the position as such is no longer there to be challenged by other potential leaders, the FAR will continue to be such a pillar.

We should also remember that when the Communist Party was created and introduced inside the FAR in the mid 1960s, it was clearly defined—as in 1961 with the political instructors—that the military leaders remained the number one source of leadership

1. Among some of the most important contributors in the field I would like to point out the names of Jorge I. Domínguez, Edward Gonzalez, Enrique Baloyra, William LeoGrande, Jaime Suchlicki, Jorge Pérez-Lopez, Paul Buchanan, Irving Louis Horowitz, Leon Gouré, and Phyllis Greene Walker

2. Part of my work in Cuba was in close association with the Central Political Directorate the *Décima Dirección* (Military Operations Abroad), the Foreign Relations Directorate, and as Guest Professor at the National Defense College (CODEN) of the General Staff in the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*MINFAR*). I was also chief analyst in two sections of the General Directorate of Intelligence (*DGI*), and had considerable field experience with Cuban military and intelligence missions abroad.

and authority, bestowed by the principles that “*el Jefe encarna el mandato de la Patria*”³ (the military chief incarnates the mandate of the Fatherland) and “*Comandante en Jefe, ordene.*” In a revolution and a regime that was not created by a communist party and in which civilian and military relations have not been separate nor conflicting magnitudes of power but very much one and the same, conventional debate between civilian and military relations, including the notion of civilian or Party control over the latter has, thus far, very little if no meaning at all in the Cuban context. The separation FAR-Party in the minds of the Cuban leadership, as it is today, has nothing to do either with classic bourgeois philosophy or with “classic” communist experiences: it is a matter of simple division of functions within a unicellular organism, in which the Party becomes an auxiliary component. It is too early to anticipate or start building scenarios as to how this relationship will evolve over the next 10 or 15 years—a process that has started already—in which an entirely new generation may have completed its full access to the existing power structure, in which the FAR will become closer to the conceptual framework that has shaped most of the failed approaches to understand the Cuban case.

In addition, there are several elements—well established as dominant perceptions—that substantiate much more the attributes of hegemony, authority, and legitimacy that the FAR embody compared to the Party:

- Greater historical roots: (1) defeating Batista; (2) defending the country from a foreign enemy/threats.
- Strong aura of invincibility.⁴
- Overseas operations that enjoyed considerable support/acceptance, reinforced by very low costs, combined with humanitarian civilian coopera-

tion and receiving significant international recognition. Che’s mythology creates special attachments.

- Neither associated with, nor educated in, direct repression.
- Not “militaristic,” but closer to a true “people’s army.”
- Strong tradition of “civic soldiers”—highly organized and qualified, efficient, productive.
- Not associated with the collapse of communism.
- The Party may cease to exist one day or be transformed into something different; the Armed Forces, on the contrary, are very much emblematic of the state and in this sense really “immortal,” as proven in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.
- Previous experiences and current approaches indicate that they would be a much more viable interlocutor and a much more effective guarantor in any future negotiations *vis-à-vis* the United States.
- Still an attractive institution for social mobility and benefits.
- Less associated with corruption than any other state institution.

Another important dimension is that the FAR were in the past and continue to be the single most important institution in providing leadership in the process of policy-making and in nominating candidates for key positions at the highest level of the state. A brief review of state institutions and policy-making processes⁵ led by FAR officials can very well illustrate this point:

- Ministry of the Sugar Industry
- Instituto Nacional de la Reserva Estatal
- Ministry of Fisheries and Merchant Marine
- Ministry of Transport
- Ministry of Communications

3. *Orden General del Comandante en Jefe*, normative document establishing the fundamental principles of the military institutions in Cuba.

4. Grenada is not perceived as a military defeat but more as a political mess, as opposed to victories at the Bay of Pigs, the Civil War (*Lucha Contra Bandidos*), Missile Crisis, Africa, the Middle East.

5. This is in addition, and well beyond, the constitutional areas of Defense, Security, Civil Defense, State of Emergency, and the National Defense Council in which the FAR are the main player.

- Ministry of Tourism
- Ministry of Higher Education
- Attorney General
- Cuban Civil Aviation Corporation, CACSA
- Habanos S.A.
- Gaviota S.A.⁶
- Metropolitan Bank
- GeoCuba Entrepreneurial Group⁷
- TECNOTEC⁸
- Industrial Military Union.⁹
- Plan Turquino-Manatí¹⁰
- Plan de Perfeccionamiento Empresarial (Entrepreneurial Redesign)¹¹
- Ideological Department of the Central Committee.

By every possible standard, this is well beyond “the lion’s share.” But it is not only this apparently disproportionate share that is relevant in understanding the FAR’s place and role. Furthermore, their role in policy-making is not simply determined by how many high-ranking officers we find in the Central Committee and even in the Politburo, but by the overwhelming centrality of the FAR in every single area of policy making. We may wrongly perceive the Politburo as one source of policy making or look at the Council of Ministers as another source, but the truth is that frequent policy designs and recommendations coming from the FAR (specifically from Raúl Castro/Casas Regueiro’s team) can play a more influential and decisive role than those coming from other quarters in the Party or the Government. A very similar experience is connected with the *Consejos de Defensa* of the three armies. Finally, research and analyses conducted by the National Defense College in the

1990s played a similar role to other research centers. Looking at names: Julio Casas Regueiro, Luis Pérez Róspide, Armando Pérez Betancourt or Eladio Fernández Cívico, all representing the FAR, have been more crucial to real policy making than many civilian ministers or brilliant economists like Pedro Monreal, Julio Carranza, Antonio Ravelo, Marta Armenteros, Francisco Soberón, Osvaldo Martínez or even José Luis Rodríguez.

There is one more factor: loyalty/trustworthiness/control. The FAR at large are perceived by Fidel and Raúl as the highest instance, as the *non plus ultra*, in terms of loyalty, trust, and control to open up the much feared gates of reforms and changes. Consequently, they have given the FAR a decisive role in these areas.

Something important should be remembered: When in 1985 the pressures in favor of reform and changes were gaining momentum, it was the FAR who were entrusted with the big *fordist* experiment that meant violating and doing away with more than 100 principles, laws, and regulations of the so-called socialist economy. It was an experiment that was not entrusted to the Party’s Economic Department, the Central Planning Board, the Ministry of Basic Industries, the School of Economics of the University of Havana nor any of the existing research centers in the field of economics. Twelve years later, in the context of the V Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, such an experiment was adopted as an official policy after listening to the experiences and explanations not of the many brilliant Cuban civilian economists but of men like Brigadier General Luis Pérez Róspide and colonels Eladio Fernández Cívico and Armando Pérez Betancourt (all of them engineers by profession). It is

6. Cuba’s fastest growing tourist enterprise since 1992. One of FAR’s “pet” projects.

7. Dealing with policies and transactions connected with land concessions/leasing, from mining to agriculture and real estate.

8. Focused on sensitive imports of high technology for military and civilian branches as well.

9. Based on 12 major industries/services and 16 factories and bases throughout the country; fully reformed in its economic and managerial principles and technologically upgraded; closely linked with the emergent sectors of the state economy.

10. Huge developmental plan covering numerous municipalities (20 percent of the Cuban territory) in all the Cuban mountain ranges and the Ciénaga de Zapata.

11. A plan envisaging the complete restructuring of the economic, financial, and managerial foundations of 150 major industries in Cuba—based on FAR’s experiences since 1985—as a first stage. FAR’s representatives are key players inside the Government Commission in charge of supervising its implementation.

not by chance that most of the emerging sectors, especially those subject to reforms and associated—or expected to associate—with large foreign investments, high-tech, and foreign markets, are also placed in the hands of the FAR.

Should this be perceived as a process of *militarization*? Not precisely. They are not militarizing the sectors and institutions to which they have expanded; it is not the regimentation of industries, services or agriculture, but its modernization according to certain models and standards perfectly comparable to those of *fordism*, including direct incentives. Their language is not that of *manu militari*, but of costs and benefits, of necessary lay-offs,¹² of responding to market demands, of mathematical models, and relying on principles of financial engineering, of computerized systems and complex telecommunications, and not in giving orders or resorting to extra-economic coercion. This is not Prussian *militarization*, “*war communism*,” a Pol-Pot type of design, or the whims and improvisations of Fidel Castro as he has done in the past. This is a *political* elite, with or without a uniform, highly unified, fighting for its survival, recovery, and continuity; they are not a segment of society and state, known as “the military,” isolated in their drills and barracks. They are building the new systems and spaces to which they can reinsert once they retire and that will meet as well the expectations of the generations that are still loyal to the existing power structure.

REFORMS

We should start by clarifying that the well-known, and encompassing, concept of *National Security*, is not used by the Cuban leadership. Instead, the term

“*defensa de la Revolución*” (defense of the Revolution) expresses the very same conceptual framework but adding with special emphasis the notions of direct aggression, defense of the Fatherland, and the dilemma of life and death. For almost 30 years the “*defensa de la Revolución*” was constructed around the threats and aggressions coming from the United States. For more than a decade now this construction has changed drastically: the number one security threat is no longer the United States,¹³ but domestic stability. The latter can be coped with only by designing and implementing policies aimed at ensuring survival, recovery, and continuity, essentially in economic and social terms.

Such a major change in terms of threats demands different responses and priorities that, in turn, changes the place and role of the FAR: reforms are now their battleground, their weapon to succeed, but at the same time a most complex minefield that can cause irreparable damage to the security, the *defensa*, of the Revolution.¹⁴ This mind set began to take shape in the early 1980s, in particular after the growing conflicts with Moscow starting in 1979. Adopting the “All People’s War” Doctrine, the Territorial Militia Troops, the Vietnamese advisory mission, the lessons from the case of Poland, the first foreign investment law in 1982, and the 1985 experiment, were all part of a collapsing alliance much before the 1989-1991 developments.

On the other hand, the 1989-1991 developments—Tiananmen events, the collapse of Eastern Europe, the failed expectations concerning the role of the Armed Forces to “save socialism,” and the demise of the Soviet Union—had a tremendous impact on the

12. We must remember also that after the 1985 experiment, more than one third of the labor force in the military industries was laid-off, something that was used by Fidel Castro as an excuse to limit the experiment to the confines of the FAR—in opposition to his brother’s views—for more than 10 years, although the real truth is that differences between the two were more substantial and far-reaching.

13. Fidel Castro himself has underscore twice in public in the last five years that the threat of a U.S. direct aggression has diminished, something that has been fully recognized in private. Meanwhile, Raúl Castro has repeatedly emphasized, in private and public, that today the “*defensa de la Revolución*,” can only be achieved through successful economic performance and saving the social achievements of the Revolution.

14. International projection has now focused, essentially, in the following areas: (1) seeking new ways and sources of supplies, especially Russian and Chinese; (2) upgrading strategies, tactics, and technologies, learning *in situ* from major conflicts like Lebanon, the two wars in the Gulf, and now from the Balkans; (3) refraining from major involvements in local/regional conflicts; (4) selected areas and cases for providing small scale advisory/training; (5) confidence-building measures towards the United States, Latin American armies, and some European Union armed forces and security establishments, for example Spain, Great Britain, and France.

FAR. Paradoxically, the last three were dismissed as irrelevant for the Cuban experience. The dominant perception was that nothing along those lines would ever happen in Cuba. But the first one—Tienanmen—was entirely different. It became a haunting ghost for each and every debate within the Cuban political class, its leadership, and the FAR. Developments at Cojimar and Regla in July and September of 1993¹⁵ made such a ghost more real and tangible; self-criticism, moderation, and refrain came to prevail over the option of isolation and “bringing the tanks into the streets” (some in Cuba refer to this as the *Burmese Option*¹⁶). The limited use of force—basically a small scale police action—combined with various political actions to quell the August 5, 1994, demonstrations, followed by the decisions connected with moving forward with reforms, should be perceived as an outcome derived from the interactions between the lessons of Tienanmen and the Cojimar/Regla episodes.

When Raúl Castro stated, in a private meeting, that he was not going to be responsible for “bringing the tanks into the streets” and that the Revolution had to be saved by introducing the necessary reforms to make the country and the system work, being productive, and efficient, providing food and welfare,¹⁷ he was sending a clear message: tanks were not the answer, but reforms leading to “food and welfare.” The FAR would not tarnish their image, and their internal unity, by getting involved in any Tienanmen-type situation, Cojimar should not be repeated, and reforms had won the day as the tool to ensure “*la defensa de la Revolución.*”

The background to such developments is none other than the scenario of a civil war, and a policy of all-out repression would be—according to most perceptions in Cuba—the breaking point of internal unity, cohesion, and stability, leading directly to civil war. Such an outcome was, and remains completely unacceptable to the leadership, the FAR, and vast sections of the populace at large. The three are fully aware of the devastating consequences and other implications of such an outcome, including the perceived threat of a U.S. intervention in this particular scenario. Paradoxically, this creates the foundation for a non-written, implicit contract among the three by which reforms and other similar paths are accepted to prevent such a zero-sum end game. Everything else is acceptable, except this scenario.

But the notion of reforms has many different meanings, depending on group interests, existing conflicts and compromises, intellectual guidance, and leadership. In the periphery of the leadership we find significant sectors of the political class (economists, political scientists, engineers, managers, professionals, and even writers and artists) advocating for more radical and integral reforms.¹⁸ At the other extreme we find Fidel Castro, the most conservative force against such an approach, always emphasizing piecemeal, slow-motion, and severe control over the pace of reform.¹⁹ More to the “middle”—and this is just a stereotype—we find Raúl Castro (actively supported by his other brother Ramón) with the Casas Regueiro team, greatly influencing José Luis Rodríguez and Carlos Lage and other civilian bureaucrats and economists that seek to escape from Fidel

15. Crucial events for domestic developments in Cuba, generally ignored or overlooked by most foreign authors.

16. Until 1993-1994 such an option had some significant following among upper echelons of the Party bureaucracy and a number of generals in the MINFAR and MININT who thought this was, apparently, Fidel Castro's personal option. After 1994 it has lost considerable ground and was unable to play a decisive role in the V Congress of the Party (October 1997) which accepted the middle ground represented by the adoption of the “FAR model.”

17. At a meeting right after the August 5 developments. The notion that the Revolution needs to be saved by no other means than those of food and welfare to the people, of productivity and efficiency, have been repeatedly argued by Raúl Castro at Party meetings and also at some public speeches after 1994.

18. See for example the many proposals of the 1995 Congress of the National Association of Cuba's Economists, some interesting contributions in the journal *El Economista*, many of the internal studies conducted by several research centers (CEEC, CIEI, CIEM, and others), and the outstanding studies and proposals of the CEA team, before and after 1996.

19. Two excellent examples, one his speech in the National Assembly in September of 1996, stating that there is no need for more reforms (something that he has not been able to enforce) and his criticism and virtual opposition to the current foreign investment law, being more supportive of the 1982 law and virtually “freezing” the 100% ownership option.

Castro's obstructing influence. For the latter group, the Chinese model is the more relevant experience to associate with, not only because of the large role attributed to the People's Liberation Army, but more essentially for the conceptual understanding, policy designs, and practical results of the Chinese model. While Fidel Castro is full of objections and hostility against the Chinese model, Raúl, Ramón, Casas Regueiro and his team, and the "civilians" that are close to them, see in this model an extraordinary source of valid lessons. Fidel Castro while visiting China paid little attention to Zhu Rongji; his brother Raúl did the opposite and moreover he invited Zhu Rongji's principal adviser to visit Cuba to share experiences, to lecture and debate on the Chinese model. Who refused to share and debate in detail with this visiting expert? No one except Fidel Castro! But despite his reluctance and obstructionist attitudes,²⁰ he has realized, and accepted, the influence of such a model because:

- It has a range of experiences that can be implemented or adapted to the Cuban case.
- Fidel Castro perceives this model as the less costly, and less potentially dangerous, of all the existing models, after dismissing the Solchaga social-democratic proposals in the early 1990s.
- He yields considerable ground to the pressures of his brothers and the FAR economic team.
- It allows him to reaffirm the place and the role of the FAR as the leading institution in the field of reforms and by doing this he remains very much in control of the pace and modalities of the reform process, blocking civilian mavericks²¹ from having too much influence; the FAR mean control and this is his obsession, arguing in private

and public, that this was crucial to the collapse in Europe and the events leading to Tienanmen Square.

- It helps to further enhance the much needed rapprochement with China, not only as a trading partner and a provider of cooperation projects, but also as a source of advanced technology, civilian and military, and its key role as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council.²²

CONCLUSIONS

The FAR have proven to be much more than a simple institution of the state, isolated as a segment, confined to certain quarters, and under "civilian" control. The FAR were, and remain, the backbone of the existing power structure. Consequently, their current place and role in Cuban developments is essential. Debates on future scenarios, cannot overlook this fact.

Whatever the nature, policies, and results associated with the reforms in Cuba, the one thing that we must bear in mind is that, especially after the V Congress of the Cuban Communist Party held in 1997, the content and pace of reforms will be decisively shaped and influenced by the FAR. They are very much aware that the Tienanmen ghost and its corollary, civil war, are still very real possibilities. To do away with these threats, or to effectively neutralize them, is a tremendous challenge. Chances for success depend on the FAR's ability to move forward in the field of reforms, to enroll the civilian *intelligentsia* committed to more radical approaches, gaining broader mass support, and being able to overcome Fidel Castro's obstructionist attitude.

20. He refused to share or accept any of the views and experiences provided by Jiang Zemin during his visit to Havana in September 1993.

21. It should be clarified that many civilian mavericks are very much respected, and their work appreciated, by many in the FAR, in spite of the fact that the latter are significantly constrained in following or adopting the analyses and proposals of the former.

22. Military relations with China were non-existent in 1992 and a very pessimistic atmosphere prevailed in Havana as to the possibility of any cooperation in this field. Circumstances have changed completely, and since 1994 a wave of high-ranking military officials from MINFAR and MININT have visited China, and Chinese military leaders have traveled to Havana; even the Chinese Minister of Defense, Chi Haotian, visited Cuba in early 1999.