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- HOME
- ABOUT US 
- PUBLICATIONS 
- PACNET COMMENTARY 
- ISSUES & INSIGHTS 
- COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS
- COVID-19 RESEARCH
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- FELLOWSHIPS 
- NEXT GEN 
- EVENTS
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PacNet #49 – China’s military engagements with Cuba: Implications of a strategic advance in Latin America

In June 2023, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the People’s Republic of China has heavily invested in a cash-strapped Cuba in exchange for access to an electronic intelligence collection (ELINT) facility, and negotiated an [agreement](#) to train Chinese soldiers on the north side of the island. These developments have been met with great concern in Washington, particularly due to the strategic threat that the PRC’s presence in the region poses.

China’s history of US intelligence collection through Cuba can be traced back to 1999 when Cuba granted the PRC [access to facilities](#) at Bejucal, a city just south of the capital, previously operated by the Soviet Union, to collect intelligence on the United States. More recently, the Biden administration’s response to the *WSJ*’s report confirmed that the Chinese had indeed been operating an intelligence facility in Cuba [for some time](#), and had only [upgraded it in 2019](#). This runs counter to presidential spokesman John Kirby’s characterization of the reports of China’s “building” of the base, and is marked as “[not entirely accurate](#).” However, the dialogue left unclear exactly how much money the PRC has invested towards the 2019 upgrade and whether or not it was included as part of the debt restructure and investment credits awarded by the PRC to Cuba this past [November](#). By contrast, the possible rotation of Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) military personnel through the island for training crosses a small, if important threshold with respect to an enduring Chinese military presence close to the US mainland.

Regardless of the minutia involved, both developments showcase an increased disposition by both Cuba and the PRC to take risks through explicitly US-focused military initiatives, in ways that suggests its willingness to take similar risks in other areas as well. This has significant implications for the United States, necessitating an appropriate, and carefully crafted response from Washington to both current and future events involving both parties.

In the case of Cuba, the government's willingness to host military threats to the United States has remained consistent since the 1962 missile crisis. That being said, the regime's willingness to permit PRC military operations on the island, with the added risk that they be discovered by US counterintelligence, more greatly highlights the regime's desperation for resources amid increasingly severe shortages of food, fuel and medicine, which have prompted a growing exodus of refugees from the island and scattered protests that led the government to temporarily shut down the internet. Such desperation is consistent with Cuban government behavior surrounding shortages, such as offering Russian investors notable tax breaks, long-term land leases, and options to repatriate profits, in exchange for investments aimed at addressing deficiencies in the country's petroleum supply, rum and food production.

As for the PRC, the willingness to host anti-US-focused military capabilities for both intelligence collection and training in proximity to the continental United States is a stark departure from the PRC's otherwise restrained military engagements in the region. Previous PRC military engagements in the region consistently focused on hospital ship visits, participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping force in Haiti (MINUSTAH), training and professional military exchanges and institutional visits. Even if the PLA ELINT presence in Cuba is not new, the 2019 upgrade suggests a decreased concern over alarming or upsetting the United States, which may be, in part, a move emboldened by Xi Jinping's government's growing military power, confidence, and tensions with the United States. It suggests a growing PLA willingness to construct military operations against the United States in the Western Hemisphere, that will surely fuel a reassessment of the interpretation of its security, people-to-people, and commercial activities in the region.

The presence the PLA is ever-expanding. The intelligence operations at Bejucal are probably not a game-changer in terms of capabilities. However, it poses a dangerous complement to the expanding array of other PRC operations to act on and use against the United States in both peace and wartime. These include numerous Chinese commercial facilities close to US shores, from Hutchinson-operated ports in Mexico, the Bahamas and Panama, to hundreds of PRC-owned business facilities in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, which could be used to "host" PRC Ministry of State Security personnel.

PRC options to use against the United States also include the numerous Latin American military, police and other and government officials who regularly travel to mainland China for "people-to-people diplomacy," some of whom may be used to provide insights to the Chinese and labeled by them as friends or "paid consultants." As seen by the practices of PRC "police stations," other options include ethnic Chinese in the region who may be induced by the PRC to cooperate in the interest of familial ties. In addition, the PRC capabilities may also be supplemented by those of Cuban intelligence and that of other anti-US regimes, with personnel in both the United States and throughout the region.

Beyond its facilities and human intelligence capabilities and options, the PRC also has the ability to capture data relevant to US security in the region through its vast and expanding digital footprint there. This is because any Chinese company operating within the United States, under the 2017 PRC [National Intelligence Law](#), is required to turn over any data that may be relevant to security to the PRC. Some of these [architectures](#), like Huawei, ZTE, Xiaomi, Oppo and others in the region's telecommunications infrastructure can utilize exploitable sensitive data against Latin American government officials and political entities. For example, Huawei uses cloud computing, along with "Smart" and "Safe Cities," which utilize surveillance technology, and companies like [Didi Chuxing](#), a ride hailing application, have been known to [collect trip data](#) on its users. These are but a few examples of Chinese companies operating within the region that deal with sensitive data that can be subject to exploitation.

In the event of war between the United States and China over [Taiwan](#), anti-US countries close to the United States like Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua would [likely be too vulnerable](#) for the PLA to base traditional forces such as aircraft and ships for attacks against the United States. Still Cuba and other such countries could [serve as key staging areas](#) from which the Chinese could observe and disrupt US deployment and sustainment flows, along with other war-critical operations, which would put the United States and its allies at risk. Both the presence of the Chinese operated ELINT facility, and development of a PLA training operation on the island will certainly help the PRC to create favorable conditions to counter the United States.

While it is true that the United States and other democratic states conduct international waters and airspace operations under the freedom of navigation principle (FONOPs), the United States cannot simply tolerate an intelligence collection facility 100 miles from its shore operated by its principal geopolitical rival, nor the rotations of PLA military personnel through the island. Such acts of espionage go beyond the simple characterization of "what rivals do" and should be met with a response.

Besides military strikes or other extreme measures that would ultimately be counterproductive for the relationship with the region, the United States most likely cannot persuade nor coerce Cuba and the PRC into abandoning their US-focused military cooperation. However, this should not prevent the United States from exploiting all other available means to maintain pressure on, and isolate the Cuban regime and China. Doing so helps limit the ability of both extending anti-US intelligence collection and other capabilities elsewhere. It also strongly signals to others that the United States draws the line, and will extract a high price, for explicitly collaborating with extra-hemispheric rivals in ways that threaten US security.

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PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.

Photo: Chinese President Xi Jinping and Cuba's President Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Friday, Nov. 25, 2022 by Ding Lin/Xinhua via AP Photo.

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