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Cuba: Invasion Rumors

by LADB Staff

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While official Washington rejects Cuban claims that a US invasion is imminent, Cuba's uneasiness seems soundly based. For one thing, there is President George W. Bush's bellicose Cuba policy, and for another, the central role the administration has assigned to Cuba as an antagonist in the war on terror. Cuban President Fidel Castro insists that the US is planning to invade the island, and US officials deny there is any such plan, at least not for now.

But there is a contradiction in the denials because Bush has carried on two distinct public relations campaigns. Throughout his term in office, Bush has promised Cuban-American voters in Florida that he had plans to bring down Castro's government and end his iron-fisted rule, while simultaneously accusing Castro of manufacturing invasion threats as an excuse to maintain his iron-fisted rule.

Cuba goes on war footing

Since early 2003, Defense Minister Raul Castro has spoken publicly about military readiness to meet an invasion in what was officially called "The year of Defense Preparation." He said last December, "Anyone who sets foot here will at least leave his boot behind with his leg inside it." According to an official announcement from Cuba in January, the Revolutionary Armed Forces planned to step up training and to increase its reserves by reducing the number of exemptions from conscription.

The Madrid daily El Pais reported that foreign observers in Cuba thought the training of workers militias and preparation of bunkers and shelters went much further than in previous invasion scares. One rumor was that some officials and government archives had been moved to safer locations.

Nevertheless, US officials say Cuba's warnings are political theater. James Cason, chief US diplomat in Havana, said the Cuban government was "fabricating the threat of a US military attack to engender fear in the Cuban population, to spend scarce resources to maintain large military, security and intelligence structures, and to justify extreme measures in a vain attempt to crush Cuba's nascent independent civil society." Despite all the preparations for war, there are indications that Cuba has not increased military spending and intends to make do with its limited military assets.

In November 2003, a Foreign Relations Ministry official said military expenditures had been drastically reduced over the past decade. By way of confirmation, the Mexico City daily La Jornada, citing foreign diplomatic sources in Cuba, said the number of soldiers in the Revolutionary Armed Forces had been reduced in recent years from around 300,000 to about 55,000. Cuba sees pattern of threats From the Cuban viewpoint, an invasion for the purpose of regime change is the logical next step in the evolution of Bush's Cuba policy.

In 2002, Bush declared his foreign-policy doctrine, the National Security Strategy of the United States, in which the US defined its unilateral preemptive-war and regime-change doctrine. In May 2002, Bush announced new measures against Cuba called "initiative for a new Cuba," which Cuba could reasonably regard as an application of the new doctrine (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23). Cuban concerns increased after the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. When Cuban authorities arrested and jailed 75 journalists and others accused of working as paid agents of the US, the administration said Castro was taking advantage of the war to crack down on dissidents, and there were loud cries among exiles in Miami for an immediate invasion (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24). That was followed by a rash of highjackings that the Cuban government said was a US-coordinated provocation to justify a naval blockade of the island or even an invasion (see NotiCen, 2003-05-08).

Bush sharpened that suspicion with a Rose Garden speech in October 2003, in which he announced the formation of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, charged with drawing up plans to "hasten" Castro's political demise (see NotiCen, 2003-11-20). The Cuban government has also been concerned about failure of the US to act against anti-Castro leaders in Miami who they accuse of advocating terrorism and assassination in clear violation of US law.

In July, Rodolfo Fromenta, leader of the Miami-based anti-Castro F4 militia commandos, said on Miami television that his group had agents in the US and Cuba ready for an armed attack with weapons obtained in the US. US sees danger from southern flank The current invasion scenario is different from some others that were easily dismissed as election season pandering to the Florida exile vote. This one is bound up with Bush's larger, global ambition to carry on limitless war to eradicate terrorism. Just as the US defined the Cuban revolution as a security threat during the Cold War, it is now defined as a threat in Bush's war on terror.

Specifically, Cuba has been drawn into the administration's policy of promoting the end of Hugo Chavez's presidency in Venezuela. Administration officials claim that Venezuela has joined with Cuba to forge the core of a subversive alliance intent on destabilizing the region (see NotiCen, 2004-01-29). In 2002, a group of Republican lawmakers, led by Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL), warned that Castro and Chavez were leading an "axis of evil." Supporting the charge, media reports cited anonymous administration advisors suggesting Chavez had a hand in deposing Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada in October 2003.

One of those advisors could have been Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of State for Western Hemisphere affairs, who was active early this year criticizing Argentina and Brazil for moving too close to Castro (see NotiCen, 2004-04-01). Both he and Secretary of State Colin Powell accused Cuba and Venezuela of collaborating to destabilize democratically elected governments in Latin America.

Foundation warns of threat from southern flank

The Heritage Foundation, a think tank with ties to the Republican Party and the Bush administration, offered a theoretical framework for combating the supposed Cuba-Venezuela axis. In a foundation report issued this year titled Strengthening America's Southern Flank Requires a Better Effort, authors James Carafano and Stephen Johnson warn about the seven or more "major

terrorist organizations" the State Department has identified as active in Latin America. These include the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional de Colombia (ELN), and the Islamic groups Hamas and Hezbollah.

The authors advise the administration to apply the National Security Strategy more purposefully in Latin America. They note that the strategy calls for the US to step in with its resources whenever countries in other regions are unable effectively to fight terrorism. Since they find no countries in Latin America capable of fighting terrorism and other threats, they recommend a US-led militarization of the region's efforts. This would include: - Revising the 1947 Inter-American (Rio) Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, once focused on the Cold War, to deal collectively with terrorism, international crime, and natural disasters; - Considering the transfer of US planes, advisors, and other assets in the Andean region from the State Department to the military or to civilian agencies with experience in combat and law enforcement; - Revitalizing the Pentagon's US Southern Command to promote regional security; - Promoting closer ties between US military and civilian agencies and their Latin American counterparts; and - Improving intelligence gathering in the region, necessary in part because the US failed to uncover evidence of "Cuba's reported coordination of leftist movements in Latin America."

The most specific threat mentioned in the analysis is Chavez, whom they describe as a regional troublemaker who has "reportedly been fanning flames of social unrest" in Bolivia and Ecuador, and selling oil cheap to Cuba. US says no invasion planned In July, an official Cuban government statement concluded that the report from the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, released in May 2004 (see NotiCen, 2004-07-15), was a plan to take over the island, privatize everything, and evict Cubans from houses that had been expropriated from Cubans fleeing into exile.

The State Department replied that the programs for transition from Castro to capitalism laid out in the report "are not intended to be a prescription for how Cuba organizes itself or what policies it decides ultimately to pursue; those decisions remain with the Cuban people, expressed through a free and sovereign Cuban government." But that answer may not be very convincing to the Cubans since the commission's report is a blueprint for how US pressure and funding can unseat Castro and install "a free and sovereign Cuban government."

According to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, military action against Cuba was not contemplated "at this time." The "at this time" qualifier referred to the possibility that military action would be considered in case Cuba threatened US security. "To the extent our country is threatened or our people are threatened, then the president and the government that's the first responsibility of government, is to see to the protection and security of our country, said Rumsfeld." However, the foundation for justifying an attack on Cuba is already in place. The 1996 Helms-Burton Act states that a mass emigration from Cuba to Florida would be considered "an act of aggression" against the US; the State Department lists Cuba as a state sponsoring terrorism, and the National Security Strategy commits the US to regime change in terrorist states.

Furthermore, the US regularly if half-heartedly accuses Cuba of producing biological weapons or at least of making the technology to produce them available to terrorist states (see NotiCen, 2002-02-23). Even the official statements of reassurance contain menacing implications. Echoing the

administration's official policy statement, Cason said the goal was "a rapid, peaceful transition to a democratic, market-oriented Cuba." But it is hard to see how Cuba would rapidly convert to both without greater force from the US than has been applied for more than four decades. Nowhere in its pronouncements has the Bush administration offered to accept a democratic but socialist Cuba.

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