

1-29-2009

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuba And Russia Facing Troubled Times Together Again." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9674>

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Cuba And Russia Facing Troubled Times Together Again

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: Thursday, January 29, 2009

Cuba's President Raul Castro continued the rapprochement between old friends with a visit to Russia, touching down in Moscow on Jan. 28. He was to meet with President Dmitry Medvedev and others, returning the Russian's visit to Havana in November. The Russian Navy made a port call on Havana on its way to joint maneuvers with Venezuela soon after Medvedev's stopover (see NotiCen, 2008-09-25). Both countries have let it be known that they intend to revive the close Cold War connection between them that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and plunged Cuba into protracted economic crisis. So far the warming trend seems on track. Castro told ITAR-Tass new agency the countries are having "wonderful relations." Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said this latest visit would "mark an important milestone" in the relationship. Analysts have noted it also serves as a steppingstone as Russia moves into the US's traditional stomping grounds to offer some competition at a time of waning influence for the superpower. Raul Castro helped the waning along with statements of support for Russia in its disputes with the US over its intention to place missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic, and to facilitate Georgia's and Ukraine's entry into NATO. Lavrov said Castro will discuss these global matters, as well as Caribbean issues, with Russian leaders. He also wanted to spread the word, "We intend to firmly pursue our course for lifting the blockade, which we see as a vestige of a long-gone era." On all these subjects, the two old partner nations will be dealing with an as-yet-unknown quantity in the White House. President Barack Obama has expressed openness to lifting the blockade under certain conditions, and the Polish missile deal is a Bush initiative. It will not have gone unnoticed that Obama has cut a good number of Bush initiatives off at the knees in his first days in office. Mutuality and multipolarity There is no question that the Soviet Union under Russia was a lifeline to the Cuban Revolution and that it would have had a tough time surviving without it. Castro acknowledged that, telling reporters, "Cuba by itself could not have confronted the monster of imperialism." The Cuban leader appears to believe that "the rebirth of Russia" could mean a return to its former glory and that it would be a good thing to have alternative concentrations of power in the world. Together, Castro said, the countries "actively defend the idea of a multipolar world. Security in the world can be guaranteed only in a multipolar world. We know what happens on the planet when the balance is shattered; wars, aggressions begin, and injustice appears in relations." Raul Castro also made known his intention to insist on the return of Guantanamo to Cuba but did not make clear how Russia might help with that. He expressed confidence that Obama would close the detention facility at the base it occupies on Cuban soil, but added, "We think that would be insufficient, since the existence of the base on our territory is a great injustice." Obama signed the order to close the facility as one of his first official acts, as he had promised, but said nothing about giving the territory back to Cuba. As Castro and the Russians made their statements to the media, there was a hint of awareness that the new US officialdom might be listening. Lavrov said the relationship, wonderful though it is, has nothing to do with ideology or geopolitical incidentals, is purely pragmatic, and that he, for one, looks forward to improved ties with the new US administration. He told Prensa Latina that the world was paying attention to the promises of a change in foreign policy coming from the new US leader. He said he was confident those changes would contribute to international stability and reflect favorably on the situation in Latin America. The substance of some of the

agreements At the ninth session of the Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Collaboration that met the week prior to Castro's arrival in Moscow, accords were drawn up on cooperation on pharmaceuticals, computer science, communications, transport, and tourism. Cuba's vice president of the Council of Ministers, Ricardo Cabrisas, said these agreements go beyond trade agreements and represent a much closer relationship through the advent of joint associations and mixed companies. One such association was created between the Centro de Ingenieria Genetica y Biotecnologia (CIGB) of Havana and the Russian firms Farmstandart and Bioprocess. The new entity will produce and sell drugs created by CIGB in Russia. Agreement was reached also on a memo of understanding between the Russian National Oil Company and Cubapetroleo (Cupet) for oil exploration, extraction, refining, transportation, and marketing. The oil associations and agreements have been formed, say officials, expressly for the purpose of getting the nations through the global economic crisis and have the possibility of incorporating other Caribbean countries. In the mining sector, Norilski Nickel and Cubaniquel will cooperate in finance and geologic research. In tourism, accords were struck to further develop Cuba as a destination for Russians. In the past year, Cuban travel in Russia increased 39% to more than 40,000 tourists. Along with this was a deal to supply Cubana de Aviacion with cargo and passenger aircraft. The deal was said to be a major stimulant to the Russian aircraft industry. This edition of the Intergovernmental Commission was the largest and most extensive yet held, reflecting the new emphasis on the bilateral relationship. A Cuban delegation also made a stop in the Belarusian capital of Minsk, another old Soviet associate. Belarusian Foreign Ministry officials said the purpose of the visit was to "study in detail the status and perspectives for bilateral cooperation in political, economic, and commercial areas." A joint meeting on these topics was set for Minsk later in the year, and Cuba invited Foreign Minister Serguei Martinov to attend the ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Havana in April.

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