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Daniel Vázquez

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Cuba-Russia Ties Strengthen as Crisis in Venezuela and Tensions with U.S. Heighten

by Daniel Vázquez

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Tanker shipments of Russian diesel and petroleum to Cuba are propping up the old relationship between the two Cold War allies and promoting a greater influence on the region by Vladimir Putin and the Russian government, precisely when Venezuela's social and economic crisis is worsening and while US President Donald Trump maintains his distance from Havana.

A shipment of 249,000 barrels of diesel arrived in May at Matanzas Bay, 100 km from Havana, aboard the Maersk Erin tanker. It was the first delivery in response to an agreement signed in March between the Russian state oil company Rosneft and the Venezuelan PDVSA, under which Russia will supply Cuba with 250,000 tons of petroleum and diesel. The transaction has been estimated, at market price, at US\$100 million.

Cuba extracts some 45,000 barrels of oil per day and more than 3 million cubic meters of gas, but requires imports to complement its energy demands ([NotiCen, Nov. 3, 2016](#)). After Havana reduced fuel consumption in the summer of 2016, the economy went into recession for the first time in 23 years. Budget cuts are forecast for 2018 ([NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017](#)).

The gesture of closeness between Moscow and Havana occurred as Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro faced protests against the presence in his country of Cuban professionals and technicians, part of a collaboration that began during Hugo Chávez's time in office (1999-2013) and generated income for Cuba, as Cuba gave Caracas political and military support ([NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2005](#), and [Aug. 5, 2010](#)).

A political and economic restructuring was predicted in Cuba after Trump's election, a development to which Havana responded by organizing military training exercises, even as it urged the White House to strengthen the links between both governments initiated during former President Barack Obama's time in office (2009-2017) ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#), and [March 26, 2015](#)). Havana has had to moderate its expectations in light of Trump's hostile statements regarding President Raúl Castro ([NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017](#), and [April 6, 2017](#)).

Official contacts with the Kremlin

Decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which plunged Cuba into the greatest economic crisis in its history—one that the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro (1959-2008) euphemistically called "the special period in time of peace" ([NotiCen, Jan. 23, 2003](#), and [Aug. 11, 2016](#))—Cubans are again witnessing an increase in the Russian influence on the country's affairs. They had expected a flow of goods and businesses from the US but are instead waiting for Trump to announce a revised US policy toward Cuba.

Exchanges of official visits and talk of agreements between Cuba and Russia reveal that the two countries are carefully weighing their areas of collaboration. Cuba lacks the liquidity to make large expenditures on the international market, and Russia lacks the opulence of the former Soviet

Union to subsidize Cuba's economy as it did during the Cold War, so the Russians have insisted on economic compensation in their transactions.

"Cuba does indeed want us to supply them with petroleum and its derivatives, but the question is their funding sources," said Russia's energy minister, Alexander Novak, who is also a board member of Rosneft. Speaking of the possibility of increasing oil shipments, he said in late May, "If the funding is found, the companies will make the deliveries. This is not a matter of charity." Novak.

The talks about potential bilateral agreements are often mentioned by state media in both countries, without giving details, but with a gentle, optimistic, and apologetic tone reminiscent of the articles seasoned with Kremlin propaganda that were published in the 1980s. According to the Cuban press, the current bilateral collaboration covers energy, metallurgy, transportation, biotechnology, science, and education.

Moscow has made gestures of rapprochement to Havana in recent years. When Putin visited Cuba in 2014, he forgave US\$32 billion of the island's debt with the former Soviet Union, equivalent to 90% of the total. The rest of the debt, some US\$3.2 billion, would be repaid in 10 years and reinvested in Cuba. In 2014, bilateral agreements were signed for the exploration and extraction of petroleum in Cuban waters. In 2015, Moscow granted a credit of US\$1.36 billion to improve Cuba's electrical power plants.

There have also been several high-level visits by Cubans to Moscow: in 2009 and 2015, President Raúl Castro traveled to Russia; in 2016, First Vice President Miguel Díaz Canel made a trip; and last April, Col. Alejandro Castro Espín, the president's son and adviser to the Defense and National Security Commission of Cuba (Comisión de Defensa y Seguridad Nacional), approached Russian authorities regarding cooperation in computer security, according to the official press in both countries.

Last May, the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute in Moscow inaugurated a program at the University of Havana to teach Russian language and culture to children, and the Russian government announced that it would award 100 scholarships annually to Cuban students. It harkens back to the days, from 1965 to 1993, when 21,514 Cubans graduated from educational institutions in the Soviet Union, more than 16,000 of them at the university level.

This year, the Russians announced that they would contribute about US\$350,000 toward the restoration of the dome of Havana's Capitol using gold-leaf and natural stone. Inaugurated in 1929, the building is an imitation of the Capitol in Washington, DC. The Russian contribution symbolically reaffirms a "golden nexus" with Cuban political power, although in reality, the city that surrounds the capitol, with its deteriorating and collapsing buildings, road networks, and sewer systems, is much more in need of foreign financial contributions.

The Capitol was the seat of Congress before Fidel Castro took power in 1959. For years, it was reviled for having been the stage for a capitalist Cuba and reassigned to the Academy of Natural Sciences. The building is now being repaired to be used as the seat of the National Assembly (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular).

Some Cubans are joking that the Capitol's dome will contain Russian antennas to monitor Mar-a-Lago, Trump's Florida mansion some 320 miles to the north. They have not forgotten how Moscow used the electronic surveillance center (Centro de Inteligencia) at Lourdes, near Havana to collect

intelligence between 1964 and 2001. Its abrupt closure motivated protests by the Cuban government ([NotiCen, Nov. 15, 2001](#)).

'Cuban airlift' to Russia

On the internet, Cuban travel agents are advertising trips to Moscow for about US\$150 per person per day. Included in that cost are airport pick-up services, accommodations, translation services, excursions, visits to shopping centers, and even help in packing luggage with Russian goods for the return trip, so that the travelers can recoup their expenses by selling merchandise when they are back in Cuba.

The option seems to be gaining popularity in light of the difficulties Cubans are having in obtaining tourist visas for the US. Many developing countries with precarious economies have also set strict visa requirements for Cubans, who are considered to be potential immigrants. However, Cubans do not need visas to travel to Russia.

These trips to Russia are within reach only for a minority of Cubans who can pay the fares thanks to their emerging private enterprises or remittances from abroad, or through contacts made possible by the fact that they learned Russian as students in the former Soviet Union.

"There is no empathy with the Russians, neither their language nor their culture in Cuba," said Natasha, a Cuban woman who obtained her bachelor's degree in the former Soviet Union. She recalled the "stupefying propaganda about a hypothetical communist future that, of course, never came" as well as the economic benefits coming from the Soviet Union. "The image remains that Cuba was used as a chess piece in the Cold War while the Cuban government protected itself from the US and subsisted at the expense of a powerful ally."

Many young Cubans are now wondering if their destiny will be in Putin's shadow. In the island's independent publications, the Russian leader is coarsely described as authoritarian, homophobic, and adverse to human rights. In contrast, the Cuban state media often report on him favorably, broadcasting that positive information to their audiences, nationally and in developing nations.

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