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Commentary: Castro Shows Interest In Wooing Japan & Making Money

by John Neagle

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[Appearing below is an article distributed by Pacific News Service during the week of 03/27/89. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Franz Schurmann No country in Latin America has been more annoying to the United States than Cuba. Yet given the right circumstances, Cuba could be of considerable help in Washington's dealings with the rapidly growing forces of the Latin American left. No country, not even the nuclear armed Soviet Union, worries the United States so much as Japan. Japan has acquired that technological genius Americans once regarded as God's special gift to them. Yet with its immense stashes of money Japan could be of immense help to the United States in seeking to move Latin America beyond the debt crisis. Now a curious link is developing between Cuba and Japan. Last March 2, late in the evening, there was an unexpected ring at the Japanese embassy gate in Havana. Inside a big business delegation headed by Mitsuo Ueda of the giant Iwai conglomerate was enjoying a Japanese-style banquet. The unexpected caller was Fidel Castro. He entered and stayed for close to four hours, talking incessantly and leaving only when the Japanese guests dozed off from fatigue and drink. Castro had already explored the possibility of Japanese aid to Cuba with the Japanese ambassador and had also ordered three days of national mourning for the late Emperor Hirohito the only socialist leader to make such a gesture. During his late night panegyric, he called the emperor a great politician who led Japan from ashes to superpower status. Cuban young people, he said, admire Japan's kamikaze spirit. But, Castro stressed, what he mainly wanted to talk with the Japanese about was money. Cuba, badly short of foreign exchange, needed money and needed Japan's economic help. He was grateful that Japan had reduced Cuba's existing debt to Japan of \$700 million to only \$14 million. He wanted to make a pitch for Japanese tourists. Tourism, he commented, is the easiest way to make money. To entice tourists in, he promised the build some 40 or 50 golf courses. Cuba actually would be an ideal place for Japanese tourism and investment. It has wonderful beaches, great scenery, and pretty towns. Its 10 million people are well educated, disciplined and hard working. The revolution has brought about a great improvement in racial harmony among its people whose skin colors range from black through intermediate shades to white. There is a lot of under- and unemployed labor, and will be more as soldiers return from Angola. If it were not for the US trade embargo, Japanese capital would have long since moved into Cuba. Japan's trade still is massively linked to the US market and, like Japanese-owned maquiladoras along the US-Mexican border, similar enterprises in Cuba could ship their products the short distance into the United States. Over the last year or so signs have been growing that US policymakers are seriously rethinking their cold shouldering of Cuba. This is partly due to the fact that the once-tight link between Havana and Moscow is loosening. Till now, Cuba has survived economically by selling its sugar at a high price to the Soviet Union, getting in return low priced Soviet oil, and re-selling it to third countries with an annual mark-up of \$400 million. Gorbachev now wants out of that arrangement. There are, however, other reasons as well for the rethinking. While Cuba is no longer a revolutionary model for the Latin American left, it retains enormous influence throughout the hemisphere. Castro himself, at age 61, has become an elder statesman freely dispensing advice to his fellow revolutionaries. Much of that advice comes down

to warning: don't needlessly antagonize the colossus of the north. The new bipartisan consensus on aid to the Nicaraguan contra army is much more than that. It represents a broad recognition in Washington that the United States has to deal, not fight, its way of out the mess Reagan policy has plunged it into in Latin America. That means the Bush administration will have to deal with the Latin American left just as its predecessor, in its waning weeks, swallowed the bitter pill of dealing with the PLO. Such dealing will involve Cuba, among others. Dealing will also involve money. And it is Japan, not the deficit-ridden United States, which is the main potential source of such money. After years of bitter trade friction, US-Japanese relations have improved considerably. The quid pro quo is assurance of continued access to the American market despite protectionist anger in the United States. But it is also evident, as it was with Japanese reluctance to get drawn into the Vietnam horror, that Japan wants no part in any repeat of the Reagan fiasco in Central America. Japan is known abroad for its stunning technology and its desire to make money. Castro has now made clear that he too wants to make money for his country. He also reportedly believes a new generation of Miami Cubans is waiting in the wings to invest in Cuba once normal relations with the United States resume. His quid pro quo for bending some of his high revolutionary principles is that the United States abandon its anti-Cuban crusade and go back to its own tradition of making money.

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