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¡Viva Cuba! Russian Military Eyes Return to Caribbean

By Jim Kovpak

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Cuban President Fidel Castro embracing Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, 1961. **Public domain.**

Russian military forces may be returning to Cuba, just under 150 kilometers from U.S. borders, a leading government official has said. Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov told members of the State Duma that his ministry was considering reopening military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, raising concerns of a new level of confrontation between Russia and the West.

Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov refused to deny Russian plans when speaking to journalists. "The international situation is not static; it is quite mobile," he said.

If Russia does open a military facility on Cuba, it will be the first time it has done so since it closed its Lourdes listening station in 2002. Depending on where the hypothetical base is established, it could be as close as 144 kilometers from U.S. soil, drawing obvious parallels to the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

The previous Russian base at Lourdes was built in 1962, the same year of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Throughout the Cold War, it functioned as a post to spy on the U.S., and hosted several thousand intelligence specialists from the Soviet KGB and foreign military intelligence main agency, the Cuban DGI, and operatives from various Eastern Bloc nations. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Lourdes continued to operate as the largest foreign installation operated by Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR.

While, so far, there is talk of once again using Cuba only as a listening post, expert Anatoliy Tsyganok of Russia's Military Forecasting Center told the RBC newspaper that there was a possibility of Russian missiles returning to the island after the installation of surveillance systems. Tsyganok called Cuba an "instrument of pressure on the United States," referring to how the U.S. removed its nuclear Jupiter missiles in return for the Soviet Union agreeing to remove its missiles from Cuba in 1962.

Building a base on Cuba may prove easier said than done, however. For one thing, Cuba and the U.S. have been improving relations since 2014. Hosting a Russian military base at this point in U.S.-Russia relations is bound to impede that process.

There is also the matter of money. Cost was the main reason Putin closed the base early in his presidential career. Cuba might not demand the same $200 million per year subsidy it received in the past, but whatever price it asks will have to be considered in light of the costs Moscow just accepted, when it agreed to build a permanent naval base in Syria, to prop up the Assad regime militarily. Russia is also burdened by similar expenses in eastern Ukraine, where it helps sustain two pseudo-states in Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia's struggling economy might be incapable of maintaining all these commitments.

In spite of these obstacles, Russian experts say they do not doubt the feasibility of a Cuban outpost.

Retired Russian general and director of Russia's Center for Political Research Evgeny Buzhinskiy is confident Russia can foot the bill for a return to Cuba.

"Of course there will be something," the retired general said. "I wouldn't call it a base, because a base is something different. I would call it 'facilities.'"

Buzhinskiy, who has visited Cuba multiple times, said he was skeptical that the Cuban authorities might deny Russia use of their territory in order to preserve U.S.-Cuba relations. The country's decision-making generations are still largely anti-American, he said.

Another expert, Ruslan Pukhov of Moscow's Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, is far more skeptical of the prospects of proposed Russian bases in both Cuba and Vietnam.

"I think Cuba in the current context of reconciliation with the U.S. won't be willing to offer us a base," Pukhov said.

He said that the idea of a base in Vietnam was even more unlikely because such a facility would contradict Vietnam's current military strategy. In addition to this, he added that neither Vietnam nor Cuba were likely to welcome a military facility for payment. "Vietnam

has a booming economy" and "Cuba will get more from the U.S. just by attracting its tourists," he said.

"I think it's just the sweet dreams of the Russian military, which will not be fulfilled in the near future," he said.

U.S. State Department spokesperson John Kirby downplayed the issue of Russian bases in Vietnam and Cuba in a White House press briefing last Friday. When asked about the issue, Kirby answered that the U.S. also had overseas bases, and said "those are sovereign decisions that two states need to work out."

Whether or not the U.S. takes a position on the issue, a Russian return to Cuba is sure to conjure up memories of the Cold War-era nuclear stare-down between the two superpowers.

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