

Cuban Intelligence after the Cold War: A Case Study in Adaptation and Influence

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SAFIA GORDON, MAY 31 2024

Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the Republic of Cuba has substantially transformed its intelligence operations both within its borders and abroad (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023). The Cold War era had firmly entrenched Cuba within the Soviet sphere of influence; however, following its conclusion and Cuba's subsequent loss of \$6 billion in aid per year from the Soviet Union (USSR) American Experience (2005), Cuban intelligence operations have been compelled to adapt to the altered geopolitical landscape. This change has led to prioritising the acquisition of vital intelligence and cultivating strategic alliances to aid its government in decision-making processes that safeguard the nation's national interests.

Furthermore, this essay aims to evaluate the efficacy of Cuban intelligence operations since the end of the Cold War from 1991 to the present day through an analysis of the changes made to Cuban intelligence operations, their successes and failures, as well as the challenges and opportunities Cuban intelligence agencies may face in an evolving global environment. This essay finds that Cuban intelligence operations have demonstrated sustained efficacy in various aspects since post-Cold War. Cuba has successfully maintained a robust intelligence apparatus that has operated proficiently domestically and internationally despite the collapse of its ally, the Soviet Union, and the subsequent decline in economic and military support.

Changes in Cuban Intelligence Operations

Shift in focus from countering U.S. intelligence to economic espionage

Historically, Cuba's primary intelligence operations aimed to thwart the United States (U.S.) intelligence activities, which were often done through politically motivated counterintelligence activities, commonly relying on human intelligence (HUMINT) (Cozine, 2013). These operations incorporated traditional intelligence-gathering methods, including communications and surveillance, as well as espionage operations that used agents and informants to infiltrate U.S. government agencies and military facilities to acquire sensitive information (Lefebvre, 2009).

However, the imperative to adapt to the emerging economic circumstances post-Cold War has served as a pivotal driver for Cuba's alteration in priority; coinciding with the dissolution of relations with the USSR, Cuba shifted focus to economic espionage. In 1996, President Bill Clinton's enactment of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act significantly impacted this shift and further intensified existing tensions. The legislation not only imposed penalties on foreign enterprises engaged in business activities within Cuba but also granted U.S. citizens the right to initiate legal proceedings against foreign investors who utilised properties confiscated by the Cuban government from American individuals or entities (American Experience, 2005).

Furthermore, Cozine (2013) argues that decisions as critical as meddling in foreign nations' affairs may often be undertaken without definitive certainty regarding the prevailing circumstances. Consequently, the development of digital communications platforms and the growing use of the Internet aided Cuban intelligence agencies in utilising technology and cyber operations within their operations. As a result of this transformation, Cuban intelligence operations began to gather information concerning prospective foreign investments post-Cold War and obtained

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technology and intellectual property from foreign companies (Johns, 2003).

These operations have included sophisticated computer systems, digital networks and databases to monitor and assess communications traffic, along with malware to access sensitive information (Curran & Wilson, 2023). In conjunction, Cuba has adopted preventive techniques, including encryption technology to secure their communications through algorithms to protect data and communication protocols, as well as 'quantum computing' to circumvent encryption regulations (Curran & Wilson, 2023).

Additionally, Cuban intelligence agencies have engaged in illegal activities, including the trafficking of drugs and weapons, in their efforts for political and economic gain (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). In 1998, the Colombian National Police in Cartagena apprehended 7.2 metric tons of cocaine intended for sale in the United States (Committee On Government Reform, 1999). Despite the country's lower risk of money laundering, Cuba exhibits strategic deficiencies in its legal framework, including the absence of financial institutions reporting, inadequate supervision, and enforcement of designated non-financial businesses and non-profit organisations (NPOs). As a result, these deficiencies have provided loopholes for entities to gather intelligence and exploit this corruption for Cuba's gain (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

Furthermore, the alterations in Cuban intelligence operations after the conclusion of the Cold War have been of considerable magnitude. The redirection of its attention from counterintelligence endeavours against the United States towards economic espionage and adopting a more sophisticated technological and cyber-oriented strategy has allowed Cuban intelligence to quickly gather information and carry out further targeted operations against its adversaries with continued efficiency. Lefebvre (2009) argues that this reorganisation attests to the ability and professionalism of Cuba's intelligence operations to successfully exploit vulnerabilities in their security measures while acquiring valuable information on U.S. activities. Furthermore, this signifies not only Cuba's emergence as an efficient intelligence-gathering entity within the region but also its sustained competitiveness within the global economy despite the novel geopolitical circumstances confronting the island.

Collaboration with other countries and non-state actors

The Cuban General Directorate of Intelligence (DGI) operates as Cuba's principal state intelligence agency and oversees its covert operations (Wolf, 1989). The collapse of its traditional ally, the Soviet Union, compelled the agency to adjust to new geopolitical realities, necessitating the development of novel strategies for intelligence collection and covert operations. One of the most notable transformations in Cuban intelligence operations is its increased collaboration with other nations and non-state actors, resulting in access to a broader range of information and resources, further facilitating the island's expansion of influence.

For instance, President Obama and Raúl Castro took measures to normalise bilateral relations, including restoring diplomatic ties and expanding travel and trade in 2015 (Council On Foreign Relations, 2022). However, the Trump administration reversed many of these reforms, although following widespread protests in Cuba, President Joe Biden has since relaxed some of the previous U.S. government restrictions (Council On Foreign Relations, 2022). The Committee On Foreign Affairs (2012) identified intelligence acquisition as a significant motivating factor in catalysing cooperation. Among others, China and Latin American nations have been at the forefront of this strategic change; additionally, to restore Cold War relations, Cuba has also entered into an agreement with Russia, permitting Moscow to operate a signals intelligence (SIGINT) facility at Torrens, which is the most extensive outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (DIA, 1997).

In addition, despite Cuba's collaboration with other countries, the DGI has also augmented its involvement with non-state actors, encompassing the exchange of intelligence with criminal organisations and supporting rebel factions in Latin America. Although experiencing a significant decline in morale and training since the end of the Cold War, Cuba's paramilitary units, namely the Territorial Militia Troops and the naval militia, still possess the capability to inflict a substantial impact on potential invading forces (Defense Intelligence Agency [DIA], 1997). As a result, this engagement has furnished Cuban intelligence with invaluable insights into the activities of non-state actors, which may be exploited to attain strategic advantages. Furthermore, the subsequent alterations in Cuban intelligence

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operations since the end of the Cold War have allowed new strategies for intelligence-gathering and covert operations, ensuring Cuba's continued prominence within the intelligence-gathering community.

Successes of Cuban Intelligence Operations

Gathering intelligence on U.S. political and economic activities

Following Cuba's formal independence from the United States in 1902 and the later Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba continued to experience a complex association with the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Post-Cold War, Cuban intelligence successfully gathered intelligence on its adversary through countersurveillance procedures, decryption programs, and radio transmission equipment (Lefebvre, 2009). Notably, Cuban spy Ana Montes managed to infiltrate the U.S. State Department by assuming a false identity, subsequently gaining access to sensitive information pertaining to U.S. foreign policy for 17 years (Lefebvre, 2009). La Red Avispa, or the 'Wasp Network,' operated in South Florida between 1992 and 1998 (Lefebvre, 2009). Its primary objective was to monitor the activities and intentions of Cuban exiles and politicians residing in Miami. The network also aimed to counter anti-Castro terrorist activities by focusing on targets within the U.S. (Lefebvre, 2009). Cuban-American couple Carlos Alvarez and his wife, Elsa Alvarez, also engaged in illicit activities. In particular, Carlos Alvarez had a prolonged period of nearly three decades during which he supplied the Cuban Intelligence Service with sensitive information pertaining to the Cuban exile community in Miami, which represented the core opposition to the rule of Cuban President Fidel Castro and his communist regime (New Zealand Herald, 2007).

In addition to traditional espionage and HUMINT operations, Cuban agents have been able to conduct electronic surveillance of U.S. communications by employing SIGINT and sophisticated electronic and intelligence-gathering techniques (Committee On Foreign Affairs, 2012). Cuban intelligence operations have successfully accessed economic activities and financial information by infiltrating telecommunications networks, enabling them to acquire confidential documents and information about American trade and investment activities (Curran & Wilson, 2023). Additionally, in 2003, on behalf of Iran, Cuban intelligence deliberately disrupted the broadcasts of the National Iranian Television, Voice of America, and three other broadcasting systems directed towards Iran, which also coincided with Iran's suppression of dissidents and the 1999 student Uprising (Committee On Foreign Affairs, 2012).

Furthermore, the success of Cuban covert operations since the conclusion of the Cold War has allowed Cuban intelligence agencies to gather valuable information on U.S. political and economic activities. Lefebvre (2009) contends that as long as the Castro remain alive and unless there is a comprehensive alteration in the governing system, "Cuban intelligence agencies will continue to pose a threat to the United States" (para. 2). Subsequently, through their intelligence operations, Cuba's advanced monitoring capabilities have allowed officials to build a clearer picture of U.S. operations in Latin America and the Caribbean and thus, better equip Cuba to develop appropriate strategies to counter U.S. interests in the region.

Supporting leftist movements in Latin America

Following the culmination of the Cold War, bilateral ties between Cuba and the United States continued to deteriorate (Johns, 2003). Consequently, to further broaden Cuba's alliances and diplomatic relations, Cuban intelligence operations assisted radical leftist movements in Latin America (Committee On Government Reform, 1999). For instance, Cuba supplied Nicaragua with military advice, encompassing military training and operational support to their security forces, alongside aid in education, healthcare, and industrial development, all aimed at ameliorating the destitute Nicaraguan economy. In reciprocation, Nicaragua furnished Cuba with grains and other food commodities (Prevost, 1990). Additionally, Cuban intelligence operations began proactive involvement in the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela in 1999, advising and assisting President Hugo Chávez to counter internal dissension and external opposition, intending to establish an inter-American coalition (Cohrs, 2015). Chávez articulated that Venezuela's foreign policy aimed to foster an independent and self-governing leadership role for the country in Latin America as well as strive for the emergence of a multipolar world with mechanisms to restrain U.S. hegemony (Cohrs, 2015). Cuban support encompassed the training of guerilla fighters and providing operational assistance to the Venezuelan security services, thereby significantly contributing to Chávez and his Fifth Republic Movement parties' success,

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which led to the constituent process that resulted in the Venezuelan Constitution of 1999 (Cohrs, 2015).

Cuba also played a significant role in supporting the Bolivian government's ascent to power under Evo Morales in 2006, a development that, according to Farah (2017), transformed the radical populist movement into a formidable challenge to the United States. Morales' presidency represented a significant advancement in the struggle for both national and continental independence, as well as the pursuit of economic reform. This alliance between Bolivia and Cuba was further solidified through their participation in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), a trade bloc founded by Cuba and Venezuela (Farah, 2017). Moreover, Cuba provided substantial aid to Bolivia, mainly through its medical internationalism programme, which involved sending doctors to provide healthcare to impoverished individuals and teachers to conduct literacy campaigns (Farah, 2017). Furthermore, Cuban intelligence operations have successfully supported leftist movements in Latin America since the end of the Cold War, playing a crucial role in advising and supporting these movements aiding them in attaining and maintaining power within their respective countries.

Failures of Cuban Intelligence Operations

Inability to prevent defections and leaks

In addition to their successes, Cuban intelligence operations have also encountered several failures, most notably their inability to prevent defections and leaks. These failures have been a significant obstacle for Cuban intelligence agencies as well as the Cuban government's aim of maintaining strict control over its population. Furthermore, the defection of Florentino Aspillaga in 1987, who was regarded as "the most informed and highly decorated officer ever to defect from Cuban intelligence," subsequently alerted the Central Intelligence Agency to the extent of Castro's spy network (Adams, 2012, para. 11). Consequently, counter-intelligence operations were intensified in which the number of Cuban spies apprehended between 1998 and 2011 were over ten times the amount during the Cold War (Adams, 2012).

Post-Cold War, numerous other defections have occurred, including Cuban diplomat Yusimil Casañas, who was employed at Cuba's embassy in Mexico City, and her husband, Michel Rojas, who defected to Mexico in 2010 (Staff, 2010). This act was prompted by economic hardships resulting from significant reductions in revenue caused by the global economic downturn and persistent inefficiencies within the socialist system of the island; however, the couple were widely condemned as betrayers of the Castro leadership (Staff, 2010). The conviction of Cuban Minister of Interior Rene Gonzalez, among four others, in 2001 for their involvement in the Wasp Network was another significant blow to the Cuban intelligence apparatus (Committee On Foreign Affairs, 2012). Following Gonzalez's defection to the United States, the U.S. court later convicted him of espionage, and after serving a 13-year sentence, he was allowed to return to Cuba in 2014 (The Guardian, 2011).

Additionally, the Cuban government has encountered numerous instances of information leaks. In 2019, the digital media outlet Cubadebate published an estimate of Cuba's international reserves, characterised as "elusive data long considered a 'state secret'" (Frank, 2023, para. 1). Among the details were intricate aspects of Cuba's military and intelligence operations, the leaked documents disclosed that the country's international reserves amounted to \$11.528 billion in 2019, with an estimated decline of \$2.5 billion, equivalent to a 22% decrease by 2021 (Frank, 2023). Furthermore, Cuba's inability to prevent defections and leaks has been seen as a significant setback in its intelligence operations, making it more challenging to maintain a tight hold on the country's intelligence security. Despite increased surveillance capabilities and arresting potential dissidents, Cuba's efforts have, at times, been insufficient to prevent further defections and leaks. As a result, this inability has assisted in the Cuban government's vulnerability towards further unsecured intelligence incidents (Freedom House, 2020).

Criticisms of human rights abuses and lack of transparency

Post-Cold War, Cuban intelligence operations have faced criticism for human rights abuses and a lack of transparency, damaging the country's international image. In 2011, Human Rights Watch documented various cases of arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment of political prisoners (Freedom House, 2020). According to the Cuban

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Foundation for Human Rights, 30 of Cuba's 300 political prisoners were jailed simply for expressing their opinions (American Experience, 2005). The report noted that the Cuban government failed to investigate or prosecute these abuses and that this lack of transparency in their covert operations has made it challenging to uncover the extent of the violations (American Experience, 2005). Similarly, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has called for greater transparency in Cuban intelligence operations, stating in 2019 that the Cuban government had failed to establish an independent oversight mechanism to monitor its intelligence services, arguing that Cuba's "grave neglect of elements essential to the freedom of expression, representative democracy and its institutions persists" (Freedom House, 2020, para. 8).

Additionally, Amnesty International has been unable to visit Cuba since 1990, making it the only country in the Americas inaccessible to the organisation (Freedom House, 2020). This lack of transparency has subsequently raised concerns about the efficiency of covert operations, particularly in infiltrating and disrupting peaceful protest movements. Notably, on the 28th of January 2021, Cuban security personnel apprehended over 20 artists and journalists engaging in peaceful demonstrations in front of the Ministry of Culture, causing widespread disruption in the country (U.S. Department of State, 2021). However, the DIA (1997) found that fear and intimidation in Cuba prevented widespread political reforms, leading to a lack of freedom of expression. Furthermore, the Cuban government must address its human rights abuses, transparency, and efficacy in its intelligence operations to ensure greater accountability in order to aid in restoring the nation's reputation internationally.

Potential Challenges and Opportunities in a Changing Global Landscape

Importance of adapting to new threats

The dynamic global environment is in a constant state of flux, necessitating Cuban intelligence operations to remain adaptable and progressive to maintain their efficacy. Given the formidable nature of the current security landscape, which includes emerging international threats such as nuclear weapons and terrorism, Cuban intelligence agencies are tasked with safeguarding Cuban citizens and the island's national security and prosperity while advancing their national interests. Furthermore, heightened levels of trade and technological advancements often render nations more vulnerable to the actions of international powers, and Cuba is not exempt from this reality.

For instance, the proliferation of nuclear weapons constitutes a significant apprehension for Cuban intelligence endeavours and, as a result, calls for adequate precautions to identify and dissuade any endeavour from procuring, developing, or employing nuclear weapons on Cuban soil. Furthermore, Cuban intelligence entities must employ contemporary technologies and strategies to monitor potential nuclear threats (Ruhl, 2022). Subsequently, Ruhl (2022) highlights the imperative for Cuban intelligence agencies to establish collaborative partnerships with international entities, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to prevent the unauthorised diversion of nuclear materials and technology. Nevertheless, Cuba possesses the potential to leverage these opportunities by fostering enhanced information sharing among nations and engaging in intelligence cooperation with various countries and organisations due to the expanding process of globalisation within the international sphere (Ruhl, 2022).

Another challenge Cuban intelligence operations face pertains to the threat of terrorism, whereby the Cuban government has endured numerous terrorist attacks resulting in the loss of 3,478 lives (United Nations, 2019). Nonetheless, following the conclusion of the Cold War, the national Constitution was adopted in February 2019 in the commitment to fight against terrorism and was elevated to constitutional status in which Article 16 of Chapter II states that the Republic of Cuba "rejects and condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations" (United Nations, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, through their active involvement, Cuban intelligence operations have remained adaptive in thwarting terrorist attacks on Cuban soil effectively. This has been aided by investments in security infrastructure, including heightened border and police force presence and the development of sophisticated surveillance and counter-intelligence capabilities to detect and disrupt potential terrorist plots before they can be executed (United Nations, 2019). As an illustration, in 1998, Luis Posada Carriles was caught engaging in anti-Castro terrorist activities in Cuba for over ten years. During that same year, seven Cuban exiles were also found guilty of conspiring to assassinate Fidel Castro (American Experience, 2005). Furthermore, these subsequent security measures have

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contributed to protecting the safety and security of Cuban citizens from potential terrorist threats. This has been achieved through effective intelligence-gathering, facilitating the coordination of efficient responses, and raising public awareness among the Cuban populace to enable them to identify potential threats.

Furthermore, the shifting global landscape presents potential avenues for Cuban intelligence to capitalise on. Ruhl (2022) states that novel technologies can provide Cuban intelligence with powerful tools for intelligence-gathering and operational execution. Additionally, nations' heightened interconnectivity can give Cuban intelligence access to new information and resources. Therefore, Cuban intelligence agencies must remain cognizant of the evolving international security dynamics and adapt their operations accordingly by capitalising on the opportunities and tackling these challenges. Thus, by recognising and responding to emerging threats through formulating appropriate strategies, Cuban intelligence operations maintain the potential to effectively address these issues alongside ensuring the security and prosperity of its national interests.

Conclusion

Since the dissolution of the Cold War and, subsequently, the Soviet Union in 1991, the Republic of Cuba has undergone a substantial transformation in its intelligence operations, successfully maintaining a robust intelligence apparatus that has proficiently executed both domestic and international operations. This essay contends that despite numerous challenges and criticisms, Cuban intelligence operations have effectively managed to maintain a strong global presence. Cuba's ability to amass valuable information globally and detect and prevent internal threats while strengthening its international relationships to enhance its ability to respond to external ones demonstrates Cuba's sustained pertinence as a significant player on the international stage.

Furthermore, this essay evaluated the efficiency of Cuban intelligence operations in the post-Cold War era. The analysis examined the changes in Cuban intelligence operations, which included a shift in focus from countering U.S. intelligence to economic espionage, aided by the increased utilisation of technology and cyber operations, as well as collaboration with other countries and non-state actors to strengthen its bilateral relationships and ultimately enhance the effectiveness of its intelligence operations globally. These measures have proven highly successful in detecting and preventing internal and external threats by gathering intelligence, particularly on U.S. political and economic activities, as well as in supporting leftist movements in Latin America. However, despite their successes, significant criticisms have been levelled at the nation's intelligence infrastructure. These intelligence failures include Cuba's inability to prevent defections and leaks and allegations of overly aggressive tactics to gather information, including human rights abuses and a lack of transparency. It is imperative to note that the factors contributing to Cuban intelligence's success or failures are often subjective and reliant on the overall context of the prospective operation. As a result, the evaluation is typically retrospective, and hindsight often plays a crucial role. Furthermore, Cuba's intelligence operations demonstrate how intelligence success may be achieved despite criticisms of efficacy, which does not necessarily imply that the operational intelligence was unsuccessful but that the tactical aims may not have had the desired result. Finally, this essay addressed Cuban intelligence agencies' potential challenges and opportunities in a changing global landscape. These included their ability to adapt to new threats, including the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the threat of terrorist attacks, to safeguard the nation's citizens and its national security interests.

Nevertheless, as Cuba continues to navigate a dynamic global environment, its intelligence agencies must adjust and evolve to ensure its continued security and advancement. This requires a concentrated effort to enhance intelligence capabilities, enabling effective monitoring of global events while ensuring that the Cuban intelligence apparatus primarily serves the interest of the Cuban people. Furthermore, evaluating the efficacy of Cuban intelligence operations post-Cold War allows insight into the current security situation in Cuba, the surrounding region, and the broader global security context. Thus, through this analysis, a more thorough comprehension of the existing Cuban intelligence apparatus may be achieved, facilitating the development of optimal strategies transnationally to address and mitigate potential future international security concerns.

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