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Cuban threat

Senior American defence officials are growing increasingly worried by Cuba's emergence as a major military power. Cuba is no longer regarded just as a source of subversive activity in the hemisphere. Today, after billions in Soviet aid, the island is now a genuine military threat to the United States.

Such news may come as a surprise to many North Americans who have been conditioned to think of Cuba as a sunwashed island, valiantly struggling to defend its communist revolution against the menacing power of its great northern neighbor.

Today, Cuba, with only 10 million people, is the Western Hemisphere's third military power after the United States and Brazil. Some analysts think Cuban military potential may even surpass that of Brazil, a nation of 127 million.

After the 1962 missile crisis, Russia concentrated on building up Cuba's defensive strength. The result was a well-trained and professionally led army of 130,000, backed by 190,000 reserves and a militia of 600,000. Recent additions of 600 tanks and heavy artillery have made the army a potent fighting force.

Cuban troops serve as a foreign legion for the Soviet Union. Over 20,000 combat soldiers and advisers are on active duty in Angola, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria and Libya. Smaller Cuban units are active in Nicaragua, Guyana, South Yemen and, possibly, Afghanistan.

The Cuban air force now has 400 aircraft, including 30 MiG-23s and 90 MiG-21s. An extensive anti-aircraft missile system protects the island's airspace. Cuban pilots, many of whom have seen combat in Africa, are considered proficient and aggressive.

Even the formerly small Cuban navy has attained considerable offensive power with the acquisition of three Russian submarines and a flotilla of 26 missile-firing, fast-attack craft. Extensive facilities have been recently constructed to service and rearm Soviet submarines. Russia is reported to have stockpiled large quantities of mines and munitions on the island.

Powerful Russian arsenal

Nor should it be forgotten that a heavy Russian mechanized brigade, with tanks and artillery, is permanently located on the outskirts of Havana. Its task is to protect the Castro regime against any military plot and to ensure security for Russia's extensive electronic warfare and intelligence system in Cuba.

This powerful arsenal is now considered a significant threat to the United States and NATO. For the first time, NATO planners are taking Cuba into serious consideration in any war scenarios with the Warsaw Pact. Conditioned as we are to assume our hemisphere immune from enemy conventional attack, the reasons for NATO's concern are most disturbing.

In the event of a Russian attack on Western Europe, victory or defeat may be decided by America's ability to safely and swiftly transport troops, equipment and supplies to Europe. Fully half of these reinforcements would sail in convoys from Gulf of Mexico ports like Galveston, Corpus Christi and Mobile.

To reach the Atlantic, they must traverse the 120-mile wide Strait of Florida between Key West and the Cuban coast. In this narrow, constricted passage, they would be prey for Cuban aircraft, missile boats, mines and submarines. Avoiding this dangerous gap by rerouting shipments through more northerly Atlantic ports would be impractical: These Atlantic ports could not cope with the huge outflow of men and material.

Cuba's ability to menace half of NATO's reinforcements from North America is a threat of enormous strategic importance; it is causing nightmares for NATO planners. The ability of Russian attack submarines to replenish food and torpedoes in Cuba greatly enhances this already awesome danger.

Unsinkable aircraft carrier

Cuban aircraft and warships are also ideally positioned to intercept tanker and cargo traffic sailing north from the Panama Canal. The principal tanker routes, through the Windward and Mona passages, are within combat range of Cuban fighter-bombers. In effect, Cuba sits like an unsinkable aircraft carrier athwart some of North America's most vital sea lanes.

The Cuban threat is not only naval. Strike aircraft from Cuba, flying low to evade America's very limited radar surveillance along its Gulf coast, could bomb key embarkation ports. Flying time from Cuba to the Florida coast is a matter of minutes.

As an additional danger, Russian electronic-warfare installations in Cuba can not only intercept a large portion of American military communications, but they can also jam them, causing enormous disruption up to 1,000 miles away.

The U.S. is responding to this threat by improving its radar network along the southern coast and by modernizing airfields in the south. A new Caribbean command has been created to co-ordinate such activities and to assume control of any military operations against Cuba. Naval and air units have been tasked against Cuba. But all of these assets have been extracted from existing formations, further thinning the deployment of already over-extended U.S. forces.

And a final worry haunts U.S. military planners. Are there Russian tactical nuclear missiles and bombs hidden in Cuba? Could they be used in wartime in a devastating surprise attack against U.S. ports and airbases? No one knows for certain.

Cuba, once noted for its beaches, casinos and gorgeous nightlife, has now become a very dangerous Russian Gibraltar in North America's soft and surprisingly vulnerable strategic underbelly.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)