

Cuba, Drugs, and U.S.-Cuban Relations

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This is the story of a Caribbean state that at one time was deeply (if selectively) involved in the international drug trade, becoming now a state for which suppressing the drug traffic seems to be a foremost national priority. This apparent transformation and accompanying tectonic shifts in the international security environment, have some important implications for U.S.-Cuban relations

The United States and Cuba have a strong mutual interest in closing off trafficking routes in the western Caribbean and in preventing attempts by Mexican and South American cocaine mafias to set up shop in Cuba proper. Yet they have not entered into a formal agreement to fight drugs – even though Havana maintains such agreements with at least 32 other countries – and what cooperation exists occurs episodically, on a case-by-case basis. Washington and Havana need to engage more fully on the issue, deploying intelligence and interdiction assets to disrupt smuggling networks through and around Cuba. Washington hitherto has shied away from a deeper relationship, fearing that it would lead to a political opening and confer a measure of legitimacy on the Castro regime. Yet current strategic realities in the region and Havana's own willingness to engage in such a relationship, as well as impending leadership changes in Cuba, argue for rethinking these concerns, even in the absence of formal diplomatic ties. .

Cuba's relations with the international drug trade are historically complex and controversial and deserve some mention here. The Castro regime, on its accession to power in 1959, largely wiped out what had been a flourishing domestic market for cocaine and marijuana that was closely associated with the mob-run Havana casino-nightclub scene. Despite this achievement, opportunistic ties with foreign drug-trafficking organizations apparently persisted. Allegations of Cuban state complicity in the drug trade date to the early 1960s, although hard evidence of a Cuban drug connection did not surface until the 1980s.

Such cozy relationships reached a height in the late 1980s, when a group of Cuban Ministry of Interior officials, led by MC department head Antonio de la Guardia, together with representatives of Colombia's Medellin cartel coordinated some 15 successful

smuggling operations through Cuba to the United States which – according to Cuban officials – moved a total of six tons of cocaine and earned the conspirators \$3.4 million.

Also complicit in these activities, though tangentially, was Division General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez, a decorated hero of the Cuban revolution. An Ochoa emissary met with Medellin cartel chief Pablo Escobar in 1988 to discuss a cocaine-smuggling venture and also a proposal to set up a cocaine laboratory in Cuba. The discussions also touched on another topic – and this is what Escobar really wanted most – the transfer of some surface-to-air missiles to the cartel in Colombia. The trafficking schemes never materialized, but in early 1990 the Colombian National Police discovered an assortment of 10 ground-to-air and air-to-air missiles of French manufacture (apparently originating in Angola) in a Bogotá residence belonging to an assassin employed by the Medellin cartel.

The Ochoa-de la Guardia machinations and the subsequent trials, executions, and purges marked the beginning of a watershed in the Cuban government's policies toward illegal drugs. In subsequent years the regime made a visible and mostly successful effort to distance itself from the international drug trade, setting up new and elaborate drug-fighting institutions, establishing narcotics cooperation agreements with European and other Latin American states, and adopting an increasingly prohibitionist approach toward the sale and use of drugs inside Cuba. (This, incidentally, contrasts sharply with the harm-reduction approach being advocated by three former Latin American presidents.)

This policy shift was attributable to three main factors:

1. First, the corruption scandals of the late 1980s brought home to Cuba's leaders the reality that in Cuba – as elsewhere in Latin America – the illegal drug trade could spawn independent centers of power, posing potential challenges to the existing political order. Generally speaking, the Ochoa-de la Guardia conspirators tended to favor the liberalizing tendencies that at the time were occurring elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, and Castro must have wanted to prevent the emergence of a

narco-funded reformist movement that could weaken the totalitarian underpinnings of the Cuban system.

2. Second, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc eliminated the protective mantle of Soviet patronage that had sustained Cuba for years, and thus forced Cuba to reorient its entire foreign economic posture to seek vastly improved trade, investment, and tourism ties with the West. To do this, Cuba needed to burnish its international image and to project an aura of respectability. This meant taking visible domestic and foreign policy steps to try to erase the drug stigma acquired in earlier years.
3. The third factor was the emergence in the 1990s of a domestic consumer market for cocaine, crack, and marijuana, which was propelled by the increasing inflow of dollars from the tourist economy and by remittances sent from Cuban communities abroad to their relatives on the island. In what appeared to be a replay of the 1950s, drugs circulated freely in Havana's nightclubs, bordellos, streets, and hotels. The internal drug market was never large, at least in relation to what we see here in the United States, but it alarmed Cuban authorities because it pre-supposed the development of a sphere of criminality outside the regime's effective control.

An interesting question is: Where did all of these drugs come from?

The main source, at least according to Cuban official statistics, were so-called "recalos," bulk packages of cocaine and marijuana that are dumped at sea, and then carried by wind and tides to Cuba's shores – the detritus of failed rendezvous between Colombian planes or Jamaican marijuana carriers and go-fast boats based in Florida. Drugs are also brought to the island by foreign tourists, usually for their own use, but sometimes with the intent of introducing them into the Cuban market. A third source is domestic marijuana cultivation, which yields a relatively low-quality leaf, mainly in Cuba's eastern provinces (Granma, Santiago de Cuba). Finally, there was cocaine that leaked into the domestic

Cuban market from the trafficking pipeline that Interior Ministry officials set up through Cuba in the late 1980s. This pipeline, I suspect, carried a lot more than the six tons officially acknowledged by the Cuban regime.

The policies adopted by the Castro regime to counteract the perceived drug threat to Cuban society took several forms. One was to strengthen counter-narcotics legislation. Between 1988 and 1999 maximum penalties for drug dealing in Cuba's criminal code increased from 7-15 years imprisonment to 20 years to death. Money laundering was made a crime punishable by up to 12 years in jail, and Cuban banks were compelled to adopt "know your customer" rules and to maintain records of transactions of more than 10,000 pesos (roughly \$10,000 equivalent) for five years. In 2003, the government tightened the screws further with a decree prescribing the confiscation of business and residential property where drugs were produced, sold, stored, or consumed, a step that precipitated nationwide house-to-house searches to root out evidence of drug crimes.

Drug interdiction efforts were expanded to deny Cuban airspace and territorial waters to traffickers. Much of the emphasis here was on clearing Cuba's coast of recalos of cocaine and marijuana and to this end the regime mobilized various social organizations – youth brigades, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, fishing collectives, tourism workers, et. al. – to cooperate with the Cuban Border Guard in patrolling the island's shores. Also, to facilitate information-sharing on suspected drug shipments crossing Cuban territory, in 1999 Havana allowed the stationing of a U.S. Coast Guard officer in the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.

On the demand-reduction front Cuba set up a vast network of nearly 200 mental health centers, staffed by psychologists and family physicians, which were charged with preventing the spread of drug abuse within the Cuban population. Some of these facilities provided in-house treatment and rehabilitation for cocaine and marijuana addicts. The regime mounted an extensive education and prevention campaign targeting schools and youth organizations, evidently aiming to insulate the younger generation from the scourge of drugs.

By some indications, the regime's draconian drug policies seem to have worked, at least up to a point. My contacts within the Cuban public health system have told me that the average price of a gram of cocaine increased from about \$15-20 in the 1999-2003 period to \$90 in mid-2008, and the price for a joint of imported marijuana from \$1 to \$10 over the same years. Also, admissions of the numbers of new entrants into drug treatment facilities in the Havana area have dwindled significantly since the 1990s.

Now on the foreign policy front: looking back in time, narcotics-trafficking was a focal point of conflict in U.S.-Cuban relations for most of the pre-1990 years, except for a brief period during the Carter administration. The focus gradually shifted to cooperation in the 1990s, as the Cuban leadership ostensibly severed connections to the international drug trade. Cooperation and information-sharing between the two countries have netted a few high profile seizures, arrests, and extraditions, but all of this has occurred rather episodically, without an umbrella agreement on counter-narcotics cooperation, (although Cuba has concluded such agreements with many other countries inside and outside the hemisphere).

Such an agreed framework could set the stage for a more substantive level of engagement on drugs. For example, we could train and equip Cuban Border Guards and Interior Ministry operatives, we could conduct joint naval patrols with Cuba in the western Caribbean, we could coordinate investigation of regional trafficking networks and suspicious financial transactions through Cuban banks and commercial entities, and we could station DEA and FBI contingents in the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. We could also negotiate a ship-rider agreement with the Cuban authorities, and possibly even the right to pursue drug-laden vessels and aircraft seeking safe haven in Cuban territory.

How far Havana and Washington would be willing to proceed in these directions is unclear, since the political barriers on both sides are formidable. Yet the prospects for more productive collaboration against the hemispheric drug threat seem a lot more promising today than in the past. In any event, failure to exploit Cuba's law enforcement

and intelligence assets to good advantage leaves a major gap in U.S. defenses against drug trafficking through the Caribbean. Interdiction successes in Mexico seem likely to augment this flow down the road, a further reason to closely monitor trafficking trends in a Caribbean country only 90 miles from U.S. shores. The drug threat from Cuba seems destined to increase as the Castro regime's revolutionary order loses its hold and appeal, as the island's economic ties with the outside world continue to expand, and as criminally-inclined Cuban nationals seek alliances with South American and Mexican drug kingpins. Such an outcome is hardly in the best interests of the United States and other countries in the hemisphere.