



China-Cuba Relations: Recent Developments and Implications for U.S. National Security

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Introduction

China and Cuba enjoy a close relationship to include longstanding diplomatic relations and robust economic cooperation. However, recent developments involving China-Cuba relations on military/intelligence matters have created concerns related to U.S. national security. Open source media reporting has indicated that China currently operates a signals intelligence (SIGINT) collection facility on Cuba and is seeking to construct a joint military training facility to be shared by the two nations. These actions highlight China's strategic interest in Cuba due to its proximity to the U.S. mainland. This paper will briefly examine the history of the China-Cuba relationship, the recent developments related to the SIGINT collection facility and the proposed joint military training facility, and the implications for U.S. national security.

Background

Cuba provides adversaries such as China with an excellent platform to conduct military/intelligence activities directed toward the U.S. due to its location just 90 miles from Florida. Cuba-U.S. relations have been strained since the 1959 overthrow of a U.S.-backed regime by Soviet-aligned revolutionary Fidel Castro. While relations have recently normalized somewhat in recent years, Cuba has historically been willing to aid and assist U.S. adversaries, particularly Russia. During the Cold War, Cuba hosted Russian nuclear missiles, leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Cuba also allegedly hosted a Russian SIGINT facility from 1964 to 2001, although the base was reportedly reactivated in 2014.^{1,2}

China-Cuba relations date back hundreds of years through various iterations of Chinese and Cuban government. However, the current Republic of Cuba has maintained formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China since 1960. Both nations share an ideological bond, having communist governments which originated from revolutions that occurred just years apart. Though there have been some minor disputes and differences, the relationship between the two countries has remained generally positive over time.^{3,4}

In recent years, China has become Cuba's top trading partner. Additionally, China has invested heavily into Cuba's economy and infrastructure, in sectors to include energy, transportation, healthcare, agriculture, and manufacturing. In 2018, China and Cuba signed a memorandum of understanding to jointly advance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious global plan to spread Chinese economic and political influence through infrastructure projects. In addition to concerns regarding Chinese influence abroad, critics of the BRI have called it a "debt trap" for nations accepting Chinese investment. However, as will be seen later in this paper, such debt could potentially lead to nations accepting money/debt forgiveness from China in exchange for a deepened Chinese presence (to include a military/intelligence presence).^{3,4,5}

Prior to the aforementioned recent developments, military cooperation between China and Cuba has been fairly limited. In 2011, a Chinese Navy hospital ship visited Havana, marking China's first operational naval mission to the Caribbean Sea. In 2015, three (3) Chinese warships sailed to Havana to mark the 55th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, China has not sold any significant weapons systems to Cuba, although it has sold weapons to a number of other Latin American countries.^{4,6,7}

SIGINT Collection Facility

In June 2023, open source media reporting stated that China and Cuba were negotiating an agreement for the island to host a Chinese SIGINT collection facility in exchange for “billions of dollars” as Cuba faced economic troubles. Subsequent reporting (quoting anonymous U.S. officials) stated that such a facility already existed, and had been upgraded in 2019. Further reporting (quoting a retired Army counterintelligence agent) stated that the SIGINT collection facility had existed since 1992. Yet another report suggested that China and Cuba jointly run four (4) SIGINT collection facilities on the island nation. While this body of reporting suggests that Chinese intelligence collection activities in Cuba were well-known to U.S. defense and security agencies, the flurry of open source media reports in June 2023 brought the issue into the public eye.^{8,9,10}

The primary SIGINT collection facility (and focus of much of the recent media attention) is allegedly located just outside of Bejucal, a rural villiage approximately 45 minutes' driving distance from Havana, and just 116 miles from Key West, Florida. A 2018 U.S. Federal Communications Commission document (citing the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission) states that “[China] maintains physical presences at Soviet-era intelligence facilities at Bejucal in what appears to be a signals intelligence collection operation.” Additionally, the document states that “the installation near Bejucal has been previously used to intercept electronic communications from the United States, and commercial satellite images of the intelligence collection base from 2018 show a marked change in the size and sophistication of the antennas used for SIGINT collection, which indicates a high level of economic investment.”^{11,12}

Open source media reporting also suggests that personnel from Chinese telecommunications firms Huawei and ZTE were spotted at the Bejucal facility. Both Huawei and ZTE have come under scrutiny in recent years for potential involvement Chinese espionage efforts. The U.S. banned the sale and import of Huawei/ZTE equipment in November 2022 amidst security concerns. While there is currently limited evidence of Huawei/ZTE's intent to assist in espionage-related activities (nor is there an extensive documented history of such activity), the involvement of Huawei/ZTE personnel at the Bejucal facility underscores such concerns.¹³

The Bejucal facility potentially provides China with a platform to intercept communications emanating from the southeastern U.S., as well as monitoring ship movements throughout the region. Florida also hosts a number of Department of Defense (DoD) installations, which could be potential priority collection targets. Moreover, Naval Station Guantanamo Bay (located on the island of Cuba) could potentially be targeted.

Joint Military Training Facility

In June 2023, open source media reporting also revealed China's intentions to establish a joint military training facility on the Cuba's northern coast. Per an unnamed U.S. official speaking to a media outlet, "Beijing and Havana are discussing what kind of training would take place at the facility and what the leadership structure would look like" though "it's unclear...how far along China and Cuba are in their chats about the prospects for a deal". Details surrounding Chinese funding/debt forgiveness associated with the facility also remains unclear.¹⁴

While the proposed base would allegedly be primarily utilized for training purposes, it could potentially host a significant quantity of Chinese military personnel, weapons systems, and assets. This could provide a potential power projection platform to target the U.S. and its interests in the region. As noted earlier in this paper, Cuba has historically hosted Russian military equipment to include nuclear missiles. Moreover, such a facility could also host intelligence collection equipment like the equipment allegedly hosted at Bejucal.

China has sought to expand its global military reach in recent years, with the construction of its first overseas military base (a naval facility in Djibouti) completed in 2017. China has reportedly sought to construct additional military facilities in countries to include Cambodia, the United Arab Emirates, and a number of African countries. These bases provide (or could provide) China's navy with the ability to project seapower much closer to the U.S.¹⁵

Of note, China's naval base in Djibouti is located just a few miles from the U.S. Navy's Camp Lemonnier. When China first opened the facility, the U.S.-based Center for Naval Analyses assessed that the facility could potentially collect "various types of [SIGINT], which can likely be done without having to leave the confines of the Chinese facility, and in ways that do not attract attention." Moreover, in 2018, the DoD issued a formal protest to China after a number of lasing incidents in which "military grade" lasers were pointed at U.S. pilots from the Chinese base. Should the Cuba base be constructed, similar concerns (regarding both intelligence collection and harassing/disruptive activities) could be created in the region surrounding Cuba.^{16,17}

Outlook

China will almost certainly continue to leverage its close relationship with Cuba in order to further its whole-of-government approach to spread worldwide political and economic influence and challenge U.S. hegemony. China's SIGINT collection facility at Bejucal will likely continue to intercept U.S. electronic communications, while the proposed joint military training facility could potentially enhance China's forward military presence and ability to project power near U.S. shores. RMC's Intelligence & Analysis Division will continue to monitor relevant developments involving China-Cuba relations and implications for U.S. national security.

¹ Council on Foreign Relations. (2022, June 3). U.S.-Cuba Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-cuba-relations>.

² Kelley, M. B. (2014, July 16). Russia Is Reportedly Reopening Its Spy Base In Cuba. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-is-reportedly-reopening-its-spy-base-in-cuba-2014-7>.

³ China Briefing News. (2022, November 25). China's Bilateral Trade and Investment Outlook with Cuba. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-cuba-bilateral-trade-and-investment-prospects/>.

⁴ The Diplomat. (2021, August 3). How China Helps the Cuban Regime Stay Afloat and Shut Down Protests. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/how-china-helps-the-cuban-regime-stay-afloat-and-shut-down-protests/>.

⁵ McBride, J., Berman, N., & Chatzky, A. (2023, February 3). China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁶ Franks, J. (2011, October 21). Chinese navy hospital ship visits Cuba, Caribbean. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-60058520111021>.

⁷ Associated Press. (2016, August 23). 3 Chinese warships arrive at Cuban port for visit. *San Diego Union-Tribune*. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-3-chinese-warships-arrive-at-cuban-port-for-visit-2015nov10-story.html>.

⁸ Madhani, A. (2023, June 21). US confirms China has had a spy base in Cuba since at least 2019. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/china-cuba-spy-base-us-intelligence-0f655b577ae4141bdbeabc35d628b18f>.

⁹ *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*. (2023, July 6). China has had a spy base in Cuba for decades, former intelligence officer says. <https://www.hawaiitribune-herald.com/2023/07/06/nation-world-news/china-has-had-a-spy-base-in-cuba-for-decades-former-intelligence-officer-says/>.

¹⁰ *Fox Business*. (2023, June 21). U.S. tracked Huawei, ZTE workers at suspected Chinese spy sites in Cuba. <https://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/us-tracked-huawei-zte-workers-suspected-chinese-spy-sites-cuba>.

¹¹ Sherwood, D., & Spetalnick, M. (2023, June 18). Does a Cuba base host a Chinese spy station? US thinks so. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/does-secretive-cuba-base-host-chinese-spy-station-us-thinks-so-2023-06-14/>.

¹² U.S. Department of Justice. (2022, November 30). Team Telecom recommends the FCC Deny application to directly connect the United States to Cuba through subsea cable. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/team-telecom-recommends-fcc-deny-application-directly-connect-united-states-cuba-through>.

¹³ *BBC News*. (2022, November 26). US bans sale of Huawei, ZTE tech amid security fears. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63764450>.

¹⁴ Ward, A. (2023, June 20). China negotiating with Havana about joint military training facility in Cuba. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/06/20/china-negotiating-with-havana-about-joint-military-training-facility-in-cuba-00102636>.

¹⁵ Miller, E. A. (2022, August 16). *More Chinese military bases in Africa: a question of when, not if.* *Foreign Policy.* <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/16/china-military-bases-africa-navy-pla-geopolitics-strategy/>.

¹⁶ Downs, E., Becker, J., & deGategno, P. (2017). *China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base.* In Center for Naval Analyses. https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dim-2017-u-015308-final2.pdf

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense. (n.d.). *U.S. protests Chinese interference with U.S. planes in Djibouti.* <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1511708/us-protests-chinese-interference-with-us-planes-in-djibouti/>.