

Sujet traité : À Cuba, la Russie explore un coin / In Cuba, Russia Explores a Counter

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## In Cuba, Russia Explores a Counter

by George Friedman - June 12, 2024

*Russian warships, including what appears to be a nuclear-powered submarine, have made port in Cuba – just 400 miles (645 kilometers) or so from the U.S. coast at Florida. The U.S. ports along the Gulf of Mexico are vital to the American economy, so while it's unlikely that Moscow is trying to pick a nuclear fight, it is certainly trying to remind Washington of the vulnerabilities it can exploit.*

*The real issue for Russia, of course, is to not lose the war in Ukraine. So in Cuba, its goal is simply to show that humiliating Russia could come at a high price. Instilling enough anxiety in the United States and in Europe – where Russia recently carried out tactical nuclear exercises on NATO borders – will enable Moscow to save face in its near abroad. In 2022, I wrote about how Russia could use this very counter – you can read the article below. Frankly, I'm surprised it took this long.*

*Russia is now in a position to potentially block U.S. maritime operations, and it hopes that this will be enough to sway public opinion on Ukraine. But if it were truly interested in terrifying Americans, it would have to take far greater risks than I believe it is willing to take. Even during the Cuban missile crisis, I believed Moscow was more interested in disrupting the U.S. economy than in establishing a nuclear base. Now as then, the risk to Russia far outweighs the benefits, but Moscow's need for a show of strength may outweigh otherwise rational behavior.*

### Cuba's Strategic Location



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Yesterday, Russia announced that President Vladimir Putin would have an important phone call later in the day, without revealing whom he would talk to. To the surprise of many, it was Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel. The subject of their conversation was energy and industry, and though they may well have talked about both, the suspense Moscow built around the conversation suggests the call was more important than the buying and selling of crude.

I've written before about how important Cuba is to U.S. security. It's the reason Washington has been obsessed with Cuba since Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, and why the Cuban Missile Crisis was in Cuba and not somewhere else. Back then, the threat was over Russian nukes in Cuba. Today that is not a threat, as both sides have intercontinental ballistic missiles. But there is another threat. This time around, the threat is the blockading of ports along the Gulf of Mexico – places such as Beaumont and New Orleans – that are utterly vital to U.S. trade.

Blockading these ports would deal a serious blow to the U.S. economy. Cuban waters between the United States and Mexico are relatively narrow waterways that could be closed by submarines, aircraft and anti-ship missiles launched from multiple platforms. It is one of the most vulnerable and valuable chokepoints in North America. I suspect that this is what Moscow secretly had in mind in the early 1960s.

Either way, Russia has been fixated on Cuba for decades. For Moscow, Cuba was the key to Latin America and, as important, a perpetual irritant to the United States. Today, the United States is supporting Ukraine, overseeing blockades on dollars and goods, holding a force on standby in the Mediterranean Sea. Russia desperately needs a counter. Using nuclear weapons against the United States would result in the near-immediate death of Russian leadership. Economic pain inflicted in Cuban waters may be just what Moscow is looking for.

None of this means a blockade would succeed, even if it were imposed. Far from it. All the phone call itself means is that the U.S. would have to dust off old contingency plans – of the economic costs of Russian blockades, the risks involved in countering that blockade, and so on. Conversations may go from how to further damage Russia to how much damage Russia might be able to impose. It's less than Russia needs to inflict, but the psychological impact of a Russian force off the U.S. coast could generate a shift in U.S. psychology. The Russian force would be vulnerable to decimation by U.S. forces, but during that time they could launch conventional weapons at the U.S. But even then, that would not be the goal; the goal would be to redefine the U.S. perception of the risks it's running by antagonizing Russia.

Cuba, for its part, still reeling economically and feeling embattled by the U.S. as a matter of habit, would welcome Russia. Cuba mattered when the Russians were there, far less with Russia distant. For Havana, a battle pivoting around them is valuable. For Moscow, it would provide home ports. For Washington, it would provide targets.

I doubt that the Russians will go this far, but they urgently need a tool to make the Americans see war with Russia as risky. Putin wanted to put this possibility on the table. Even if Russia and Cuba only talked about energy and industry, it might create a threat, and that was certainly worth a phone call.

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