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THE CHINESE MILITARY PRESENCE IN CUBA AND MORE.

China's interest in expanding its global influence is evident in various parts of the planet. One of the places where this attention is manifest is Cuba, a state that has a consolidated tradition of relations with foreign powers in competition with the neighboring United States.

The geopolitical situation of Cuba has been the subject of international interest for decades and continues to present elements of extreme complexity and in continuous evolution, even in the current transition phase. This small and poor Caribbean republic has played a significant role in global politics, experiencing challenges and changes that have influenced its position in the international context and, in one case at least, the international context tout court as happened with the "missile crisis" of 1962.

Addressing the serious internal problems and seeking new opportunities for cooperation are crucial elements for the future of the island.

Cuba has played a leading role in Latin America, supporting revolutionary movements and leftist governments in the region. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), founded by Cuba and Venezuela in 2004, has tried to promote an alternative to the stars and stripes influence, but in recent years some countries in the area have adopted more conservative governments, creating a new geopolitical dynamic. Furthermore, the emergence of new leaders and political instability in key countries such as Venezuela and Brazil have affected Cuba's position. Cuba's geopolitical situation is also conditioned by global dynamics: the withdrawal of United States from multilateral agreements, such as the Paris climate accord and the nuclear deal with Iran, has had implications for Cuba's role in global politics. Moreover, the growing prominence of China and Russia in the international context could offer new opportunities and advantages for the island.

Cuba also faces internal challenges that affect its geopolitical situation. The economy is in dire straits due to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the

inefficiencies inherent in its socialist model. This situation has led to growing economic inequality and heavy emigration resulting in a brain drain. Furthermore, human rights and civil liberties are a constant concern of the international community. The economic and social challenges that Castro's government faces internally can affect its ability to manage geopolitical dynamics.



The Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2009 visiting the 66th Venice Film Festival (Photo Piovesana Archive)

The Chinese military commitment in Cuba and the geopolitical implications deriving from it deserve an analysis, albeit synthetic, especially on the challenges and opportunities that this presence may entail.

China and Cuba have maintained a long-standing relationship based on political and economic cooperation. In recent years, the Celestial Empire has become one of the main trading partners of the Caribbean state, promoting investment, technical assistance and trade.

This economic cooperation has increased in recent years and has helped strengthened ties between the two countries.

Beijing has shown a growing interest in increasing its political and economic influence in Latin America, and therefore Cuba, being one of its historical allies in the region, has become a focal point for this strategy of expanding diplomatic and trade relations.

There has also been an increase in military cooperation which has manifested itself through exchanges of delegations, joint exercises and supplies of equipment and materials. China has supplied Cuba with relatively advanced weaponry and has contributed to the development of its war capabilities.

The Chinese diplomatic-military engagement can be seen as a way for Beijing to consolidate its presence and interests in the western hemisphere and to support a political ally in that arena. This cooperation has been viewed negatively by some international actors, especially United States, which see China as a growing threat to regional stability and security and beyond.

In particular, the intensification of joint military exercises between China and Cuba in the Caribbean Sea has aroused such concern as to prompt Washington to monitor the situation closely and to strengthen ties with countries in the region to preserve its security and influence.

The military activity of the Dragon in Cuba is seen as part of a broader strategy, which aims to guarantee access to markets, resources and, most importantly, strategic trade routes.

The Chinese posture in the Caribbean is a topic of great geostrategic interest, and to fully understand its impact it is essential to examine the historical context of the relations between the two socialist republics, as well as the reasons that led to the Chinese presence on the island.

Relations between China and Cuba have deep historical roots. During the Cold War, both countries shared a communist ideology and opposed the Western capitalist system and Washington's foreign policy. These ideological ties helped establish significant bilateral cooperation in the political, economic and military spheres, especially after the implosion of the USSR.

In recent decades, China has become a global power and has shown a growing interest in consolidating its influence in different areas, even eroding US supremacy.

Chinese action in Cuba has a number of strategic implications. First of all, the military presence can be seen as a move to counter the influence of United States in the Caribbean area and in Central and South America. Cuba offers an extremely attractive geographic location that could allow Beijing to monitor US activities in the western hemisphere and project its political and economic influence.



Patrol boat Rio Damuji, BP 390, of the Cuban Revolutionary War Navy (Photo Agencia Cubana de Noticias)

The Chinese military presence in Cuba has also the potential to influence regional dynamics and the balance of power in the Caribbean Sea. This could lead to growing competition between the global powers in that theater and increase tension between China and United States, also in the light of the fact that in some respects a sort of parallel could be established with Taiwan.

For Havana, military cooperation with the Dragon could present desperately needed economic opportunities. China is a major global investor and trading partner and could offer economic support through infrastructure projects and investments. However, this could also carry the real risk of economic dependence on China, with implications for sovereignty and independence.

Beijing's engagement in Cuba represents a complex and multidimensional issue for the geopolitics of the region and requires a balanced assessment. While the cooperation between China and Cuba can be seen as a manifestation of bilateral diplomatic relations, it is also important to consider the geopolitical impact of these activities on regional stability and international relations with special reference to the US presence. Relations between Cuba and United States have always been complex, contradictory and characterized by a series of problems and tensions. However, in recent years there have been attempts to normalize relations. In 2014, the Obama administration took a series of steps to ease economic sanctions on the island, paving the way for greater cooperation. However, the subsequent Trump administration restored some restrictions, creating uncertainty in bilateral relations. The current Biden

administration faces the challenge of finding a balance between promoting human rights and supporting the Cuban economy but is moving in an up-and-down and uncertain way. While he has promised to review policy towards Havana, he has so far made no significant changes. United States and Cuba only established official diplomatic relations in 2015, with the opening of their respective embassies in Washington and Havana. However, the Trump administration has reduced diplomatic staff at their respective embassies, limiting bilateral communication and cooperation. As regards the critical aspect of migration policies, the latter are traditionally an important topic in the relations between the two States. In 2017, the Trump administration rescinded the "Feet Dry, Feet Wet" policy that granted special treatment to Cuban immigrants reaching US borders, leading to a significant decline in Cuban immigration to United States. The issue of human rights represents another critical point in relations between United States and Cuba. Concerns continue to be raised in United States about civil liberties and human rights on the island, while the Cuban government has often accused, in turn, United States of hypocrisy and legal violations.

Some observers have long raised fears that China might seek to establish a permanent military base in Cuba. This raises questions about China's ability to project power in the region and the implications this could have for stability and security.

In fact, on June 8, 2023, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) stated that the People's Republic of China would have set up an electronic spy base (Signals Intelligence, SIGINT) on the Caribbean island to monitor United States.



Photo from:

https://www.google.it/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fit.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FMare_Caraibico&psig=AOvVaw1yPOz6RdbOwFgXdqU18nl-4 49&ved=0CBEQjRxqFwoTClj-pcbHzoADFQAAAAAdAAAAAABAh

An operation of this type, established 100 miles from Florida, could cover the entire southeast of the States, home to numerous military bases and sensitive industries, as well as the numerous installations of the US military in Latin America, including of course the major hub of Puerto Rico. Furthermore, which is no small thing, it would be able to monitor maritime traffic, even that towards the Panama Canal. The Chinese would have repaid the Cubans with the concession of a few billion dollars.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, the agreement "appears to be an extension of the accord China signed with Cuba at the turn of the millennium, which has been widely talked about but never with official confirmations, to give China access to the Soviet-era ELINT listening facilities in Lourdes and perhaps also in Santiago".

The news was also picked up and confirmed by CNN and was made known close to the meeting in Havana with Russian diplomacy in which numerous trade and cooperation agreements were stipulated, which should allow the island to mitigate the effects of the sixty-year embargo enforced by United States.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has contemptuously denied the existence of a secret military agreement between the two countries and so has the Cuban government which, in mentioning fidelity to the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace in January 2014 against the foreign military presence (Havana Declaration), in turn accused USA of contriving to destabilize the island and to perpetuate the unlawful occupation of the Guantanamo Bay base.

For their part, the White House and the Pentagon have defined the news as "inaccurate", while according to other subsequent indiscretions, negotiations are still ongoing or existed but have been aborted.

According to other anonymous intelligence sources, China and Cuba already jointly manage as many as four electronic interception stations on the island. The network was formed around 2019, initially as a single station and later it expanded.

Perhaps the WSJ article had been piloted precisely in order to exert diplomatic pressure on the Cubans and above all on the Chinese.

It should be emphasized that the authoritative WSJ, together with the New York Times, is the newspaper most used by elements of the US deep state to speak to those who must understand under the pretext of informing the general public.

Later, US government sources admitted that the issue of the spy base had already emerged under the Trump administration in 2019, probably supported by Huawei and ZTE and described as already operational.

Such an agreement, if materialized and above all if officially confirmed, would certainly derail the attempts of the Biden administration to unfreeze relations with Beijing, especially after the numerous tensions that have arisen between the two Powers, which reached their peak following the case of the spy balloon surprised while crossing the North American skies, an event that had led the Secretary of State Antony Blinken to postpone the visit to China scheduled for February 2023. Similar spy balloons had also been sighted in the skies of Costa Rica, Colombia and Venezuela.

This important diplomatic trip was then carried out in the following June, in any case a few days after the publication of the scoop on the alleged SIGINT center.

In Washington, at the level of internal politics, the news has aroused clamor and great concern. In particular, there has been a bipartisan call, obviously stronger from the Republican side, to intervene firmly to safeguard national security.

The "hawks" present in Congress seem to want to sabotage the efforts of the Biden administration aimed at preventing a further crisis between Washington and Beijing: every time the White House expresses its intention to get closer to China, some revelation takes place from an "anonymous source" which cancels all attempts at dialogue.

This, in the light of the date of Blinken's visit to China, could be another key to understanding the WSJ article.

Cuba once again constitutes the ideal site to threaten the United States and its Monroe Doctrine, the preservation of which is for Washington the most important geostrategic imperative, since its global hegemony is subordinated to supremacy in the hemisphere where United States are located.

The existence of a base of the Middle Empire a few miles from Florida would inevitably constitute a systemic challenge to the current international order and consequently to US supremacy and prestige not only in the area but in the entire planet.

Furthermore, from the Chinese point of view, it could also be a way to publicly denounce the alleged hypocrisy of Washington's conduct in its backyard in relation to the Taiwan dossier.

Just a day after the conclusion of the US Secretary of State's diplomatic trip, the WSJ, citing some intelligence sources, released the news that negotiations are in an advanced

stage, but not yet concluded, for the construction by China of a structure for the military training in Cuba.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry limited itself to cryptically stating that it was not aware of the story which, understandably, would instead have led the Biden administration to put pressure on the regime of Miguel Díaz-Canel not to comply with the requests coming from Beijing. At the moment, the hypothesis of launching a kinetic response is being rejected in Washington, while significant additional sanctions and the targeting of Cuban personnel associated with the project are instead being evaluated.

The Chinese military center would be part of "Project 141", the initiative of the Chinese military to expand its global military presence and technical support network. Currently the only Chinese military base operating overseas is located in Djibouti.

The Chinese intention would be to provide for the creation of at least five overseas bases and ten logistical support sites by 2030 in order to establish a worldwide network of military and naval bases.

To date, a naval base is under construction in Cambodia as a strategic hub at the Cambodian installation of Ream, on the Gulf of Thailand, while construction of a military facility inside a Chinese-managed port in the United Arab Emirates has begun but the works for this last installation would have been stopped as a result of US pressure exerted on Abu Dhabi.

It should be noted that the Dragon already has a worldwide network of over 90 ports partially or totally owned or managed by Chinese companies, and in Central Asia, i.e. right in the heartland theorized by Sir Halford Mackinder, Tajikistan would have approved the construction of a new Chinese military base not far from the border with Afghanistan, the result of an agreement between the Tajik and Chinese interior ministries.

Negotiations are also underway to activate a military port installation in Equatorial Guinea, which could reward and consolidate years of massive Chinese investments in Africa. If successful, China would have a naval base on the Atlantic.

In any case, Beijing is moving with patient initiative to crown its project of having naval bases and infrastructures on all oceans.

In Latin America it has 40 ports, combined with 11 satellite earth stations in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela, which allows it to have strategic positions in the Western Hemisphere. It should be borne in mind that many of the Chinese state-owned companies involved in these infrastructure investments and development projects have

ties to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) or are not directly affiliated with it.

The PLA has sought to establish a base in Panama since Chinese investment firm Hutchison Whampoa won concessions in 1999 to operate two ports there, and in El Salvador since plans for a mega project in La Unión were announced in 2018.

The port infrastructures of the Celestial Empire are tools of its strategy of economic, political and military expansion to become the great global hoarder of raw materials, in particular of Latin American resources without regard for the irreversible "collateral damage" caused to the social fabric and the environment. China's logic is not to help the development of the countries that establish alliances with it, but rather to implement long-term strategies that facilitate the development of its expansion and, in any case, progressively erode the global supremacy of USA by questioning the current world order.



The triple frontera (photo Corriere della Calabria)

Concerns that Beijing may use strategically located ports to host warships are largely justified by the fact that it has been building its navy for decades to protect its interests around the globe. Chinese port terminals have commercial value but are also multipurpose as they can serve for logistical support, intelligence gathering and future military bases.

Chinese investments in port and airport infrastructures, although officially of a civilian nature, are marked by an imprint of military hegemony which places limitations on the authorities of the host country on the development of the strategic projects.

The Chinese persuade countries most in need of capital to welcome them to have a monopoly on certain sea lanes: this, in itself, is an absolute advantage in geostrategic terms.

China has also supplied satellite and surveillance equipment to various Southern Cone countries, including the construction of two communications satellites for Bolivia, which could be equipped with back-end access devices for Beijing's intelligence.

In Argentina, the Chinese have been trying since 2010 to build a naval base in the city of Ushuaia, in the province of Tierra del Fuego, which would guarantee them easier access to Antarctica. So far, they have only obtained the non-binding assent of the local authorities against the firmly negative will expressed by the central government. At the provincial level, the agreement was signed with the Chinese state-owned company Shaanxi Chemical Industry Group Co. Ltd which will invest in infrastructure with a significant annual capacity for the production of chemicals (synthetic ammonia, urea and glyphosate), as well as the construction of a multipurpose port terminal (which will allow the docking of 20,000-ton ships) and a 100 MW power plant. The construction of the port would be the task of another Chinese chemical giant controlled by the regime: the HydroChina Corp. Shaanxi Group, which is a state-owned energy and chemical company developed by the provincial party committee and the provincial government of Shaanxi. US pressure on Argentine decision-makers is obviously strong and General Laura J. Richardson, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command, warned of Chinese interests in the country also referring to the Chinese space station active since 2017 in the province of Neuquén, which some specialists describe as a military installation for monitoring communications.



Ushuaia and Tierra del Fuego (photo Enc. Britannica)

The affair of the ventilated port in Ushuaia appears to be dotted with suspended works, scandals, episodes of corruption, journalistic and judicial investigations and heated controversies in politics and public opinion. Finally, it should be emphasized that today's city of Ushuaia (built by Italian emigrants in 1948) overlooks the Beagle Channel and therefore has considerable strategic value.

The existence of "Project 141" emerged following the dissemination of a report allegedly part of the considerable amount of classified documents illegally shared online by US airman Jack Texeira.

Disclosure of the PRC project came at a time when that power was actively moving to expand its role as a global player. Recent diplomatic moves by the Dragon in the light of these revelations now risk being undermined by an ulterior motive of an imperialist nature.

US diplomacy had long warned that China aimed to build a global military network through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The existence, not yet concretely ascertained, of the Chinese espionage base in Cuba would therefore fit into this context.

Moreover, various sources indicate the location of Lourdes as its possible location, known for having already hosted a similar Soviet and, later, Russian installation.



Russian SIGINT Base. Lourdes, Cuba (Foto Getty images)

The Cuban military base in Lourdes has long been a point of interest and tension in international relations between Cuba, Russia and United States. This facility was primarily used as a listening and intelligence center and played a significant role during the Cold War. To fully understand its importance and impact, it is useful to examine the context and the political dynamics that influenced its creation and operation.



Russian SIGINT Base. Lourdes, Cuba (Foto Getty images)

During the Cold War, the base played a strategic role in Soviet military intelligence, providing crucial data on the

political and military situation in the Caribbean Sea and in the Americas. This military presence has been a point of concern for United States, which has seen its proximity as a threat to national security and geopolitical balance.

In the golden years of its activity, over 1,500 technicians, engineers and agents of the KGB, the GRU, the Cuban DGI and the Eastern Bloc worked in the structure.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Lourdes base continued to be used by Russia for a short time, but in 2001 the Russian government announced the closure of the facility, which materialized in 2002. This was seen as a gesture of détente diplomacy to United States and a way to reduce military spending at a time of political and economic change in Russia. The buildings were abandoned and later rebuilt to become the University of Information Sciences.

Despite the closure of the base, perhaps secretly reactivated in 2014 (which Putin himself denied), its existence has had a lasting impact on international relations in that theatre. The SIGINT center has fueled distrust and mistrust between United States and Russia and has contributed to the perception of Cuba as a point of confrontation between the two superpowers.

Today, while the Lourdes structure may remain closed, the question of its reopening perhaps with Chinese guests or of a possible new military presence of Moscow in Cuba could still have significant implications on regional and global dynamics. United States continues to closely monitor any national security developments and could react strongly to any resumption of Russian military activity on the island.

On the other hand, it is known that Russia has installed a SIGINT base in Nicaragua, where personnel from CMP Wagner have also reportedly been operating for some time, and that in Venezuela it has had a similar structure since the days of Chávez.

For its part, Iran conducts espionage and criminal activities in Central-South America, such as the trafficking of drugs and weapons, through individuals linked to Hezbollah in competition with local politicians and high-profile criminal organizations (connections with Mexican cartels of Sinaloa and Los Zetas as well as with the Colombian FARC). The paramilitary arm of the Party of God currently manages training centers and SIGINT installations in Nicaragua, Venezuela (the ties that have arisen between Hugo Chávez and the Iranian Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are significant) and in the Triple Frontera, the no-man's land on the border between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay where, among other things, there were also the presences of Osama bin Laden and Imad Mughniyeh, who was one of the founders and number two of Hezbollah.

In addition to Hezbollah, the activity of members of Hamas, the Movement for Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda, al-Gama al-Islamiyah, al-Mugawamah al Islamiyah also emerged who, moreover, are mainly dedicated to fundraising. The Party of God has taken root in the region since the 1980s, following the Lebanese and Palestinian refugees mostly from the Bekaa Valley (place where Hezbollah was born) which constitute a recruitment pool and an alternative autonomous source of financing Iranian channel.

Last but not least, it is significant that in the Triple Frontera, in addition to the presence of various criminal and terrorist organizations, Chinese transnational organized crime also operates, especially that of Hong Kong. This evidence deserves particular attention in light of a possible use of criminal groups in operations conducted in the Gray Zone and in hybrid warfare environments.

In conclusion, the Cuban military base in Lourdes was a flashpoint in international politics during the Cold War,

providing Russia with a strategic advantage and fueling US security concerns. Although closed, its existence has left a lasting imprint on relations between Cuba, Russia and United States, and the future of the base could continue to be a topic of interest and concern in regional geopolitics.

The current probable but unproven Chinese military presence in Cuba, in Lourdes or in another site, certainly integrates a concrete threat to the USA not only in terms of security but also a vulnus to the prestige and soft power of the superpower in its immediate district and not only with negative repercussions inside and outside the States, and this probably constitutes the greatest strategic advantage for the Dragon.

Pier Riccardo Piovesana

Pier Riccardo Piovesana is a retired Director General of Polizia di Stato. He attended the Academy of the Guard Corps of P.S. from 1974 to 1978 and subsequently various courses including that of Management Training and that of "Public Order and Crowd Management. Security During Major Events" at the Polizei-Führungsakademie in Münster, Germany. He was Quaestor of Gorizia and Parma. He has held various positions in Police Headquarters, Specialty Departments and Educational Institutes where he has also carried out numerous lectures. He has been a member of many collegial bodies, including international ones. For his professional activity he has received various honors and national and foreign certificates. He has been a member of CeSMar since 2021.

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