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Cuban Military Culture

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Introduction

Cuba's military institution is shaped less by conventional national defense requirements than by revolutionary legitimacy, regime preservation, and ideological continuity. The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) did not emerge from a post-independence professional army but from a victorious insurgency that seized state power in 1959. As a result, it sees itself not as subordinate to civilian authority but as a co-founder and guardian of the political order. Reinforced by decades of anti-imperialist doctrine, Soviet-era professionalization, and deep integration into state governance, the FAR remains Cuba's most powerful and stable institution, and the regime's primary guarantor of continuity.

This memo situates Cuba's security environment and U.S. interests within that institutional culture. Engagement strategies that ignore this identity will misread incentives and overestimate prospects for rapid professionalization or depoliticization. Effective policy must treat the FAR not simply as a defense force but as the regime's institutional backbone.

Among the FAR's most consequential characteristics is its substantial stake in the Cuban economy. The FAR's economic interests generate both rigidity and leverage. Engagement that safeguards operational continuity (e.g., ports, tourism flows, logistics networks, and disaster response) without challenging command authority is more likely to elicit pragmatic cooperation. Conversely, measures perceived to threaten revenue streams or internal cohesion will incentivize securitization, resistance, and hardened anti-U.S. narratives.

Foundational Norms and Values

FAR norms center on revolutionary loyalty, ideological unity, and anti-imperial vigilance. Officers are evaluated as much for political reliability as for technical competence. Discipline and centralized command structures reflect a belief that dissent equates to counterrevolution. Service is framed as moral duty rather than professional careerism.

This culture prioritizes cohesion and regime fidelity over initiative, transparency, or civilian oversight. Unlike most Western militaries, the FAR does not regard apolitical professionalism as a virtue; politicization is considered essential to institutional survival.

Historical Legacies and Turning Points

Five formative episodes anchor institutional memory:

- The 1959 Revolution (guerrilla legitimacy)
- Bay of Pigs (siege mentality)
- The Missile Crisis (dependence on great powers and asymmetric defense)
- Overseas deployments in Angola and Ethiopia (internationalist credibility and pride)
- The post-Soviet "Special Period" (expanded economic management role)

Together, these episodes shaped three durable beliefs: the United States is a persistent threat; survival requires unity; and the military must manage both defense and governance. The break with the Batista-era army further embedded an identity grounded in ideological purity and rejection of "mercenary" professionalism.

Civil-Military Relations and Oversight

Civil–military relations in Cuba are best described as institutional fusion rather than civilian control. Senior officers occupy top political offices, and the FAR helps select and sustain leadership rather than answer to it. Political transitions are therefore likely to occur through the FAR, not around it.

While the FAR underwrites regime stability, it is not typically the instrument of routine repression. Day-to-day coercion is delegated to Ministry of Interior organs. The FAR instead preserves its image as a national, "people's" institution, intervening directly only when unrest threatens systemic stability. This division of labor mirrors other party-army systems, where the military safeguards regime continuity while avoiding constant coercive exposure.

Institutional Pressures and Internal Fault Lines

Key stressors include:

- Aging Soviet-era equipment and limited modernization
- Economic strain and sanctions
- Generational tensions between revolutionary veterans and younger technocrats
- Dependence on military-run conglomerates, including GAESA, for revenue

Control of major economic enterprises gives the FAR a material stake in system survival beyond ideology alone. These holdings create inertia but also opportunity. Leaders may resist reforms that threaten prerogatives, yet they behave pragmatically when cooperation protects revenue streams, supply chains, or operational stability. Economic interests can therefore function as a lever for incremental change, provided core authorities remain intact—a dynamic consistent with other transition contexts in which military-economic actors accepted procedural change while preserving institutional equities.

Security Environment and Strategic Pressures: Transnational and Nontraditional Threats

Cuba's primary challenges are nontraditional: narcotrafficking routes, migration crises, natural disasters, and cyber vulnerabilities. The FAR addresses many of these missions through internal security and civil-defense mechanisms, reinforcing its domestic governance role.

Extra-Hemispheric Influence and Arms Diplomacy

Historically aligned with the Soviet Union and later Venezuela, Cuba relies on external partnerships to mitigate isolation. Russia and China provide limited material support, but neither offers sufficient resources for comprehensive modernization. These relationships are pragmatic rather than ideological.

Defense Capabilities and Gaps

Strengths

- Internal control
- Intelligence and counterintelligence
- Civil defense mobilization
- Institutional cohesion

Gaps

- Air and naval modernization
- ISR and cyber capacity
- Logistics sustainability
- Interoperability with regional partners

Regional and Strategic Implications

For the United States, Cuba poses minimal conventional threat. Its strategic significance stems from proximity, intelligence activity, migration leverage, and symbolic alignment with U.S. competitors. Accordingly, FAR behavior will prioritize regime security over regional cooperation.

Key Findings and Strategic Inference

Finding 1: The FAR is the regime.

It is not merely an instrument of state power but a co-governing institution embedded across the political system and economy. Engagement that bypasses it will fail.

Finding 2: Identity is ideological, not professional.

Standard military-to-military confidence-building assumptions, depoliticization, bounded information sharing, and interoperability run counter to core FAR values. Change will be slow and selective.

Finding 3: Continuity outweighs reform.

The FAR has repeatedly expanded functions, economic management, and disaster relief without altering ideology. Future adjustments are likely to preserve regime control rather than enable liberalization.

Finding 4: The FAR behaves ideologically in politics but pragmatically in economics.

Its management of key sectors through military-run conglomerates ties institutional survival to commercial performance. This material stake can moderate risk-taking and open space for technical cooperation when core authority and revenue streams are preserved, providing the United States with targeted leverage.

Strategic inference: U.S. policy should assume persistence, not transformation. The FAR is a continuity actor first and a modernization actor second.

Recommendations and Opportunities for Engagement

Recommendation 1: Frame engagement around technical, non-ideological cooperation.

Disaster response, maritime safety, search-and-rescue, and humanitarian logistics align with the FAR's self-image as a societal protector. These areas offer limited political risk and build functional trust without challenging ideology. Avoid language suggesting "reform" or "professionalization," which may be interpreted as regime-subversive. Emphasize operational continuity and economic resilience (e.g., port safety, logistics reliability, disaster recovery).

Recommendation 2: Target generational and technocratic pathways.

Younger officers managing logistics, engineering, and economic enterprises tend to be more pragmatic. Quiet exchanges on supply chains, public health resilience, or environmental security can build relationships with emerging elites likely to shape future transitions. This approach leverages institutional evolution without threatening core identity.

Recommendation 3: Calibrate deterrence while reducing symbolic threat narratives.

Overtly coercive or regime-change rhetoric reinforces siege mentality and strengthens anti-U.S. cohesion. Maintain credible deterrence but avoid actions that validate revolutionary propaganda. Balanced, firm, and non-provocative signaling reduces incentives for repression and external alignment with adversaries.

Conclusions

The FAR's culture, rooted in revolutionary legitimacy, anti-imperial memory, and civil–military fusion, functions as an institutional blueprint rather than a constraint. It explains the military's resistance to depoliticization, its dominance in governance and the economy, and its consistent role in preserving regime stability.

For U.S. policymakers, the implication is straightforward: Cuba's political trajectory will be mediated through the FAR. Engagement strategies should therefore treat the institution not as a conventional partner or adversary but as the decisive continuity actor in Cuban statecraft. Pragmatic, low-visibility cooperation, paired with disciplined deterrence and minimal ideological confrontation, offers a more credible path to incremental influence than attempts at rapid transformation.

Author

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Brian also serves as a Cybersecurity Policy Fellow and International Security Fellow at the D.C.-based think tank New America. His analysis has been featured in local, national, and international media and he serves as the on-air political analyst for South Florida's WSVN-Fox News. Brian has testified before the U.S. Congress in 2019 and 2021. His recent publications include two edited volumes titled *Culture and National Security in the Americas* (Lexington Books, 2017) with Eduardo A. Gamarra and *Democracy and Security in Latin America* (Routledge, 2021) with Orlando Perez and Gabriel Marcella, and he is co-author of *The New US Security Agenda: Trends and Emerging Threats* (Palgrave, 2017) with Jonathan Rosen. Brian's technical expertise and publications focus largely on U.S. and Latin American governance, national security, and foreign policies, with particular focus on Venezuela, China, Russia, and cyberspace.

Brian joined FIU after serving as the Senior Research Manager for Socio-Cultural Analysis at United States Southern Command's Joint Intelligence Operations Center South (JIOC-S). Brian holds degrees in International Business and International Relations from Florida International University in Miami, Florida, and attended Sichuan University in Chengdu, China, and National Defense University in Washington D.C. Most recently, he obtained his doctoral degree in Political Science and Government from Florida International University. From 1997 to 2004, he served in the United States Marine Corps and facilitated the training of foreign military forces in both hostile theaters and during peacetime operations.

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