

Cognitive Warfare at America's Edge

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The State Department's "Cuba: The Capital of 21st Century Communism" [report](#) and the independent [assessment](#) by resilience and resistance interdisciplinary scholar Dr. Robert Burrell both address important but differing views. The State Department examines how Havana converted limited conventional power into a durable system of espionage, ideological influence, proxy relationships, and political subversion. Burrell examines why the Cuban regime continues to survive economic decline, sanctions, demographic pressure, and public unrest. One follows the outward projection of power, the other measures the internal foundations of authoritarian durability. Together, they offer a useful composite picture. Yet both stop short of the assessing what is most necessary, whether Cuba has contemporary value as a strategic access platform for Russia, China, and Iran.

First is that Cuba has transitioned from a revolutionary exporter to an enabling platform. Cuba no longer needs to export revolution on the scale of the 1960s to remain strategically consequential. Instead, it can leverage geography, diplomatic cover, intelligence tradecraft, Spanish-language credibility, telecommunications access, port facilities, and a tightly controlled operating environment ninety miles from Florida. These activities connect to the modern cognitive warfare apparatus. [NATO](#) defines cognitive warfare as synchronized activity intended to influence, protect, or disrupt cognition to affect attitudes and behavior. Through that lens, Cuba is more than a messenger. It can serve as an intermediary that helps foreign narratives acquire regional identity, historical legitimacy, and attributional distance.

Russia's Cuban provision is one of proximity, access, and narrative localization. Russian information operations in Latin America benefit when themes originating in Moscow are restated through Cuban institutions, sympathetic regional outlets, diplomatic networks, or established anti-imperialist frames. These themes can appear less like foreign intervention and more like an indigenous critique of U.S. power. The 2025 U.S. Southern Command [statement](#) described Russian, Chinese, and Iranian cyber espionage and information operations across the region and discussed the 2024 Russian naval visit to Havana. That activity did not establish an imminent attack, but demonstrated how access, intelligence collection, and messaging can be leveraged.

China's Cuban provision is more infrastructural, known as *cognitive infrastructure*: the telecommunications, data, sensing, media, and analytical systems through which perceptions can be studied and influence delivered. [CSIS](#) satellite-imagery assessments have identified Cuban facilities containing equipment potentially capable of signals-intelligence collection while appropriately treating Chinese involvement as a possibility requiring continued evaluation rather than a conclusively established fact.

At first glance, many access points Cuba provides to China may appear innocuous. They are simply telecommunications upgrades, academic exchanges, commercial partnerships, port visits, research cooperations, media engagements, or technical assistance. Individually, these activities

can be explained as routine state-to-state transactional relations. Their strategic significance emerges through accumulation. Each interaction creates another opportunity to observe institutional routines, social networks, political reactions, military patterns, and regional audience vulnerabilities. Over time, persistent collection can transform ordinary access into a developing exploitation infrastructure.

Cuba's value in this process is not limited to geography. Its controlled political environment, security institutions, regional relationships, and proximity to the U.S. can provide China with a discreet platform from which engagements may gradually support intelligence partnerships, narrative targeting, and future cognitive influence.

Iran's Cuban provision is wholly different. It is built around sanctions solidarity, diplomatic reach, technical cooperation, and hemispheric access. Evidence does not indicate a substantial Iranian combat presence in Cuba.

Iranian Spanish-language messaging, resistance narratives, and anti-sanction's themes can reinforce Cuban and Russian accounts without requiring a single integrated command structure. The three states can repeat complementary claims portraying the U.S. as coercive, destabilizing, culturally hostile, or economically predatory. Repetition across separate national and media sources can produce narrative convergence, giving audiences the impression that multiple independent observers have reached the same conclusion.

Second is the separation of Cuban regime resilience from external influence capacity. Intelligence services, security institutions, elite cohesion, and foreign assistance do not merely explain Cuban survival. They also make Cuba useful to foreign actors by protecting personnel, concealing sensitive agreements, disciplining state media, and preserving long-duration access. Economic weakness may therefore increase Havana's willingness to exchange infrastructure access, intelligence cooperation, political support, or technological privileges for energy, credit, and regime security.

Third is the absence of a Cuban campaign continuum. Cuba-enabled competition could progress from commercial investment, diplomatic exchanges, media partnerships, and technical assistance into secure facilities, persistent foreign personnel, expanded data access, port familiarity, [intelligence sharing](#), cyber staging, and coordinated crisis narratives. Visible military deployment might appear only at the far end. By then, much of the cognitive preparation could already be complete. U.S. audiences may become divided over attribution. Regional governments may become reluctant to cooperate. And policymakers will become uncertain whether responding to a limited provocation would produce escalation.

Fourth is the institutional perception risk inside the U.S. Cuba's intelligence success has never depended solely on stealing secrets. Long-duration penetration can also shape what institutions believe is important, which warning indicators they discount, and how threats are categorized. The [conviction](#) of former U.S. ambassador and National Security Council official Victor Manuel Rocha for secretly acting for Cuba over decades demonstrates the patience and access Cuban

intelligence can achieve. The cognitive effect of penetration is therefore larger than the information removed.

CONCLUSION

The State Department report and the Cuban independent assessment are useful, but each risks treating Cuba as an isolated problem rather than as a strategic access point for larger adversarial powers. Cuba is better understood as a strategic doorway, an authoritarian platform whose value increases when connected to the resources of larger powers. Russia can use it to localize narratives and signal proximity. China can use it to gain access to data, sensing, and infrastructure. Iran can use it to extend diplomatic and informational reach into the hemisphere.

The missed threat is therefore not a Cuban conventional assault. It is the gradual construction of an ecosystem in which foreign collection, political access, information laundering, cyber opportunity, and cognitive pressure converge near the American homeland. Cuba's economy may be failing; its strategic utility is not.

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