



National Defense University

Institute for National Strategic Studies

COLLEAGUES FOR THE AMERICAS SEMINAR SERIES

## “Cuban Foreign and Security Policy in Latin America.”

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**Featured Speaker:** Hal Klepak Ph.D., Professor of History, Royal Military College of Canada.

**Commentator:** Frank Mora, Ph.D., Professor of National Security Strategy, the National War College, National Defense University

Hal Klepak’s research covers a wide spectrum from Latin American security and the region’s diplomatic and military history to Canadian and Cuban foreign and defense policy. In addition to teaching at the Royal Military College of Canada, he advises the Departments of National Defense and Foreign Affairs and International Trade on hemisphere issues. Professor Klepak regularly visits Cuba and enjoys considerable access to the Cuban armed forces.

He has authored numerous books and articles. His most recent scholarship focuses on Cuba. Professor Klepak published *Cuba’s Military 1990-2005: Revolutionary Soldiers during Counterrevolutionary Time* (Palgrave MacMillan) in October 2005. This was preceded by *Cuba’s Foreign and Defense Policies in the “Special Period”* in 2000. Early works include *Canada and Latin American Security* (1993) *Natural Allies? Canadian and Mexican Views on International Security* (1996) and *Confidence-Building Sidestepped: the Peru-Ecuador War of 1995* (1998). Professor Klepak also is a retired infantry officer who served with and commanded in the Black Watch Regiment. Hal Klepak studied at McGill University and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. from London University.

A summary of the seminar follows.

Cuba’s approach to its Latin American and the Caribbean neighbors has changed since the late 1990s. The government’s new self-confidence in conducting foreign affairs reflects the communist nation’s emergence from relative isolation in a hemisphere of democratic and democratizing countries. The regime’s difficult years began with the end of the Soviet connection in 1991 and the demise of friendly governments in the region, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The initial years without Soviet economic, political and psychological support were catastrophic for Cuba in many ways. Deteriorating economic conditions, a tighter U.S. embargo, natural disasters and poor state decision making brought extreme hardships. Throughout the 1990s, however, Cuba’s institutions and people made sacrifices, adapted and sustained the revolution in a modified form. Today, Cuba again is an accepted, more visible, but limited player in world affairs.

### “Catastrophe” Leads to Shift in Doctrine

As political isolation became a reality, its impact on the Castro regime was severe, especially the armed forces. For the military, the end of Soviet support had disastrous repercussions for procuring modern weapons and equipment, sustaining the force (particularly fuel for daily operations), training regular and reserve units to maintain their readiness, and continuing intelligence collection outside the country. Incredibly, its leaders kept the institution united and its morale never experienced a

catastrophic fall. No other national institution or group was hit as hard in so many different ways. Yet, the military saw little or no fragmentation. Today, an unprecedented number of Cuban youth want to enter military school.

The Cuban government was forced to become less revolutionary in its foreign policy. Interventionist initiatives and activist diplomacy had to be abandoned. Cuba also began low-profile cooperation with the United States and other countries when security interests meshed in areas such as transnational crime, especially drug smuggling, and illegal immigration. By the 1990s, Cuba began to see itself playing a valuable law enforcement role in the Caribbean.

This period led to reinforcement of the previous doctrinal shift away from advocacy for revolution to solve Latin America's longstanding social and economic problems modeled on Cuba's experience. After assessing the impact of global and regional trends on Latin American and Caribbean nations during the 1990s and Cuba's recent experience, Castro's message began to change. His argument became: If capitalism does not heal itself, there will be violent revolution, but not an organized socialist revolution. It will be spontaneous, violent, vulgar, and uncontrolled. This turmoil is not in the interest of socialist or capitalist states.

### **Coming Out of Isolation with Little Gain**

Cuba has been able to break out of diplomatic isolation but gained little from its relationships with other developed and developing countries. Cuba now has diplomatic relations with 177 countries. Most have staff in Havana. The Cuban government, however, has been unsuccessful in getting relations with these nations to contribute in a significant way to the country's development, with one exception – Venezuela. With the election of President Chavez in 1998, Venezuela and Cuba formed a partnership. This arrangement for mutual advancement with a major Latin American country is the first in the regime's post-revolution history. Cuba gains badly needed oil and gas at a preferential rate. Venezuela receives assistance to help the Chavez government meet its domestic commitments. These programs include: education in rural and urban barrios, medical clinics staffed with doctors and nurses, sports programs and cultural activities that emphasize Venezuela's heritage. The Cuban participants represent the positive side of their country's socialist experience. Both countries have an interest in sustaining this beneficial relationship. In addition to Venezuela, the Castro regime now also enjoys good relations with Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, and Peru.

### **Cuba Today**

Castro's influence in the region is subtle. His revolution has survived almost fifty years, and there are lessons that may be useful for other national leaders. Castro believes that the country's unique revolutionary process has improved internal conditions in Cuba. From his experience, there is no way a legitimate democracy can function in Latin America without left-leaning governments coming to power to deal with longstanding basic socio-economic issues. The success of the Cuban model in addressing hunger, illiteracy, housing, and medical care makes it an attractive model, even if important issues like traditional human rights are overlooked.

Cuba still confronts dramatic weaknesses at home. The most telling are its bad economy and inability to benefit for state-to-state relations with the exception of Venezuela. It is unclear whether Castro can convert his prestige into real political clout in the hemisphere, although his active "soft power" diplomacy in many countries (the engagement of doctors, engineers, teachers and social workers, and offers of subsidized education) may give him influence in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Cuba may present a challenge if the hemisphere's democratic states cannot reverse the trend toward societies losing faith in the ability of democratic government to solve longstanding socio-economic problems. Cuba can be seen as an appealing place, when countries cannot offer anything better. The vulnerabilities in Latin and Caribbean societies are extensive and not easily corrected. There is much work to be done: the last thing the United States wants is an unstable southern flank.

## **Commentary**

Frank Mora stressed that while the Cuban government has had opportunities to use its prestige and exploit the globalized environment to improve its economy, Castro has opted not to go in this direction. Instead, the regime has chosen to engage in the excessive jargon of the past. Dr. Mora asked: "What is it that Havana wants?" "What is the objective?" "What is the priority?" Analyzing the Cuban government's recent actions, Mora believes that recentralization and a return to orthodoxy are the goals. Castro, in Mora's view, is not concerned with economic development, but with the refinement of ideology. He is unwilling to undergo economic reform, modernization and normalization, because in his view, Castro understands that poverty is a mechanism of social control. Castro seems to alienate those who could offer trade, investment and remittances. He has retracted and canceled contracts with businesses and industries that could provide something beneficial and positive to the Cuban economy, including employment.

In regard to Bolivia and Peru being potential Cuban allies, Dr Mora thought that this would offer further opportunities to avoid diplomatic isolation, but asked if is there anything tangible that Morales and Humala can offer Castro? Cuba can give these countries a lot, but both of them can offer little except *simpatia*.

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The INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar Series is a program of monthly meetings that commenced in 1994 to further research on hemispheric security and defense issues and to contribute to the professional education of United States and foreign practitioners.

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