



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 22, 2015

Russian Spy Ship Docks in Havana While U.S. Explores New Relations With Cuba

A Russian spy ship docked in Havana harbor the day before a U.S. delegation arrived in the Cuban capital, signaling Moscow is watching with keen interest the beginning of renewed relations between Washington and the former Soviet satellite in the Caribbean.

The *Viktor Leonov*, one of Russia's newest surveillance ships, made the unannounced stop Tuesday, reportedly with 200 sailors aboard. A high-level U.S. diplomatic delegation arrived on Wednesday to discuss normalizing relationships between the two countries that were severed by President Eisenhower in 1961 after Fidel Castro had made clear his alliance with Soviet Russia, while confiscating billions of dollars worth of American property on the island. The United States has maintained a trade embargo against Cuba for more than half a century since, but President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro, brother successor to the ailing Fidel, announced in December their intention to reestablish diplomatic ties and normal trade relations.



The surveillance ship, loaded with high-tech software, radar, and 30-millimeter cannon and anti-aircraft guns, replaced a cruise ship that had been docked at the same location the day before. The Russian ship normally sails in international waters up and down the U.S. Eastern Seaboard with its radars pointed toward the United States and its military and communications installations. The Pentagon said that it tracks the spy ship all the time.

"It's not unprecedented. It's not unusual. It's not alarming," an unnamed U.S. defense official told Agence France-Presse. The *Viktor Leonov* has stopped at Havana twice in the past year, though both of those visits were announced by the Cuban government, the *Christian Science Monitor* said. On Wednesday, the ship was opened up for the children of Russian diplomats.

"We have normal relations with Russia," socialist writer and editor Raphael Hernandez told the *Monitor*. "One day, when we have normal relations with U.S., we could have an American ship visiting."

The U.S. delegation is in Havana for three days of talks with Cuban officials. It is led by Roberta Jacobson, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs and the most senior U.S. official to visit Cuba since 1980. Items on the agenda for Thursday, the Associated Press reported, include removal of restrictions on American diplomats in Cuba and assurances that the Cuban people will have



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access to a reopened U.S. embassy. In Wednesday's session, Cuban officials pressed for a change in U.S. immigration policy that admits nearly all Cuban refugees that escape the island by boat or raft and make it to Florida's shores. Cuba is also demanding its removal from the U.S. State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, something the Obama administration is reported to be considering.

The State Department designated Cuba a state sponsor of terrorism in 1982, citing Fidel Castro's training and arming of communist rebels in Latin America and Africa. It is one of only four nations currently on the list, along with Iran, Syria, and Sudan. The department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013* charged Cuba with providing safe haven to members of Basque Fatherland and Liberty and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and charged it with harboring fugitives wanted in the United States. The Basque Fatherland and Liberty was designated a terrorist organization in 1997 and has been involved in bombings of Spanish government buildings and assassinations, killing more than 800 people since 1968, according to the State Department's 2013 report.

Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), the son of Cuban refugees and a staunch opponent of normalized relations with the Castro government, has also cited a Cuban effort to supply weapons to communist North Korea in violation of a United Nations resolution, "prohibiting the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea of all arms and related materiel." In July 2013, a North Korean ship carrying undeclared Cuban weapons was seized by the Panama Canal Authority. According to a United Nations report, the cargo included two Russian MiG 21, rocket launchers, and components for surface-to-air missiles. A FactCheck.org report noted Cuba's claim that the aborted shipment was intended for the repair of weapons by North Korea, rather than for the sale or transfer of the arms. The UN panel investigating the shipment said it was "unconvinced by Cuba's rationale," in part because the weapons were undeclared and hidden under bags of sugar.



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