



Written by on January 30, 2009

Raul Castro's Visit to Russia

At the beginning of one meeting with Medvedev, Castro recalled the longtime alliance between Cuba and Russia and Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union. The BBC reported that Castro said he wanted to revive strong ties between the two nations, which have weakened since the end of the Cold War. Relations between the Eurasian giant and the small island nation have improved recently — Russia was the first country to send humanitarian aid to Cuba following two hurricanes last year, and the two nations signed major trade agreements shortly before Medvedev visited Cuba last November.



"We are old friends, we have known each other in good (times) and bad, the ones when you really get to know friends best," said Castro, the younger brother of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, who gave up his public duties last February owing to poor health. "This is an historic moment, an important moment in relations between Russia and Cuba."

Reuters news service reported that Medvedev, who leads a nation that ostensibly has given up communism, congratulated Cuba on the 50th anniversary of its communist revolution and sent his best wishes to Raul's brother, Fidel, who led that revolution and seized hold of power on January 1, 1959.

"Your visit to our country opens a new page in the history of Russia-Cuba relations and will mean their elevation to the level of strategic partnership," said Medvedev.

The agreements signed by the two leaders provide for Russia to give Cuba at least 25,000 tons of grain, and issue a \$20 million loan to finance Cuba's purchase of Russian construction, energy, and agricultural equipment, as well as civilian aircraft.

Following the meetings, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin told reporters that the Russian power company Inter RAO signed an agreement to build a power station in Cuba, and several Russian vehicle manufacturers are interested in building plants in Cuba. He explained to reporters, "Solid foundations have been laid for the development of Russian-Cuban relations in the economic area."

But when a reporter asked Sechin about the possibility of military cooperation between Russia and Cuba, the Russian official responded tersely: "Why are you interested in that?"

Castro is scheduled to meet Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on February 1.

In a report about Castro's visit, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera online news network quoted Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, who advocated an end to the U.S. economic boycott of Cuba, as stating:

Our country has consistently stood for normalizing the situation around Cuba, for its fully fledged reintegration into regional and world processes. What is important is that Latin American countries are united in their efforts to overcome Havana's isolation.



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The warm meeting between Castro and Medvedev — who reminisced about old times while eating salo with black bread at the rural lodge — brought back memories to this writer of the world-famous photograph of Soviet dictator Nikita Khrushchev embracing Castro's older brother Fidel on the floor of the United Nations General Assembly back in 1960.

Of course, at the height of the Cold War, Americans harbored no false illusions the Soviet designs on the island nation, whose main interest was its proximity to the United States. In fact, during a visit to Key West, Florida, last year, I recalled the words of a popular early-1960s bumper sticker: "Don't Worry — They're Still 90 Miles Away!"

Two major events of the Cold War were the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion by exiled Cuban freedom fighters (which failed when the promised U.S. air support never arrived) and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, during which President Kennedy supposedly intimidated the Soviets into stopping their delivery of more missiles to Cuba. However, as part of the settlement of the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy not only agreed to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey, but also gave Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev a pledge that the United States would refrain from participating in any invasion similar to the Bay of Pigs in the future. That pledge enabled Castro to divert many of his troops and a sizeable portion of his military equipment to spreading communist power in Latin America and in Africa.

Concerns about Soviet (or Russian) hegemony in the Western Hemisphere largely evaporated with the breakup of the Soviet Union, however. Never mind that Hugo Chavez, a Marxist protégé of Fidel Castro, remains in power in Venezuela. During his visit to the Caribbean last November, Medvedev visited Russian warships in the Venezuelan port of La Guaiara with Chavez. A writer for AFP news service observed of the meeting: "The Russian leader's tour sought to boost Cold War-era ties with left-leaning countries and was seen as a rebuff to U.S. moves in formally Communist-ruled parts of Europe, such as planned missile defense facilities."

During Medvedev's visit, the Russian fleet engaged in warship maneuvers, dubbed "VenRus 2008," which included some 1,600 Russian forces and 700 Venezuelans. Then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice dismissed the significance of the events, stating: "A few Russian ships is not going to change the balance of power."

American complacency regarding Russia and Russian ties with communists or communist-leaning governments in our hemisphere largely stems from the falsely cultivated view that communism is dead in Russia. However, as journalist William F. Jasper observed in his article "Gorbymania!" in *The New American* magazine for November 3, 2003:

Since the supposed collapse of the Soviet Union, all of the key centers of power — political, economic, military, intelligence — in Russia and the other "former" Soviet states have remained in the hands of lifelong Communists. If a genuine collapse and legitimate elections had occurred, all Communist leaders would have been swept from office, tried, and hanged or penalized by their long-suffering victims.

The continuation in power of "ex-communists" in Russia continues to this day. Medvedev's mentor, Vladimir Putin, joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union while he was a law student at Leningrad State University. Upon graduation from the university, he joined the KGB and served the Soviet spy agency until 1991. In 1998, President Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin head of the FSB (one of the successor agencies to the KGB). In 1999, Putin was appointed acting prime minister of the Russian Federation by President Boris Yeltsin. Putin was elected president in 2000 and was reelected in 2004.



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Unable to serve for a third term, Putin was replaced by his hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, who subsequently appointed Putin prime minister of Russia.

The cozy getaway by Raul Castro and Dmitry Medvedev was about much more than sharing salo with black bread and talking about "the good old days." For comrades of their stripe, "the good old days" are the days when Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev embraced not only each other, but a vision of extending the communist reach to the very doors of the United States.

— *Photo: AP Images*



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