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Cuba: Not a Terrorist Threat

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As the Obama administration and Cuban negotiators examine the 54-year-old unilateral embargo (or “blockade” as the Cubans refer to it), one obstacle—particularly painful for Cubans and extremely important to American interests—must be addressed: Cuba’s continued presence on the U.S. State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism.

President Obama directed the State Department to review this designation in December 2014, since Cuba’s removal from that list is entirely justified and long overdue. As a result, when the State Department issues its annual Country Reports on Terrorism on April 30, it is likely to be the first time in 33 years that Cuba is not designated a sponsor.

Removing Cuba from the list is one of the most significant reforms the Obama administration can implement without congressional approval. The President need only notify Congress 45 days in advance of the release of the report, and Secretary Kerry must show that Cuba has not supported terrorism in the past six months—something that will invariably be shown.

And the announcement could not come soon enough for some officials. “Cuba is a 43,000 square mile blind-spot in our national security rear view mirror,” General Charles Wilhelm, Commander of U.S. Southern Command from 1997–2000, commented at a National Summit on Cuba. Wilhelm and other military commanders have long lobbied for the benefits that more military cooperation with Cuba could yield.

Coast guard officials agree, especially those working hand-in-hand with their Cuban counterparts out on the open waters of our shared Gulf of Mexico. Cuba stretches 760 miles across the entrance to that tender underbelly of the U.S., and is larger than all the Caribbean islands combined. Cooperation on anti-drug trafficking efforts has worked to the benefit of both nations by limiting clandestine avenues for terrorist activities.

President Reagan put Cuba on the list in 1982 for its support of Leftist insurgencies and independence movements

in Latin America and Africa, and for providing safe haven for members of anti-government Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Basque separatists (ETA) in Spain. However, its support for such groups ended when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

These days the Colombian government praises Cuba's leading role in peace talks with the FARC, talks that just this weekend yielded a landmark agreement for the two sides to work together to remove landmines.

While getting onto the list is quite rudimentary, getting off the list is more opaque. There is no clear process for removal, though somehow Libya, North Korea, and Iraq have all succeeded. Some argue that harboring fugitives is a justification for keeping Cuba on the list, and yet countries that do—Mexico and El Salvador, for example—are not listed.

Even more confusing is that states routinely linked to terrorist networks—like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—have never been included on the list. Of the other three countries on the list—Iran, Syria, and Sudan—only Cuba lacks evidence of terrorism support.

"There has been no indication to my knowledge that the Cuban government has provided any kind of training or weapons to terrorist groups," says Jack Devine, President of Arkin Group and 32-year veteran of the CIA, where he served as chief of the Latin American division.

Larry Johnson, CEO of Berg Associates and a former CIA and State Department Counterterrorism official, says keeping Cuba on the terrorist list is "just silly," a political construct that undermines U.S. credibility in fighting the real terrorist threats we face today, a fight that especially involves our (relatively) peaceful neighbors to the South.

Back in the 1970s, "about 15 percent of terrorism was Shia[-based], maybe around 5-10 percent was Sunni-based, and the rest was Communist and Leftist organizations," Johnson tells World Policy Journal. "About 98 percent of terrorism today is Sunni-based, and Cuba doesn't support these groups."

Furthermore, the State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism's 2013 Country Reports on Terrorism struck an almost apologetic tone in its 200 words or so on Cuba, saying at one point, "There was no indication that the Cuban government provided weapons or paramilitary training to terrorist groups."

The report also notes that Cuba's ties to ETA are "more distant" and points to its work with Spain to repatriate various members. While Cuba's continued harboring of fugitives wanted in the United States—a problem renewed diplomacy may finally address—is also highlighted in the document, that is certainly no justification for its inclusion on the terrorist list.

Designation on the list is a particularly sensitive topic for Cubans, who in recent years have cultivated goodwill worldwide with their medical assistance and response to global disasters. At the heart of the issue is what Cubans view as a long, ugly history of the U.S. harboring those that Cuba (and other countries) continue to view as terrorists, including those who perpetrated terrorist acts against 'Cuban sympathizers' on U.S. soil.

Recall the 1976 car bomb murders of Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and U.S. national Ronnie Moffit in the middle of Washington, D.C. There's also the bomb that blew off the legs of Miami journalist Emilio Milián, and the bomb that went off in the Center for Cuban Studies offices in New York. And these incidents don't even take into account other heinous acts committed by groups (some CIA-backed) like Alpha 66, Omega 7, and CORU who were never brought to justice.

Luis Posada Carrilles and Orlando Bosch are particularly sore points in Cuba-U.S. relations. The two escaped from jail in Venezuela after being arrested for the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 73 people, including the whole Cuban national fencing team. They fled to the U.S. where Carrilles admitted his acts to journalist Ann Louise Bardach, and Bosch, whom the U.S. Department of Justice found to be involved in numerous attacks, lived under protection in Miami until he died in 2011.

Worst yet, the embargo consumes vital resources and anti-terrorism personnel at government agencies, especially the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Controls (OFAC), charged with investigating the flow of terrorist funding. The Government Accountability Office has said the U.S. government devotes hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of man-hours into administering the embargo each year, and nowhere is it a bigger waste than at OFAC.

Undoubtedly, with the retirement of Raul Castro in 2018, there is much at stake. The U.S. has a significant opportunity to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the Cuban government. But to do so, it must take the first step in removing Cuba from the terror watch list.

For more on the disturbing history of clandestine acts against Cuba, check out Ann Louise Bardach's seminal book, *Cuba Confidential*.

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