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UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS REGARDING THE INEVITABLE SUCCESSION OF POWER IN CUBA

Dr. Max G. Manwaring

Four uncomfortable questions arise, even in circumspect circles, regarding the possible succession of power in Cuba. First, assuming the nearly 80-year old Fidel Castro is mortal, “Who will succeed him when he dies?” Second, “What role will the Cuban armed forces play in the transition process?” Third, “What could happen to disrupt that process?” And, finally, “Will the United States respond to the event in an ad hoc manner, or will a plan be in place to help ensure U.S. interests?”

The answers to the first two questions are relatively easy, and constitute the most likely “business as usual” transition scenario. That is, Raul Castro will follow his brother in an orderly, dynastic succession with the support of a united military chain of command. Raul has a strong claim to that succession. As already indicated, he is Fidel’s brother and heir apparent. Significantly, Raul is also the long-time Cuban Defense Minister, and has considerable military power at his disposal. In this connection, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias [FAR]) has long been the most powerful, influential, and competent governmental institution in Cuba. Top generals will play crucial roles in all conceivable succession scenarios. So, what could go wrong?

Several scenarios could be developed, but, for the purposes of this argument, we will consider the two most discussed possibilities. First, if large-scale internal popular violence—exacerbated by anti-regime forces outside Cuba—were to be mobilized, it is possible that some military commanders might refuse to move against civilians. Second, if Raul Castro were to die before his older brother, the expected succession would be thrown into chaos. In both these scenarios, (1) institutional integrity—military command and control—could be fractured and a certain level of anarchy would be encouraged; (2) various individuals with viable political and/or military power at their disposal could and would challenge the system, and the best organized and best armed leader would dominate a praetorian-type regime; and (3) there is a high probability of civil war.

What, then, should U.S. planners and leaders focus on that would be most helpful in proactively preparing for or reacting ad hoc to a situation involving the demise or incapacitation of either Fidel or Raul Castro? The critical dependent variable in these and many other transition scenarios that might be developed is the degree to which the institutional integrity of the FAR is being enhanced—or being eroded. FAR’s integrity, in turn, will be determined by the cohesion, singularity of purpose, professionalism, popular support, and morale of its personnel—and by the political and leadership skills

of the officer corps. Is the United States researching, monitoring, and molding these variables to provide maximum leverage for the protection and enhancement of U.S. interests in Cuba and the Caribbean region? Are the additional dependent and independent variables that contribute significantly to the greater notion of the political, economic, and social stability and security of Cuba being assessed? Are the same things being done not only to prevent Cuba from becoming a failed state, but also to establish a responsible democratic system in that country that will contribute to the strengthening of democracy in the region? These questions provide a task outline of what planners and policymakers must accomplish to respond intelligently and effectively to Cuba's inevitable transition scenario.

The final question involves planning--more specifically, end-state planning. Although the United States and other global actors might agree regarding Cuba's many interrelated problems, how to deal with them in terms of sequence and priority cannot be left to "ad-hoc-ery." In this context, it is time to move beyond a unilateral, crisis management approach to the Cuban strategic problem as if it were a strategy. A long-term multilateral endgame strategy is required for Cuba in which the United States is a key player. If the United States is to protect and enhance its interests in Cuba and the Caribbean region it will be crucial to: (1) gather the information that explains the key operative variables in the Cuban situation; (2) determine mutually-agreed interests with other players; (3) establish an integrated multilateral implementing strategy upheld by transparent, achievable goals that can be used to evaluate progress; and (4) develop the multilateral organization that can implement a unified strategy. The sooner, the better!