

Analysis

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FOCUS

If attacks aim to divide US-Cuba, they're working

When Americans started falling ill last year in Havana, the victims of eerie, invisible attacks, investigators seized on a key question: Who had the motive to drive the United States and Cuba apart? Nearly a year later, the US hasn't unraveled the riddle. But whoever is to blame, the plot appears to be working. Less than three years have passed since the longtime enemies began an ambitious diplomatic experiment, restoring formal ties despite lingering resentments and potent political opposition on both sides of the Florida Straits. Despite all that, a delicate detente took hold in 2015 and has slowly but steadily progressed.

Now the experiment has been abruptly upended. Each country will soon have but a fraction of the diplomatic presence in the other's capitals that they've had in recent years. The United States, fearful about diplomats' safety, will leave behind a skeleton staff for emergencies. Cuba, ordered to withdraw 15 diplomats, will maintain roughly a dozen in Washington - far fewer, even, than worked in its "interests section" that took the place of an embassy for decades when the countries didn't officially speak.

For some 2 million Cuban-Americans and their relatives still in the homeland, the distance suddenly seems much wider than the mere 90 miles of water separating the nations. Visa processing will grind to a halt for the 20,000 Cubans who seek permission each year to emigrate to the US and thousands more applying to visit family. "The only thing I can do is wait," said Carlos Sierra, a 31-year-old restaurant worker in Havana. His hopes for a family re-unification visa to join his parents in the US have been dashed.

But what other choice did Washington have? Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and other US policymakers struggled deeply with how to respond to the attacks, Trump administration officials said. They weren't authorized to discuss internal deliberations and requested anonymity. There was reluctance to punish Cuba when the US still hasn't blamed anyone. There were also concerns that if some entity - perhaps Russia, or a faction of Cuba's government - is trying to drive a wedge between Washington and Havana, cutting back diplomatic ties would play directly into their hands.

Yet Americans in Cuba these days may not be safe - at least as far as US security officials can tell. Twenty-two Americans are confirmed to have suffered medical ailments from the attacks, and the figure keeps growing. Loath to succumb to the still-nameless aggressor, most US diplomats in Havana argued against pulling out, as did their union in Washington and much of the State Department ranks, officials said. But leaving Americans in harm's way presented a moral dilemma that, ultimately, the administration decided it could not stomach.

"It's a wrenching decision," said Mark Feirstein, the former White House official who shepherded the detente with Cuba in the final years of the Obama administration. "There's clearly some entity out there that wants to damage relations between the two countries, and unfortunately, they've been successful."

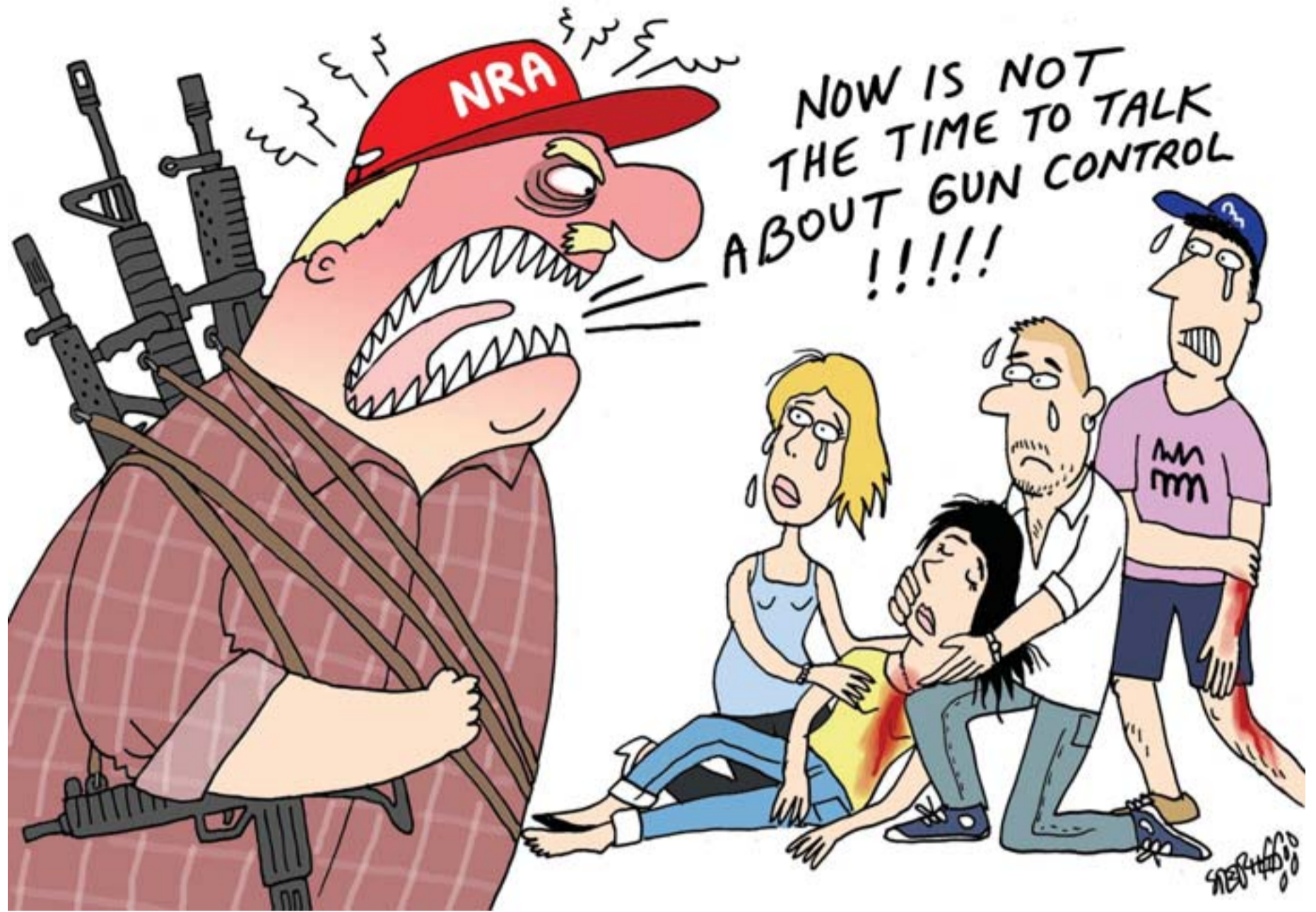
For Americans, the issue carries emotional baggage and fraught politics stemming from the saga over Benghazi, Libya, where four Americans were killed in 2012. In the years after, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her aides were pilloried over accusations they knew Americans were unsafe in Benghazi and failed to act in time. For President Raul Castro's government, the crisis has posed an entirely different challenge: If the attacks are still a mystery, how can Cuba exonerate itself?

Good Faith

Havana felt it had shown good faith by letting the FBI fly down and operate on its soil for what Cuba said was the first time in more than 50 years. The United States has praised its willingness to cooperate, but also has avoided sharing sensitive details about the investigation. At first, Cuba's communist government was judicious in its public comments about the matter, letting Washington do the talking. But then the US started suggesting Havana bore some responsibility - if not culpability - because Americans had been harmed on Cuban soil.

The United States has never explained what, if any, steps Castro's government could but won't take to stop the attacks, considering no culprit and no device have been identified. Rather, the US has merely said it's Cuba's responsibility to keep diplomats safe, and left it at that. So on Tuesday, hours after the US expelled its diplomats, Cuba finally went on offense. In a lengthy statement read to reporters in Havana, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez detailed everything his country has requested to help Cuban authorities investigate: immediate notification of attacks, access to injured Americans and their doctors, and technical data about what potential weapon might be at play, to name a few.

His argument: If Cuba is kept in the dark, how can it be expected to solve the crime? Supporters of warmer US-Cuba ties argue the Trump administration ultimately bowed to political pressure from opponents of rapprochement, such as Florida Sen Marco Rubio. Many of the same US lawmakers had tried unsuccessfully earlier this year to persuade Trump to revert back to the chillier state of affairs before 2015. —AP



Russia stymieing N Korea regime change

Russia is quietly boosting economic support for North Korea to try to stymie any US-led push to oust Kim Jong Un as Moscow fears his fall would sap its regional clout and allow US troops to deploy on Russia's eastern border. Though Moscow wants to try to improve battered US-Russia relations in the increasingly slim hope of relief from Western sanctions over Ukraine, it remains strongly opposed to what it sees as Washington's meddling in other countries' affairs.

Russia is already angry about a build-up of US-led NATO forces on its western borders in Europe and does not want any replication on its Asian flank. Yet while Russia has an interest in protecting North Korea, which started life as a Soviet satellite state, it is not giving Pyongyang a free pass: it backed tougher United Nations sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear tests last month.

But Moscow is also playing a fraught double game, by quietly offering North Korea a slender lifeline to help insulate it from US-led efforts to isolate it economically. A Russian company began routing North Korean internet traffic this month, giving Pyongyang a second connection with the outside world besides China. Bilateral trade more than doubled to \$31.4 million in the first quarter of 2017, due mainly to what Moscow said was higher oil product exports.

At least eight North Korean ships that left Russia with fuel cargoes this year have returned home despite officially declaring other destinations, a ploy US officials say is often used to undermine sanctions against Pyongyang. And Russia, which shares a short land border with North Korea, has also resisted US-led efforts to repatriate tens of thousands of North Korean workers whose remittances help keep the country's hard line leadership afloat.

"The Kremlin really believes the North Korean leader-

ship should get additional assurances and confidence that the United States is not in the regime change business," Andrei Kortunov, head of the Russian International Affairs Council, a think-tank close to the Russian Foreign Ministry, told Reuters. "The prospect of regime change is a

serious concern. The Kremlin understands that (US President Donald) Trump is unpredictable. They felt more secure with Barack Obama that he would not take any action that would explode the situation, but with Trump they don't know." Trump, who mocks North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as a "rocket man" on a suicide mission, told the United Nations General Assembly last month he would "totally destroy" the country if necessary. He has also said Kim Jong Un and his foreign minister "won't be around much longer" if they made good on a threat to develop a nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the United States.

ting back trade as it toughens its line on its neighbour's ballistic missile and nuclear program, Russia is increasing its support. People familiar with elements of Kremlin thinking say that is because Russia flatly opposes regime change in North Korea.

Russian politicians have repeatedly accused the United States of plotting so-called color revolutions across the former Soviet Union and any US talk of unseating any leader for whatever reason is politically toxic in Moscow. Russia's joint military exercises with neighboring Belarus last month gamed a scenario where Russian forces put down a Western-backed attempt for part of Belarus to break away. With Russia due to hold a presidential election in March, politicians are again starting to fret about Western meddling.

In 2011, President Vladimir Putin accused then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of trying to stir up unrest in Russia and he has made clear that he wants the United States to leave Kim Jong Un alone. While condemning Pyongyang for what he called provocative nuclear tests, Putin told a forum last month in the eastern Russian port of Vladivostok that he understood North Korea's security concerns about the United States and South Korea.

Vladivostok, a strategic port city of 600,000 people and headquarters to Russia's Pacific Fleet, is only about 100 km from Russia's border with North Korea. Russia would be fiercely opposed to any US forces deploying nearby in a reunited Korea. "(The North Koreans) know exactly how the situation developed in Iraq," Putin told the economic forum, saying Washington had used the false pretext that Baghdad had weapons of mass destruction to destroy the country and its leadership. "They know all that and see the possession of nuclear weapons and missile technology as their only form of self-defence. —Reuters



Moscow playing a fraught double game

Strategic Border

To be sure, Beijing's economic ties to Pyongyang still dwarf Moscow's and China remains a more powerful player in the unfolding nuclear crisis. But while Beijing is cut-

Independence or bust: Catalan leader boxed in

Catalonia's pro-independence leader Carles Puigdemont has called for the European Union to mediate with Spain over the region's future, but for many Catalans the intensity of a police crackdown on a banned referendum may mean it is too late for compromise. Across Catalonia's separatist heartland of Osona county, politicians said police action, using rubber bullets and batons against voters in the independence vote, left little room in the independence camp for anything short of secession.

"People here have completely disconnected from the Spanish state," said Joan Coma, a councillor for the Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), a small anti-capitalist party which has an outsized influence on Puigdemont's Catalan government. "Independence will be unilateral," said Coma, who police arrested last year and released in June on charges of inciting civil disobedience and who is councillor in Osona's capital Vic.

Before Sunday's vote, members of Puigdemont's PdeCat party said they would be ready to accept greater fiscal and political autonomy without full independence for Catalonia, a region with its own language and an industrial and tourism powerhouse that accounts for a fifth of Spain's economy. But widespread anger over the crackdown on the referendum, declared illegal by Madrid, now makes any such strategy politically risky, given it would be unlikely to sustain broad support from independence supporters and from within Puigdemont's own ruling coalition in the Catalan parliament.

The pro-independence Catalan National Assembly (ANC), which has organised protests of hundreds of thou-

sands of secessionists in the past, interpreted Puigdemont's push for mediation as essentially a call for EU recognition of a new Catalan state. "It would be the EU that offers to mediate talks to reach an agreement which, I insist, would include Catalonia's independence," ANC spokesman Adria Alsina said. Puigdemont on Tuesday evening said his government would ask the separatist-controlled Catalan parliament to declare independence within 48 hours of tallying votes from the referendum, which he said could be as soon as this weekend.

This would leave Rajoy with the option of invoking the constitution to suspend the Catalan government and to bring on regional elections. This so-called "nuclear option" could reignite unrest in a region where secessionists are invoking the name of late dictator Francisco Franco in describing Rajoy's tactics. Before Franco's death in 1975, the Catalan language was suppressed.

Constitutional Crisis

An EU spokesman declined to say whether the Union would mediate, although it would be unusual for Brussels to take such a step within one of the bloc's own member states. The EU executive voiced trust in Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's ability to manage this "internal matter", but also called for dialogue between the sides and reminded Madrid of a need to respect citizens' basic rights.

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Catalonia on Tuesday to protest against Sunday's violent crackdown by Spanish police. The referendum has plunged Spain into its worst constitutional crisis in decades, and is a political test for Rajoy, a conservative who has taken a hard



Catalan President Carles Puigdemont is reflected on a window during a press conference in Barcelona on Oct 2, 2017. —AFP

line stance on the issue. Outside of Catalonia, Spaniards mostly hold strong views against its independence drive.

Spain's King Felipe VI, in a rare intervention, accused secessionist leaders on Tuesday of shattering democratic principles and dividing Catalan society. Interviews with five pro-independence politicians in Osona county, a patchwork of farming towns, reveal an uncompromising mood after Sunday's violence which, according to Catalan officials, injured around 900 people across the region.

'We Have Lost Our Fear'

"We have lost our fear," said Jordi Casals, a 39-year-old councillor for the centre-left Esquerra Republicana party in the town of Torroella. "To go back now is impossible." Casals said that when he entered politics over a decade ago, separatist rallies attracted just a few thousand people. On Sunday, 2.26 million people out of 5.34 million registered voters managed

to vote with about 90 percent backing independence, according to Catalan government figures. However, unionists mostly boycotted the referendum.

Puigdemont used vague language open to interpretation when asked what he wanted to achieve from EU-mediated talks. On Monday, he said: "It would be a mediation in which there must be a commitment to re-establish the institutional normalcy." Coma said Sunday's turnout - greater than that of an informal ballot in 2014 according to Catalan officials - made the referendum result binding and the CUP was now mobilizing local assemblies to begin the process of splitting with Spain.

The CUP is crucial to the survival of a separatist Catalan government since it enabled larger parties to form a pro-independence coalition in 2015. As a condition, it forced out Artur Mas as Catalan leader for Puigdemont due to the lack of progress towards independence since the 2014 vote. —Reuters