

In March 1960, the Cuban government assumed control over a US-owned mining company and in June it nationalized four Havana hotels wholly or partially owned by US interests. Early in 1959, Castro, who was facing renewed domestic difficulties and also a threat of invasion, mounted either from hostile regional actors or from the United States, began to purchase arms abroad. These weapons were presumably intended not only to meet the threat of invasion but also to equip his own expeditions against hostile or ideologically unacceptable neighbouring regimes, as for example that against the Dominican Republic in mid-1959. In this sense, it should be stressed that Castro, while not perhaps a creature of the Soviets, was a deeply destabilizing new factor in regional politics. These insurrectionary activities were not particularly appreciated in the United States and the Americans refused Castro's request for a \$4 million arms deal. The United States, moreover, sought the cooperation of its friends and allies in maintaining the arms embargo against Cuba which it had put into effect late in the Batista period. Castro then sought to purchase weapons in Europe, with some success. When one of the ensuing shipments aboard the French ship *La Coubre* blew up in Havana harbour in March 1960, Castro accused the United States of sabotage and threatened to buy arms from the Soviet Union.

In the meantime, the Cubans were seeking through the diversification of their foreign trade to reduce their vulnerability to US economic pressure. This brings us to the beginnings of Soviet involvement in the growing rift between the United States and Cuba. In February 1960, Soviet Deputy Chairman Mikoyan arrived in Havana to conclude a trade agreement in which the Soviet Union would purchase one million tons of Cuban sugar a year from 1961 to 1964, 425 thousand tons to be purchased in the remainder of 1960 — in return for Soviet oil and capital goods. This was followed in late March by the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union (they had been broken by Batista in 1952), and Cuba's repudiation of the US-sponsored Rio Pact — a regional security arrangement bringing together almost all states in the hemisphere. These two steps together signalled a deliberate Cuban policy of loosening its ties with the United States and of balancing massive US preponderance in the region with ties to sympathetic great powers elsewhere. Soviet oil deliveries began in April 1960, bringing with them the first major US challenge to Castro's power.

Through most of 1959 and early 1960 the United States sought to avoid confrontation with Castro. The State Department, for exam-