

Trip to the East: Politburo Delegation in China, Laos and Vietnam (Analysis)



News from Vietnam: The head of the organ of the Communist Youth League Ho Chi Minh, Le Xuan Son, presents the newspaper Tiền Phong (Vanguard) to UJC Chair Aylín Álvarez (2nd from left) (Source: [Twitter](#)).

The most extensive trip to Asia by a Cuban Politburo delegation in a long time came to an end in Hanoi on Thursday. The high-ranking delegation was led by PCC cadre representative and Díaz-Canel confidant Roberto Morales. The visit to the socialist sister countries of China, Laos and Vietnam was intended to revive party relations on a personal level, which had been interrupted by Cornea. It was not just a matter of shaking hands and signing agreements: The delegation's declared goal this time was also to "exchange experiences on the processes of socialist construction." Is "reform and opening" now coming to the Caribbean? "Cuba Today" takes a look at the results of the trip.

Trade and history

Cuba has maintained close relations with the three countries for many decades. The ties are particularly close with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Cuba's longstanding support for the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (FNL) after the U.S. invasion began in August 1964 has remained unforgotten in Hanoi. Fidel Castro declared Cuba's willingness to "give its own blood for Vietnam" during a 1973 visit, a phrase that Vietnam's parliamentary speaker, Dinh Hue, also echoed repeatedly during his mid-April visit. Relations with the People's Republic of China were difficult for a long time after the Sino-Soviet discord beginning in the mid-1960s, but have developed steadily since 1989 and are now at an all-time high.

In 2016 and 2020, China replaced Venezuela as the island's most important trading partner, with total goods sales then declining through 2020 as a result of the onset of the recession (see chart). Vietnam is Cuba's second most important trading partner in Asia after China, and the most important in terms of food imports: two out of every three grains of rice that end up on Cuban plates come from Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The volume of trade was recently \$335 million per year. Vietnam is also the largest Asian issuer of foreign investment in Cuba, well ahead of China, and is the only foreign concessionaire to operate an industrial park in the Mariel Special Economic Zone (ZEDM).

Trade relations between Cuba and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, or Lao PDR, which has a population of 7.4 million, are minimal. However, party relations between the PCC and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) are "in excellent shape," as both sides recently expressed.

From Beijing to Vientiane

The Cuban delegation's Asia trip kicked off with a visit to Beijing on April 23. In addition to Morales, the group included the latest newcomer to the Politburo, Joel Queipo Ruiz. The new head of the PCC Economic Department had been elected directly from the grassroots level to the Politburo Secretariat at the last Party Congress in 2021. In addition, the head of the "Nico López" Party School, Rosario Pentón Díaz, and the secretary of the UJC Communist Youth League, Aylin Álvarez García, were also part of the six-member delegation.

After laying a wreath at the Mao Soleum of state founder Mao Zedong, the delegation paid a visit to the Party Museum of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which opened in 2021, and Morales was impressed by its modern technology. A meeting with Premier Li Qiang was followed by a [theory seminar between the two parties](#). The fifth (and first post-Corona) event in this format was titled: "Maintaining and Strengthening the Party's Integral Leadership to Achieve New Victories in the Cause of Socialist Construction in Cuba and China." "The development of our economies, political and ideological work, and the role of youth in the continuity of our socialist heritage represent priorities today in the joint work of building socialism, each with its own characteristics," Morales said, summarizing the substantive priorities. The trip continued to Shanghai, where the Cubans took in the CCP's founding site and the Gubei Civic Office. Although the trip focused on political rather than trade issues, economic consultations were also held in Shanghai. At the same time, the Cuban-Chinese TV magazine "Contextos" was launched in Havana to explain China to the Cuban public.



First party seminar between PCC and LPRP on April 29 in Vientiane (Source: [Prensa Latina](#))

On April 28, the delegation landed for a two-day stay in Vientiane, where Morales met with LRVP Secretary General Thongloun Sisoulith. The first theory seminar between the CPs of Cuba and Laos also took place there. The "updating" of the socialist model in Cuba, launched at the PCC's VI Party Congress, requires "the support of science, innovation, constant experimentation and adjustments in the interest of achieving the greatest possible social justice, which is the essence of our project," Morales explained. In doing so, he stressed that "moving forward in this endeavor requires enriching the ideological and practical heritage, especially the contributions of Marx, Lenin and our national heroes." With Prime Minister Sonexay Siphadone and Speaker of Parliament Xaysomphone Phomvihane, possibilities for deepening relations were subsequently explored.

Coffee, rice and market: exchange of experiences in Vietnam

Following the visit to Laos, the delegation arrived in Ho Chi Minh City. The landing took place on April 30, the anniversary of the city's liberation. A meeting with the Vietnamese-Cuban Friendship Society was held just before the fireworks display to mark Reunification Day. In HCMC, the Cuban delegation visited several agricultural projects. This was followed by a visit to the Củ Chi tunnels at the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail where Vietnamese partisans hid during the war. In the capital, Hanoi, Morales met Vietnam's new president, Võ Văn Thưởng, who has held the office since March. Not only with the CPC (China), but also with the CPV (Vietnam), the PCC (Cuba) has maintained a theoretical exchange since 2014. The seminar, also the fifth, was broadly titled "Some theoretical and practical issues in building socialism in Vietnam and Cuba." Just as in China and Laos, agreements between parties, youth associations and party colleges were renewed in Vietnam. Before departing, the Cuban delegation laid a wreath at the statues of Cuban national hero José Martí in Hanoi, and a visit to the military history museum was also on the agenda.

Roberto Morales Ojeda praised the results of Vietnam's Doi Moi (Renewal) reform process, "which has helped Vietnam out of poverty and strongly developed the economy," Morales said. "One of the lessons we take away from Vietnam is the role of the Party in consolidating economic development. Today's visit to the Coop Mary market and Smart N Green Joint

Stock Company farm shows us how much more we can do in Cuba," he added on Twitter. Under reforms launched in 1986 on the Chinese model, Vietnam succeeded in not only kick-starting food production but also generating surpluses after years of hunger via extensive decentralization of agriculture and state-owned enterprises. Allowing market mechanisms, diverse forms of ownership and foreign investment transformed the war-torn country into an Asian "tiger state" within a few years, with continuous growth rates of 6 to 8 percent and a steady decline in poverty.

Agriculture has always been an important pillar of cooperation between Cuba and Vietnam. An anecdote by Raúl Castro in this regard has become legendary:

After the end of the US war, the government in Hanoi had asked Cuba to teach the Vietnamese how to grow coffee. We went, showed them ... Today, Vietnam ranks second in the world as a coffee exporter. And a Vietnamese official asks his Cuban colleague how it is possible that we, who once taught them how to grow, now buy coffee from them. I don't know what the Cuban answered. Surely he said: the blockade. - [Raúl Castro \(2011\)](#)

In 2002, a Cuban-Vietnamese project began to advance rice cultivation in Pinar del Río and Sancti Spíritus. In 2011, the agreement was expanded again to include technology transfers. The goal was for Cuba to produce the 700,000 tons of rice needed each year for its own consumption. The project reached a brief heyday in the middle of the first decade of this century, with yields per hectare rising from three to five tons. However, a lack of fuel and other input supplies slowly brought the project to a halt. As the investment focus shifted to the tourism sector, the Vietnamese withdrew from the project. Finally, the recent crisis gave rice production in Cuba a final blow, with the domestic crop dropping from 273,000 tons in 2018 to 40,000 tons in 2021. As the Vietnamese CP central organ "Nhân Dân" announced, cooperation is now to be resumed in other areas: A delegation of experts in high-tech agriculture such as hydroponics, for which both sides see great potential in Cuba, will soon travel to Havana. Other recently concluded cooperation projects include energy, construction, and civil aviation. Meanwhile, during the return visit of Vietnamese Parliament Speaker Hue, a joint liquid and powder detergent factory was inaugurated in the Mariel Special Economic Zone (ZEDM).

Conclusion: Recipes for Cuba?

In the midst of the worst economic crisis in recent history, Cuba is not only trying to reactivate trade, but is also putting out feelers with regard to the muddled reform process. China, Laos and Vietnam all faced more or less similar problems to Cuba. Although the conditions were different, many of the systemic problems of the classical planned economy remain comparable across national and continental borders - as do the approaches to solving them. If one takes a closer look at the early beginnings of Doi Moi in Vietnam, much reads like the current program of the PCC. Similar to the early days of Vietnam's reform policy, Cuba today is trying to jump-start its economy by opening up foreign trade, decentralizing the state sector while allowing private enterprise and foreign investment, and similar to Vietnam then, Cuba today is under a blockade by the United States and struggling with massive inflation. Unlike China and Vietnam, Cubans today have the chance to evaluate the accumulated years of experience from three different market socialist countries.

From monetary policy to the transformation of state-owned enterprises to the fight against corruption (an area in which Vietnam in particular has made great strides in recent years), there are many points of contact.

In order for the reforms to take effect, however, many pitfalls and obstacles still need to be overcome in practice. Despite partly similar recipes, the way things are cooked in Havana is still completely different. Particularly in the area of agriculture, all Cuban reform approaches have so far come to nothing in terms of results. The powerful Ministry of Agriculture, with its purchasing monopoly Acopio, always seems to return to the old rut of micromanagement, despite years of repeated attempts to purge it. At the same time, there is a lack of money for urgently needed investments in technology, a vicious circle.

President Miguel Díaz-Canel, in his speech at the PCC's VII Party Congress in April 2021, highlighted the "enriching experiences of China and Vietnam" and their "undeniable progress in the economy and standard of living." This was the first time since the end of the Cold War that a PCC party congress named an external model as a point of reference. How much "Doi Moi" or "reform and opening" the Politburo delegation ultimately took back to Cuba remains its secret. However, the fact that, in addition to the expected cadres, the newly appointed economic secretary Queipo was also part of the delegation indicates that people in Havana are expecting more than just a few new anecdotes from the visit. ([Cubaheute](#))