
President Xi Jinping meets Fidel Castro as Beijing aims to capitalise on Cuba ties

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Xi's visit hailed by former revolutionary leader, who says China and Russia 'are two countries called to lead a new world that will allow the survival of humanity'

President Xi Jinping visited Cuba's former revolutionary leader Fidel Castro in Havana on Tuesday as he aims to expand investment in the fellow communist nation, his last stop on a four-country Latin American charm offensive.

"You are the founder of the causes of Cuban revolution and construction and also of the China-Cuba relationship," Xi told Castro, according to Xinhua.

Xi recalled meeting Castro in 2011 and said he was pleased to see the 87-year-old former Cuban leader in good health now.

"You are deeply admired by the Cuban people and have also won the respect of the Chinese people. We will never forget the significant contributions you have made to the bilateral relationship," Xi said.

Castro led Cuba for five decades until failing health prompted him to hand power to his brother eight years ago.

Cuba, the only one-party communist state in the Americas, began opening up its economy in 2008, but has not grown as much as hoped and could desperately use more Chinese investment.

[China and Russia] are two countries called to lead a new world that will allow the survival of humanity
Fidel Castro

Xi for his part has made a point during his tour of reaching out to countries often shunned by US and European investors, including Venezuela and Argentina as well as Cuba.

"This visit will realise the aims of boosting friendship, deepening mutual trust, expanding cooperation and driving development, opening a new phase in the mutually beneficial, friendly cooperation between China and Cuba," said Xi after touching down on Monday night in Havana.

The opening of the Cuban economy – which some analysts see as an effort to follow in the footsteps of the booming Asian giant – has created new opportunities to tighten bilateral ties, said Xi.



Castro and Xi review an honour guard at Havana's Revolution Palace. Photo: Reuters

"Cuba is already fully promoting the updating of its economic model, which means new and important development opportunities for Chinese-Cuban ties," he said.

China is already the Caribbean island's second-largest trading partner after Venezuela and its primary source of credit, filling the gap left by the US economic embargo on Cuba and its long-time exclusion from institutions such as the World Bank.

Coinciding with Xi's trip, about 50 Chinese entrepreneurs travelled to Havana to explore business opportunities, attracted by foreign investment incentives and the future Mariel free trade zone outside the capital.

"We want Chinese businessmen to invest in Cuba and partner with Cuban companies," said Cuba's director general for foreign investment, Deborah Rivas.

Xi also met President Raul Castro, 83, at the Palace of the Revolution, for the signing of a range of bilateral deals.

The second day of his visit will take him to Santiago de Cuba, the country's second-largest city, hit hard by Hurricane Sandy in October 2012.

The storm killed 11 people, destroyed 17,000 homes and damaged thousands more. Xi is expected to announce Chinese cooperation in the city, perhaps in rebuilding housing.



Raul

Castro talks to Xi during a ceremony at Havana's Revolution Palace. Photo: Reuters

Xi's visit to Fidel Castro echoes one by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who kicked off his own Latin America tour in Cuba 10 days ago by meeting with the former revolutionary.

The ageing father of the Cuban Revolution called the visits "historic" in an article in official newspaper *Granma*.

China and Russia "are two countries called to lead a new world that will allow the survival of humanity," he said.

The Chinese and Russian leaders' tours have underlined their growing ties with a region often considered the United States' back yard, and bookended a summit of the BRICS group of emerging powers where calls for less US and European dominance of international affairs took centre stage.

The group – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – launched a new US\$50 billion development bank and US\$100-billion reserve fund designed to provide an alternative to the Western-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

The Cuban president hailed the move as contributing to "a new international order."

Xi kicked off his tour last week in Brazil by proposing a new US\$20-billion infrastructure fund for Latin America, underlining the fast-growing Asian giant's increasing interest in the resource-rich region.

He has also visited Argentina and Venezuela, offering cash-strapped Buenos Aires an US\$11-billion currency swap and signing a raft of oil and mineral deals with Caracas.

Chinese trade with Latin America has grown rapidly in recent years, reaching US\$261.6 billion last year. China is now the second-largest trading partner of many countries, including Argentina and Cuba, and has been Brazil's largest since 2009.

That is a dramatic change from 1990, when China ranked just 17th on the list of Latin American export destinations.

This is Xi's second visit to Latin America since taking office last year. Last year he toured Mexico, Costa Rica and Trinidad and Tobago.
