

Cuba as a cold war client state



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While European Communist nations could generally not act on foreign policy initiatives without the explicit approval of the Soviet Union, this was not the case with Cuba. Its active interventionist policies in Latin America, and later Africa, were at the time thought by the United States and its partners and allies as executed on the direct behest of the Soviet Union. However,

Recent research has proven this not to be the case. It was clearly not a traditional client state, and had the ability to act with a great deal of impunity in much of its international affairs.

The question this paper examines is how much autonomy Cuba had in foreign policy and the limits to its unilateral action. Key considerations are the points at which the Soviet Union interests conflicted with Cuban foreign policy initiatives and what enforcement measures the Soviet Union could have taken to place Cuba in line with its own intentions. It is important to understand the nature and limits of this Cuban foreign policy autonomy because a clarification of the same allows us to better define conflicts in this era as truly proxy wars or battles that were fought for other reasons.

The traditional view of superpowers directing and controlling all the actions of states in this period can be shown to be simply invalid, and Cuba's autonomy in these matters illustrates how much third world nations at the time determined the course of world events.

Even early in its own revolution, Cuba demonstrated the propensity to conduct a foreign policy without "any need to refer to Soviet Union." Typical of this characterization was its warm relationship with Algeria and

the sending of medical aid to a nation thought to be an ideological partner and friend.

This friendship and deployment of medical personnel has been attributed solely to the initiative of Cuba. Beyond this early example of independence of action, the defining nocturne in the development of an independent Cuban foreign policy was the Cuban missile crisis.

The nature of Cuban-Soviet relations was greatly changed during this event and influenced Cuba's decisions in regards to security thereafter. After the Cuban revolution in 1959 and before the Cuban Missile Crisis, relations between the two countries developed slowly.

The Soviet union was clearly wary of agitating the United States, but eventually mutual interests developed around the trade of oil and sugar as much as on ideological grounds. ² As the relationship with Cuba matured and its slant towards Marxism-Leninism became clear, the Soviet union approached the possible placement of nuclear missiles as an experiment. The leadership underestimated the resolve with which the United States would react to these missiles.

It was almost entirely the decision of Premier Nikkita Khrushchev, who is said to have come up with the concept alone while vacationing in Bulgaria. ³ Nikkita Khrushchev was known for not thinking things through and rash decisions were part of his character. The prospect of a United States invasion of Cuba was troubling to him and he had hoped to counter it in a strategic manner. Both nations had reasons to believe an invasion by the United States was

possible, but the Soviet approach to the problem as advocated by Khrushchev was wrong.

Cuba, so soon after the attempted invasion at the Bay of Pigs, and with ongoing covert actions against its government would have accepted any security guarantee and the placement of missiles, and after some deliberate consideration of the missile deployment, viewed it as such. Given this divergence of views between the two nations, it is clear that after the crisis, based upon the understandable Soviet reaction of self preservation over a non-vital issue, a fissure could develop between the two countries because of their diverging views.

Fidel Castro bitterly complained about hearing of a compromise on the issue between the Soviet Union and the United States on the radio and the fact that he was not consulted. " We realized that we had become some type of game token," Castro said at the time. ⁵ Later, he complained to German Democratic Republic representatives that the lack of a border with the Soviet Union meant that no real security guarantee from a United States attack existed, and that Cuba would have to fend for itself. ⁶ From this point on, Cuba largely viewed the

Soviet Union as negatively pragmatic and willing to compromise with the United States in order to avoid conflict. The leaders of Cuba had clear reason to question whether the Soviet Union would always place its own national security interests well above that of Cuba.

As a result, leaders in Cuba developed a different mindset and attitude towards the Soviet Union that made independent foreign policy decisions not

Just possible but likely. This mindset in turn nurtured the belief that it must look after its own security and fostered an approach to foreign policy that neither sought nor needed the approval of the Soviet Union.

In fact, starting in 1963, Cuba used this measure of independence as it looked for ways to demand more economic assistance from the Soviet Union in return for continued allegiance. Techniques they utilized at the time included diplomatic overtures to Peking, in an attempt to use the ongoing Sino-Soviet disputes to their advantage. The Chinese were very critical of the Soviet's commitment to revolutionary and ideological principles, and the rivalry presented Cuba a way to leverage the Soviet Union.

Cuba also refused to sign the Nuclear Test Ban treaty, which while a symbolic move, clearly showed that the Soviet Union could not always dictate foreign policy to Havana.

7 Cuban autonomous tendencies in foreign policy also manifested themselves in predictable ways. After its own revolution, it would seem reasonable for Cuba to support and foment revolution in its closest neighbors. This would have the effect of building regional allies and freeing the Western hemisphere from the domination of the United States.

Cuban revolutionary efforts in South America would seem to be a natural extension of what the beliefs Cuba shared with the Soviet Union. Yet Cuban actions were not encouraged over the long term by the Soviet Union for reasons that had yet again everything to do with the fact the United States was afterwards much more wary in regards to Soviet relations in the Western hemisphere.

It was also true that in the course of time, the Soviet Union wanted the world to perceive it as a peace-loving nation and build commercial ties with Latin American countries.

It could do neither if perceived to be supporting military action in the hemisphere. Such concerns were in contradiction to the ideological aims and ideas of Castro's Cuba and a further reason why Cuba strives to set its own foreign policy agenda apart from the Soviet Union. Such a divergence was not immediately apparent. After the missile crisis, the Soviet Union was perceived somewhat at a political disadvantage to the United States. As a result, it lent tacit and financial support to "national liberation struggles" actively aided by Cuba, such as the one in Venezuela, in order to maintain the appearance of ideological legitimacy.

However, as time progressed, public statements of support for communist and guerrilla movements in Latin America focused on the need to correct injustices rather than promote 'regime change' through violence. There is proof that Moscow financially supported Venezuelan communists through 1965, in line with Cuban policy that armed resistance was necessary. After Khrushchev's death, the Soviet Union reduced such support, an action which was inconsistent with Castro's views. But Castro's views and efforts were not enough to promote successful ideological revolutions across Latin America.

Revolution had failed to take hold in Latin America, and Castro was often at odds with Communist party leaders in such nations such as Venezuela, Chile and Guatemala, in addition with members of the Organization of American States.

Guerrilla movements were defeated in Venezuela, Argentina and Peru, and Scuba's supported candidate against Chile's Allendale lost in elections. Cuba required an arena where revolution was more likely to take hold, and where they could have a free hand to pursue their own agenda. An African continent in the throes of decentralization presented an excellent opportunity.

Cuban revolutionary efforts in Africa had benefits and possible positive outcomes that are not at once obvious to a student of world events. Cuba, as a small poor nation, made deliberate, strategic decisions to expend valuable assets in order to promote evolution a continent away from its homeland.

The reasons were tied much closer to security than are first apparent. If Cuba could establish certain African allies, it had the possibility of drawing resources and building a base of operations from which to eventually promote revolution in South America when the timing was better.

Ultimately, it could play a larger role in its own security by building alliances with African nations. The Soviet Union tacitly supported this through logistical and financial support, and applied no effective limitations on Cuban action.

It could toehold vital logistical, materiel and financial support, but it often chose not to for its own reasons. In each African country the support and amount of coordination varied, and yet it was always present. Zaire was a case where Soviet financial aid to insurgents was clear and substantial.

After the rebels there faced defeat at Existentially in 1964, both China and the Soviet Union felt the moral obligation to support the rebel cause in financial and military terms.

However, only Cuba sent advisors that would end up directly leading rebel units, and this move was not opposed by the Soviet Union as perhaps a similar move in Latin America would have traveling to Africa via Moscow were delayed there because of the lack of coordination. Further, the Soviet Ambassador to Cuba at the time asserts that Cuba did not ask for permission to aid rebels in Zaire, and the Kremlin did not know of the operation ahead of time. Moscow did support Scuba's decision after the fact, and without hesitation or reproach provided logistical support to evacuate Cuban military personnel back to Havana some months later when it was clear that the mission had failed. In the Congo, where another military column was stationed, the Soviet Union rented the Felix Dizziness, a Soviet liner, for use in moving the unit to the African continent.

One member of the mission recalled that because the group was going at the request of the Congolese government, and not an insurgent group, the Soviet Union did not have a problem with their actions. 0 This kind of logistical support would become typical of how the Soviet Union aided Cuba in Africa, with Cuba seemingly taking the lead on deciding what kind of missions it would undertake on the continent. Although not irrefutably supported by recorded evidence, this pattern would seem to have continued in Guiana-Bissau. The Soviet Union provided financial assistance to rebels in 1962, long before the Cubans became involved there. However, the Cuban military presence from 1966 onwards is characterized as enhancing the

Soviet support and the deployment of Cuban troops conducted on the initiative and deliberate decision of the Cubans alone. However, when it came to Angola, the difference in aims between the Soviet Union and Cuba became much clearer early in the conflict.

Long before South Africa entered the war in Angola, Cuba agreed the Soviet Union that action was necessary to intervene in order to assist a revolutionary movement. However, the Soviet Union by this time was genuinely concerned that sending Cuban troops to Angola would hurt and offend many African countries, and it was not clear whether such aid was absolutely required. Cuba could not provide aid in a meaningful way until later in the conflict not so much because of Soviet restrictions on their behavior, but rather a lack of resources. It was only after it was clear that the South African invasion that Soviet and Cuban policies again coincided and the Cubans received unequivocal support in the deployment of troops. The option to send troops in the first place would appear always to have been the choice of the Cubans alone.

In the case of Angola, Cuba would have intervened at whatever level it could for its own reasons.

After several years of taking independent decisions in Africa, it is clear now that Cuba relied solely on its own interests in making foreign policy decisions. It was consistently taking the lead and relying on Soviet approval and support after the fact. By the time of the conflict in Ethiopia, the Soviets were in fact caught in a cycle of supporting proxy wars that were not in their

vital national security interest. There existed, according to Anatoly Dobbin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, “ a simple but primitive idea of international solidarity, which meant doing our duty in the anti-imperialist struggle. 13 The Soviet tacit support and leeway given to Scuba’s actions in Ethiopia had to come to a conclusion as it gained little from the conflict.

After being forced into the awkward political situation of having to switch alliances from Somalia to that of Ethiopia, it firmed relations with Cuba but harmed relations with the United States. Dobbin his contention that the supply to Cuban troops and especially the airlift of Cubans there did little except to convince Washington that the Soviets had a broad concerted offensive plan for Africa and this was deleterious for dtenet.

The answers to why the Soviet Union supported Scuba’s actions in Africa may be summarized in much the same way as Latin America, only it provides somewhat of a counterpoint to the Western hemisphere. United States did not care as much about the African continent, as typified by Henry Assigner’s conspicuous lack of interest in the imminent. Generally speaking, throughout the Cold War, Europe retained most of the attention of foreign policy makers and Viet Name occupied much of what was left of U.

S. Priorities at least through 1975.

The United States seriously considered sending only indirect aid to Africa at various times. This could at least be countered by guerrilla action, as opposed to direct military intervention, which could not. In the wake of Vietnam, the United States had little incentive to send U. S.

Military personnel to Africa. This was clearly to Cuba's advantage, although it did not always perform well against mercenaries and proxy forces paid for by the United States either, such as was the case in Zaire. Overall, Cuba had much more latitude in conducting its foreign policy on the African continent.

Later on, as Cuban efforts became embarrassing to the Soviets, logistical and financial support waned. Overall, the reasons why the Soviet Union would want to restrict the activities of Cuba are connected with the Soviet Union's relations with the United States.

An alliance with Cuba, a neighboring country of the United States openly defiant of it, was of definite prestige value to the Soviet Union. However, as a country with close ties to the Soviet Union located in close proximity to the United States, any hostile action Cuba's part were interpreted by the United States as executed in concert if not directed by the Kremlin.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger repeatedly refers to Soviet directed aggression as opposed to Cuban independent action in his own book, *Diplomacy*. At the time of Angola he had described Cuba as "acting merely as the client state," and as "mercenaries" in Angola. ¹⁴ This was typical of the narrow view held by the United States government at the time, and it discounted the ability of smaller nations to influence world events.

The real limits to Cuban independent foreign policy and how it relates to Soviet Union support are therefore tied to how much Cuba's actions were of prestige value to the Soviets versus the overall security of the Soviet Union. If Cuban actions were supportive or did not directly conflict with the image that the Soviet Union wanted to project, the Soviets reacted positively to

them and provided logistical and financial support. Cuban actions in Africa in turn burnished the Communist revolutionary credentials of the Soviet leadership at little cost to them.

Later, as arms limitation talks and dtenet became more important to the security of the Soviet Union, its foreign policy would diverge from that of Cuba and overt support of the same could not be reasonably expected. The balance between the prestige and the security of the Soviet Union again becomes most apparent in relation to its dealings with the United States. Soviet officials were very aware of how harmful this support for Cuba could be to good relations with the United States and had to carefully weigh how much these revolutionary activities could harm their image abroad, in particular in the United States.

Ironically, the same viewed by the United States as proof that Cuba acted solely on the behest of Moscow. In general, the Soviet Union was a proud supporter of the non-aligned movement. It supported third world nations' rights to self-determination out of ideological principle, but seemed most satisfied to support independent action by those nations that were geographically farthest from its own borders. Cuba fit this description and although the alliance was costly for the Soviet Union, it could afford to treat Cuba somewhat differently than its closest neighbors. Its closest neighbors in the Warsaw

Pact were a buffer to stem off any possible future invasion. The importance of the existence of buffer states for a nation that lost a minimum of 20 million lives (and by some Russian estimates 27 million, the calculation is

somewhat controversial by any source that I consulted) in World War II cannot be overstressed.

It was an important piece of Soviet foreign policy. Cuba was not in a geographical position to buffer any sort of invasion from Western nations, therefore its foreign policy somewhat of a lesser concern to Moscow than for example, the German Democratic Republic.

Upon practical examination, it is also questionable how much the Soviet Union could have actually brought Cuba into line with its policies if a serious disagreement persisted. Soviet limits on political expression and independent action within the European Soviet Bloc are infamous. The brutal repressions of rebellion within the Warsaw Pact nations of Hungary and Czechoslovakia molded Western expectations that the Soviet Union controlled its allies through whatever means was necessary.

Relevant to defining Scuba's unique and independent character is the fact that Castro refused to modern the Czechoslovakia invasion at the time.

This was widely unexpected, and he went so far as to excoriate Czech leaders who were taking the country on a path to capitalism and imperialism. 1 5 It was certainly a move that would please the Soviets, but there were practical implications of this outlook. If the Soviet Union had actually been willing to lose an ally so close to home, how much more willing would they be to lose an ally that was half a world away and that demanded annual subsidies and expensive economic support in return for loyalty?

The unlikely limits the Soviet Union old have placed on Cuban action would not have been as dangerous as perhaps an invasion or military occupation of Cuba, although the Soviet Union kept token forces garrisoned on the island nation.

For one reason, Cuba already had a long history predating Fidel Castro of fighting insurrections and would not have been easily cowed by military force of a superior power. For another reason, any instability in Cuba would have been deemed entirely unacceptable to the United States, given its geographical proximity.

The United States would have viewed this military aggression in the most unfavorable terms. A naval blockade similar to one executed by the United States, which the Soviet Union could have performed, would have been met with the utmost diplomatic and military resistance of the United States. As stated, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States was especially sensitive to overt and covert Soviet military aggression within the Western hemisphere. That leaves withholding of economic support as a possible means of enforcing the will of the Soviet Union.

There is evidence now that this could have been ineffective. Although Cuba lost annual financial support in the amounts of hundreds of millions of dollars year, 18 years later they show few real, unmistakable signs of imminent collapse sanctions would not have worked either. As a result, the reality of what existed in Cuba was less a dependent vassal state as it was widely perceived in the United States at the time. Cuba could be said to be more in the mold of Ditto's Yugoslavia, which was Fidel Castor's model for his nation.

Cuba was effectively a client state of the United States from the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 until 1959. Because of this, and to some degree despite Fidel Castor's eventual embrace of Marxism-Leninism, perhaps it is not surprising in retrospect that Cuba would seek to maximize Cuban independent action and reduce dependence upon other nations. Few would have expected the Soviet Union to collapse before the government in Cuba, and yet that is what happened. The government of Cuba, if not the people, has benefited from following its own policies and plans in contrivance with those of global superpowers.

Because of the geographical distance and the limits of economic sanctions, it is unlikely the Soviet Union likely could not have restricted the foreign policy of Cuba any more than the United States. The United States, as demonstrated during the Cuban missile crisis, could and would intervene militarily if it believed its security to be at stake. The repercussions today are often echoed in relationships between larger and smaller states that theoretically could be that of a patron to a minion, but in practice defy easy classification.

International relations must be approached truly without the easy classifications and definitions of the Cold War, and appreciated for having a greater complexity than just placing the responsibility for shaping events as always a result of the action of a great power alone. Some relationships, such as those between the United States and Israel, have been defined by scholars as driven by the smaller state (as described by Marshier and Walt in *The Israel Lobby*).

Further, decisions of the United States with smaller nations in the post Soviet era have at times been heavily influenced by the smaller nation when it is against the United States' best interest on purely realist grounds.

An example is the decision by the United States to recognize as genocide Turkey's actions against the Armenians and place a relationship with a NATO ally in jeopardy just when Turkey's support in regard to military operations in Iraq was required. The Westphalia model has inherent flaws that does not provide for the protection of states against encroachment on the states' sovereignty by transnational organizations and others.

However, as illustrated by the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba, it still provides a weaker state a legitimacy to pursue its own idealistic goals even with limited economic means. It can influence world events and make great powers address issues that would not otherwise receive attention or drag them into conflicts that are not in their best interest. The impact and achievements of these nations may not be as grand or wide ranging as larger powers, but nonetheless they can influence global events.

1 Squiggles, Piper.