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Politics, History, and Society of Cuba

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### Cuban International Affairs

#### **Introduction**

From the outset of Cuba's Revolution, the US has imposed a severely strict sanctions regime on the island, which has greatly interfered with the Cuban government's ability to trade and engage with the international community. This is certainly not the cause of all of Cuba's problems as Cuba's highly bureaucratized command economy produces debilitating inefficiencies that prevent economic growth. However, the far reaching restrictions imposed by US sanctions subject Cuba to significant disadvantages in every sphere of its economic endeavors. My research will thus explore how Cuba engages in trade and diplomacy with other countries in the face of such serious restrictions, and I plan to research the ways in which Cuba circumvents US sanctions to build diplomatic relations and trade partnerships by analyzing academic literature that discusses Cuban international affairs. I conclude that Cuba has consistently built strong bonds with other countries through various mechanisms, such as their newly pragmatic approach to international relations, construction of ideological alliances, and use of medical diplomacy, in an attempt to circumvent the harsh conditions imposed by US sanctions.

#### **Background on Cuban International Relations**

In order to understand how Cuba's foreign policy has been conducted in recent times, it is essential to have an understanding of how Cuba has engaged with other countries in the past. Following the Cuban revolution, the United States saw Cuba as threatening its national security interests throughout the world, and this has provided the foundation for much of the US's policies toward Cuba. The Organization of American States (OAS) expelled Cuba in 1962 with US support "on the grounds that communism was 'incompatible with principles and objectives of the inter-American system,'" and in 1964, the OAS approved "mandatory diplomatic and economic sanctions" after US-supplied evidence showed Cuban support for Venezuelan guerrilla troops (Leogrande 480). These mandatory sanctions eventually ended in 1975, but at the time, this only served to motivate Cuba's internationalism.

After the 1973 US-backed overthrow of Salvador Allende's socialist regime in Chile, Cuba and the USSR firmly believed that violence, rather than democratic methods, was the only way to move toward spreading communist ideology and governance across the world. The two countries began providing military support for revolutionary movements in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Cuba-USSR support for the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a pro-Soviet Ethiopian offensive against Somali dissidents, and Nicaragua's successful revolution in 1979 earned Cuba greater US hostility, yet these military efforts significantly "raised the prestige and power of revolutionary Cuba" (Fernandez 13). In the first few decades of the Cuban revolutionary government coming to power, the island made a big name for itself on the world stage, but none of this would have been possible without the ties it had with the Soviet Union. Cuba's ability to exert military influence abroad was almost entirely due to the nearly-guaranteed economic security under Cuba's partnership with the USSR. In the early 1970s, Cuba's deteriorating economy and failure to reach its touted goal of a 10-million-ton

sugar harvest forced the island to rely on Soviet financial support, so Cuba “became integrated into the COMECON,” or the Soviet Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (Fernandez 10). With a steady stream of income as the Soviet Union supplied Cuba with cheap oil in exchange for sugar at preferential prices, Cuba underwent a “period of unprecedented foreign activism” and made allies in the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (Fernandez 12).

This internationalism would prove to be relatively short lived though. In 1979, Cuba “damaged its non-aligned credentials” when it sanctioned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which lost much of Cuba’s international support as a leader of the non-aligned movement (Fernandez 14). The US under Reagan began openly combatting socialism in Chile, Nicaragua, and Grenada, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union further diminished Cuba’s military capacity as Cuban trade dropped by 75-80% (Gordon 474). Cuba had earned itself unprecedented US hostility and began to experience the crippling effects of sanctions as the island found itself without much of its longtime international ties to former Soviet countries and military partners. The Special Period would begin shortly afterward, and revolutionary Cuba had to abandon its old approach to internationalism and adopt new tactics to develop international relations from a newly isolated position.

### **Effects of US Sanctions on Cuba’s Foreign Capabilities**

Once Cuba lost the majority of its global connections, the consequences of US sanctions against the island became abundantly clear as sanctions impacted nearly every aspect of Cuba’s ability to conduct foreign relations. New and existing US legislation, which codified sanctions against Cuba and made it extremely difficult to repeal the embargo, have cut the island off from a vast number of trade opportunities and severely stunted Cuban domestic development. The US’s

stated goal for the embargo has always been to bring down the Cuban regime and establish democracy on the island, but this has clearly not happened. Instead, the embargo has largely worked to scare countries away from doing any business with the island, for the restrictions raise transaction costs, block Cuba from receiving any capital assistance from international financial institutions, and, ultimately, make it incredibly risky for countries to invest in or trade with Cuba.

The codification of these sanctions has subjected other countries and foreign corporations to US trade restrictions against Cuba. Both the Torricelli (also known as the Cuban Democracy Act) and Helms-Burton Acts have made the US embargo on Cuba extraterritorial in nature as the US could impose “prohibitions and penalties against third country nationals doing business with Cuba” (Gordon 474). For example, under the Torricelli Act, no ships can dock in the USA within 6 months of stopping in Cuba, and the law further “prohibit[s] foreign subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba” (Gordon 474). This has dire consequences for Cuban society as the country relies on manufactured imports for crucial aspects of its development. Cuban water treatment plants have been built up using American-made components, and the legislation prohibits Cuba from “purchas[ing] parts for its chlorination system,” which “jeopardizes safe drinking water of every city in Cuba with over 100,000 inhabitants” (Gordon 476). The Helms-Burton Act has driven away potential investors like Mexico as the legislation gives US companies the power to sue entities in possession of nationalized property. Cemex, a Mexican corporation specializing in building materials, “withdrew from a joint venture in Cuba for fear of litigation from the US company Lone Star Industries,” and Redpath, a Canadian sugar refining company, also withdrew from Cuba as a result of the Helms-Burton legislation (Gordon 477). While not all countries and foreign corporations abandon business opportunities on the island

because of US law, Cuba has undoubtedly lost out on major streams of income and developmental support from international entities as a result of these laws' extraterritorial nature.

To make matters worse for the Cuban economy, US financial restrictions have heavily hindered Cuba's ability to conduct business with and seek capital investment from global entities. Banking restrictions make it so that "Cubans living abroad often cannot find banks to transmit remittances," and "major Canadian and European banks have stopped doing business with Cuba" as the US is often relentless in enforcing these international financial restrictions (Gordon 477). In 2009, the US Treasury Department "fined Credit Suisse Bank almost half a billion dollars" for transactions involving Cuba (Gordon 477). These restrictions result in huge losses for the Cuban economy as they greatly raise transaction costs while making business with Cuba exponentially more risky. Due to the increased risk factor brought about by US measures, "interest rates for financing Cuban development projects ha[ve] reached 22%," and Alimport, Cuba's national food import company, "lost \$45m [in 2012] because it could not engage in direct transactions with US banks" (Gordon 477). At times, estimates for Cuba's loss of trade as a result of the US embargo amount to billions of dollars, but the island cannot even seek support from international institutions like the IMF or the World Bank. The Helms-Burton Act requires "US representatives on [these institutions'] boards to oppose Cuba's admission" while also requiring the US to "withhold payments" in the event that Cuba is ever accepted (Gordon 480). All of these stipulations affect development projects on the island and disadvantage Cuba's capability to seek international support and trade.

Because of US sanctions, many countries and multinational corporations refrain from doing business out of fear of US retribution, and there is no doubt that the US embargo can have fatal outcomes for the Cuban people. From health to development, Cuban society misses out on

necessary opportunities to trade and improve the lives of its citizens as sanctions make it extremely difficult to receive medical supplies, crucial infrastructure components, and financial assistance from outside markets. As a result, preventable diseases from tainted water supplies are unnecessarily common on the island, and the Cuban economy has been excluded from accessing foreign goods that would inevitably improve its health and physical infrastructure. The extent of US sanctions against the island is almost unimaginable and would surely come as a shock to many if they knew the extent of it, which is why the question of how the Cuban government builds international relationships is even more fascinating and critical for understanding Cuban society.

### **Cuban Efforts to Establish International Relationships**

In general, Cuban foreign relationships center on three ideas: economic pragmatism, ideological friendships, and medical diplomacy. Each of these three ideas drive Cuban relationships as they tend to bring about mutual benefits to both countries involved. With these concepts in mind, Cuba has been able to build new international relationships even in the face of profound American hostility.

Once the Soviet Union fell and Cuba lost much of its former trade network, it was of vital importance that Cuba engage in pragmatic relations since economic security was no longer guaranteed. Because of this, Cuba began a renewed effort of “establishing, or repairing, state-to-state relations” and began forming relationships with “capitalist and oil-exporting countries” to gain access to necessary goods and “much-needed capital”(Fernandez 15). One such relationship that Cuba began repairing was that with the United States. This relationship has a far way to go before it can be considered amicable, but in 2000, the Clinton administration

enacted the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSRA) allowing “US firms to sell... agricultural products and medicine to Cuba” (Messina et al 1). Because of standing restrictions, trading processes are still incredibly complicated, but US agricultural producers have become major players in Cuban food imports as the US became “Cuba’s most important supplier of imported food products” between 2003 and 2010 (Messina et al 1). Along with this, Cuba began to open its economy to market forces as it made regulated foreign direct investment (FDI) and tourism central aspects of its development. Countries like Mexico and Canada began doing business with Cuba, and the Canadian corporation Sherritt International “has been operating in... important sectors as oil, mining, agriculture, and tourism” (Campos and Prevost 493). Other factors like Trump’s rejection of normalization with Cuba and “Venezuela’s large-scale socio-economic and political crisis... [also] forced Cuba to intensify cooperation with non-regional partners,” namely China and Russia, and “Russia has invested heavily in modernizing the Cuban railways, supplying locomotives and other equipment” (Jeifets et al 215). The Cuban relationship with Russia and China is definitely ideologically driven, but pragmatism is most certainly a contributing factor as Cuba needs these wealthier countries’ investments. Cuba has demonstrably had to reconcile some of its differences with capitalist countries so as to have access to the resources and capital that its economy needs.

Like its past foreign policies, Cuba also relies on idealistic ideological alliances mostly throughout Latin America. The Pink Tide movement ushered in a new era of Latin American solidarity with Cuba, and in 2009, El Salvador “became the last Latin American country to restore relations with Cuba” as the country elected a former member of the left-wing FMLN guerrilla group (Campos et al 481). The leftist wave that flooded the majority of Latin American governments posed an immense threat to US hemispheric hegemony, and with this political card

in hand, Cuba was able to use these ideological bonds to reestablish normal relations with its neighbors. At the 39th General Assembly of the OAS, Latin American states “moved to repeal the 1962 resolution that suspended Cuba’s membership,” and with the possibility of defeat and weakened relations in Latin America, “the United States supported repeal in exchange for language” that committed Cuba to adopting more democratic policies (Campos et al 481). This solidarity carried over to the Summit of the Americas as well, for the Brazilian, Colombian, Nicaraguan, and Ecuadorian heads of state either boycotted or claimed that they would skip the next summit if the US continued excluding Cuba. Seeing the looming threat, the US was consequently forced to accept Cuba’s attendance. These countries’ ideological alliance has essentially given Cuba power to reassert itself as a country that could conduct normal relations throughout Latin America and the western hemisphere.

The most important of Cuba’s ideological relationships is that with Venezuela under the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA). The election of Hugo Chavez led to the two countries forming an everlasting relationship in the fight against foreign dependency and US interference throughout the region, and this relationship helped lead to the formation of ALBA in 2004, which “provide[s] institutionalization for the bilateral relations between Cuba and Venezuela” and acts as “a progressive alternate vision to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) that was strongly promoted by the United States and its allies” (Campos et al 499). Venezuela became Cuba’s most important trading partner as the two countries sought to form a progressive regional partnership to counter US influence. Venezuela-Cuba cooperation works to “circumvent the US embargo of Cuba... grow the supply of Venezuelan oil in the island... reinvigorate the global leftist movement, and condemn American” hostility, and as part of these goals, Venezuela, similarly to the previous Soviet-Cuba arrangement, sells Cuba oil “at a



fixed, preferential price (US\$27 a barrel)” (Romero and Collard 108). ALBA has also worked to bring more countries into closer relations with Venezuela and Cuba. Once the ALBA agreement was signed in 2004, “Bolivia joined later that same year, Nicaragua in 2006, Dominica and Honduras in 2008, and Antigua Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Ecuador in 2009” (Romero and Collard 108). The Venezuela-Cuba connection under ALBA has worked to promote development of Cuban railways, telecommunications, and agriculture, and Cuba even helps train Venezuelan troops and coordinates intelligence operations. As can be seen, Venezuela has become Cuba’s closest ally in recent years as the two countries’ relationship strongly resembles that of Cuba’s relationship with the Soviet Union.

However, Cuba does not merely depend on preferential treatment from other countries as the island has offered hundreds of countries substantial professional assistance through its medical diplomacy. Medical diplomacy “has been a cornerstone of Cuban foreign policy since the outset of the revolution,” and this has “helped Cuba garner symbolic capital” while also “contribut[ing] to making Cuba a player on the world stage” (Feinsilver 86). Cuba has helped hundreds of countries in the face of health crises and international disasters with its plentiful supply of doctors, and Cuban support for countries across the world has gained the island important support in the United Nations. “South Africa began importing Cuban doctors in 1996” and became “the financier of some Cuban medical missions,” but this agreement to move Cuban medical assistance throughout Africa has been more limited in scope than the Cuba-Venezuela agreement (Feinsilver 92). Cuba gives Venezuela tens of thousands of medical workers and trainers in exchange for a steady supply of oil at preferential prices. Cuban medical teams have even helped in “far flung places” like the Pacific islands of East Timor/Timor-Leste, Nauru, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Solomon Islands, and Cuba has gone as far as to offer

developed countries medical assistance like when it offered the Bush administration medical support after Hurricane Katrina (Feinsilver 92). Cuba's medical prowess has even helped the island obtain important streams of income. Cuba has been able to develop its medical tourism industry and grown its medical exports to ALBA countries, and in 1997, medical tourism revenue stood at "US\$20 million, 98.5 percent of which was plowed back into the domestic health system" (Feinsilver 99). Cuba's medical expertise played a significant role in its preferential partnership with Venezuela while also gaining the island much needed international political support and income, for it is hard for countries to maintain hostility toward a small island that graciously offers humanitarian aid whenever possible.

## **Conclusion**

To find lasting ties with other countries as a means to achieve economic independence and sufficient trade relationships, Cuba has used its vast medical and professional human capital, leftist ideology, and pragmatism to find ideal partners to engage. Many of the countries that Cuba cooperates with are also looking for ways to avoid US interference in their affairs, and in these relationships, Cuba has found its closest and most meaningful diplomatic allies and trade partners. Cuba has undeniably turned away from its military diplomacy of the past and has worked to establish itself as a well-intentioned country that deserves international support even in the face of outright US hostility. There is no doubt that Cuba has an immense amount of progress to make, but as Cuba works to restructure its economy and adopt more democratic means of governance, it seems that the island is gradually coming closer to gaining a position of normalcy in the international arena, which may one day earn the country much needed openness and opportunities in the global economy.

### Annotated Bibliography

- Campos, Carlos Oliva, and Gary Prevost. "Cuba's Relations with Latin America." *Social Research*, vol. 84, no. 2, 2017, pp. 487–506. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26550339>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023. – This article examines the important relationships that Cuba has built throughout Latin America and the ways in which Cuba has gained influence throughout the region. Much of the analysis in this article shows how Cuba has been able to gain important allies in Latin America in a way that has forced the US to reconsider its diplomatic stance toward the island.
- "Cuba and Venezuela Review Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement." *TeleSUR*, 22 June 2021, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Cuba-and-Venezuela-Review-Comprehensive-Cooperation-Agreement-20210622-0012.html>. – This short news article shows that Cuba and Venezuela continue to engage in cooperative agreements. While the two countries struggle economically, these kinds of agreements are crucial for creating mutually beneficial relationships that provide much needed support for the Cuban economy.
- Feinsilver, Julie M. "Fifty Years of Cuba's Medical Diplomacy: From Idealism to Pragmatism." *Cuban Studies*, vol. 41, 2010, pp. 85–104. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24487229>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023. – Feinsilver's journal article on Cuba's medical diplomacy takes a deep look at the extent to which Cuba has engaged with other countries via the use of its human capital. One important point of this piece is the conclusion that Cuba's medical diplomacy has gained the country significant international political support that has been demonstrated in the UN General Assembly.
- Fernandez, Damian J. *Cuba's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1988. – This book examines some of the ways in which Cuba engages in foreign policy with Middle Eastern countries. Much of Cuba's relationships with these countries can be traced back to Cuba's military support of anti-imperialist movements, and Cuba's efforts in the region have gained it some fairly important diplomatic allies.
- Gordon, Joy. "Economic Sanctions as 'Negative Development': The Case of Cuba." *Journal of International Development*, vol. 28, no. 4, 8 Feb. 2015, pp. 473–484., <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3061>. – Joy Gordon looks at many of the ways that the US sanctions regime negatively affects Cuba and its developmental prospects. Importantly, Gordon finds that "extraterritorial" sanctions cause US sanctions to also extend to other countries' dealings with Cuba, which subjects Cuba to further isolation in the international community.
- Jeifets, Lazar, and Anton Andreev. "Cuba and Post-Soviet Russia." *Rethinking Post-Cold War Russian-Latin American Relations*, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022, pp. 206–221. – This chapter shows how Cuba and Russia rebuilt their relationship following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This shows how, despite Russia essentially leaving Cuba without an immense amount of trade, Cuba had to be pragmatic and find opportunities for trade wherever it could.

- Leogrande, William M. "Normalizing US-Cuba Relations: Escaping the Shackles of the Past." *International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 3, May 2015, pp. 473–488., <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12282>. – This article also shows how Cuba and the US have come to more friendly diplomatic terms due to external pressure placed on the United States by other countries in Latin America.
- Messina, William A., et al. "The United States and Cuba: As Diplomatic Relations Warm, Do Trade Relations?" *Agricultural & Applied Economics Association*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1–8. – This article shows much of Cuba's pragmatic approach to importing food from the US. While some may think that there is no trade whatsoever between the two countries, Cuba has to deal with high transaction costs in order to import food from the US so as to provide basic goods for its people.
- Parraga, Marianna. "Venezuela to Ship Fuel to Cuba on US-Blacklisted Supertanker." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 13 Mar. 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/venezuela-ship-fuel-cuba-us-blacklisted-supertanker-2023-03-13/>. – This news article shows how Cuba is still heavily involved in trade with Venezuela. The tanker that delivered oil to Cuba has also been found to have ties to some Middle Eastern countries as well as possible terrorist connections.
- Romero, Carlos A, and Suzanna Collard. "South-South Cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba." *South-South Cooperation: A Challenge to the Aid System?*, IBON Books, Quezon City, The Philippines, 2010, pp. 107–114. – This chapter discusses the cooperation that has grown between Venezuela and Cuba. Romero really demonstrates how Venezuela may be Cuba's closest ally and trade partner in the current day and age.