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Introduction

This chapter aims to show the extent to which the actions of Luis Almagro, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), towards Cuba (and Venezuela and Nicaragua, although they will not be addressed here) since 2015 has led to the re-politicisation of Cuba as an issue and of the OAS as an organisation. Most literature on international organisations points out that they tend to tackle issues in technical ways, to avoid conflict and thus “manage” or “govern” the world order in a “depoliticized” way (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1989; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). But recent scholarship has shown that international organisations in fact undergo processes of both politicisation and depoliticisation, just like other bureaucracies (Petiteville, 2016; 2017). I understand politicisation to be the crafting of a debate around an issue that generates collective mobilisation, polarisation and cleavage, and ideological controversies and conflicts (Petiteville, 2016). Politics are generally deflected by specific processes within international organisations: their technification and reliance on “objective” expertise or universal norms, their avoidance of conflict and dilation in time (Louis and Maertens, 2021).

The OAS is a specific type of international organisation, being dominated by one superpower in a continental context of great power asymmetry. Indeed, the US is both the provider of most of the organisation’s budget¹ and home to its headquarters. Because of the history of US military and political intervention on the subcontinent, the OAS has often been portrayed and perceived as a highly political and politicised organisation that advances the specific interests of the US. However, many scholars and experts have argued that US influence has diminished over the years (Boniface, 2002; Shaw 2004), especially in the 2000s, thanks to the emergence of left-of-centre governments in many South American nations and the creation of new regional bodies such as ALBA, CELAC and UNASUR, which excluded the US (and Canada) (Lopez-Levy, 2009; Gratius, 2018). These new organisations promote a more autonomous kind of regional integration based on cooperation and complementarity and they strongly support

1. 59% in 2020 according to Larry Luxner, “Nestor Mendez discusses OAS priorities in wake of Venezuela, migrant crises”, *The Washington Diplomat*, 29.08.2019 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <https://washdiplomat.com/nestor-mendez-discusses-oas-priorities-in-wake-of-venezuela-migrant-crises/>

the principle of national and regional sovereignty (Legler, 2013). Hence, all include Cuba, despite the ongoing political debates over the nature and legitimacy of its political system. It cannot be said that these new integration processes were not politicised – as they entailed a break from US domination and were often driven by leftist governments – but they were intended to overcome the historical polarisation of the Cuban issue on the subcontinent.

Since Luis Almagro was elected Secretary General in 2015, scholars and experts alike have noted that the role of the OAS General Secretariat has shifted as Almagro's politics have become much more aligned with those of the White House and State Department under President Donald Trump (Marcetic, 2019; Pensack, 2020). As such, the new Secretary General has, among other things, implemented a policy which consists of stigmatising and sanctioning the Venezuelan and Cuban governments. This was unexpected, as his candidacy was strongly promoted by former Uruguayan president José Mujica and was even supported by Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro. The objective of this paper is to try and understand the newfound policy direction of the Secretary General, which I will analyse as a form a repoliticisation of the institution and of the role of the Secretary General. The issue of Cuba and its interaction with the Venezuelan situation have been key to that process. Indeed, since 2015 OAS policy has regained the anti-communist undertones of the 1960s. It once again emphasises the need for a total institutional break, not only with the Cuban government, but also with those considered its allies in the hemisphere and beyond.

I will first outline the history of the OAS resolutions on Cuba to show the extent to which, at the turn of the 21st century, the Cuban question had been somewhat depoliticised, in terms of its management within the inter-American system. I will then show that Luis Almagro's election as Secretary General of the OAS has changed this situation and that his actions have led to the repoliticisation of the Cuban question, which has in turn contributed to the heightened political polarisation on the continent. Finally, I will mention some of the consequences of this position on how democracy is conceptualised in certain political and institutional circles on the subcontinent.

I will not discuss the authoritarian characteristics of the Cuban, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan governments and their violations of human rights, which have been thoroughly documented elsewhere. This paper rather aims at discussing the specific way the OAS is dealing with these political regimes (all of which are associated with the left), without giving the same attention to other forms of political crises and democratic backsliding in the Americas today. This is problematic, because in the very polarised contemporary American context (both north and south), the OAS will be unable to legitimate its mission in terms of human rights and democracy promotion if it does not apply the same rules and criteria everywhere. Indeed, research has shown that lack of consistency in the promotion of democracy and human rights leads to inefficiency (Pace, 2009) and can backfire (Tezcür, 2012). Meanwhile, powerful governments' actions are not trusted if they do not also enforce consistent democratic policies at home (Whitehead, 2016).

1. From anti-communist consensus to foreign policy pragmatism

From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, a shift took place and the anti-communist consensus against the Cuban government gave way to the implementation of pragmatic foreign policies on the subcontinent. The opening of archives and the publication of recent works on the foreign policies of the different Latin American states show that, despite the political differences in Latin America, only the United States has conducted a policy of exception towards Cuba for more than six decades.

An anti-communist consensus

The opening of these diplomatic archives in many countries and new historiographical work on the inter-American system shows that the “Cuban question” was actually less divisive among Latin American governments than had been thought (Keller, 2015; Karl, 2016; Harmer, 2019). While the literature (Lopez-Levy, 2009; Kornbluh and LeoGrande, 2015; Rabe, 2012; Grandin, 2006) seemed to pit governments that were relatively supportive of the Cuban Revolution (whose leaders saw the OAS as an imperialist weapon)² against those who wished to overthrow it through sanctions or an invasion led by US forces, recent work shows that, in fact, almost all governments in the subcontinent were opposed to the socialist turn taken by the leaders of the Cuban Revolution in 1960 and 1961.

The work of historian Tanya Harmer (2019) is particularly stimulating in this regard. She recalls that only three had not broken off diplomatic relations with the USSR by the mid-1950s. All the governments were then characterised by their anti-communist positions and largely aligned with the position of the United States in the East–West conflict. On the Latin American continent, even progressive leaders who had initially recognised the legitimacy of the Cuban revolution (such as José Figueres in Costa Rica and Romulo Betancourt in Venezuela) supported the Cuban exiles during the 1960s. Indeed, the policy of exporting the Cuban revolution by providing support to guerrillas and social movements in the region worried the political elites (Rabe, 1988; Harmer, 2019). The “communist threat” was, thus, understood both as an external threat (Soviet intervention) and an internal one (destabilising traditional political elites).

Harmer shows that while there was consensus on the existence of this threat, there were differences over how to deal with it. Some supported the principle of non-intervention, one of the pillars of the inter-American system, while others wanted to implement a policy of sanctions or even promote a military intervention by the United States. On the other hand, various governments (Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia) argued that punitive measures would be counterproductive, in the sense that they would promote a closer alliance with the Soviet bloc and generate even stronger support for the Cuban experience among social movements and opposition parties in Latin America. Still other governments were interested in developing economic and commercial exchanges with Cuba in order to benefit from the US embargo policy (Marques Bezerra, 2012).

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2. Fidel Castro called the OAS little more than a “Yankee Ministry of Colonies” in a Speech at the Second National Assembly of the People of Cuba on February 4th 1962 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/cuba-and-the-oas-story-dramatic-fallout-and-reconciliation>

All Latin American governments agreed with the US State Department's analysis that the circulation of communist ideas thrived on the widespread poverty.

In any case, it is particularly relevant to underline that all Latin American governments agreed with the US State Department's analysis that the circulation of communist ideas thrived on the widespread poverty among the continent's population (Harmer, 2019). At that time, there was consensus on the need to implement both development and redistributive social policies. All the countries in the subcontinent went on to welcome the launch of the Alliance for Progress (Rabe, 2014), including the most conservative forces (e.g., the pro-Batista Cuban exiles).³

These analyses make it clear that the policy of sanctions against Cuba – suspension from the OAS in 1962, the arms embargo and the suspension of the Inter-American Defense Board, followed in 1964 by restrictions on trade, the implementation of Article 6 of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) and the severance of diplomatic relations – was not solely the result of pressure from the United States, but rather of a common understanding of the threat posed by the Cuban Revolution at that time. The desire expressed by Latin American governments for Cuba's return to the inter-American system in 2009 cannot be seen to be solely the effect of a loosening of US hegemony on the subcontinent.

1975: A silent turning point

To account for the dynamics that led to Cuba's suspension from the OAS being overturned in 2009, we must return to the silent turning point of the mid-1970s. Ten years after the OAS implemented its sanctions policy, several countries had already re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba and others wished to do so. Most countries no longer considered Cuba to be a threat in the hemisphere. Thus, in 1974 the foreign ministers of Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela requested the suspension of the measures voted for in 1964. They did not obtain the necessary 2/3 qualified majority (14 votes out of 21). But it is interesting to note, nevertheless, that the 12 countries that voted in favour of lifting the sanctions asked for a statement of protest against the voting procedure and its consequences to be entered into the minutes of the meeting.

In this statement, they criticise the fact that a blocking minority (three countries) supported by the abstention of six other countries, led to the failure of the request for suspension. They therefore warn that they no longer feel bound by Resolution I of the 9th Meeting of Consultation of 1964 and are free to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba.⁴ They conclude by emphasising that their intention was not to devitalise the inter-American system, but rather to restructure it to respond to the pressing problems facing the subcontinent – “underdevelopment, poverty and violence” – while respecting the central principle of non-intervention. Although the signatories of the text did not explicitly denounce the OAS's double standards, since Chile, Uruguay and Brazil (the three countries in the blocking minority) were all governed by military juntas at the time, the text was a blow to the legitimacy of the inter-American system.

In 1975, Colombia, Venezuela and Costa Rica, accompanied by seven other countries, asked for a new vote on the “freedom of action” of member countries with regard to Cuba at the 16th Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in San José, Costa Rica. This

3. See *Patria*, the pro-Batista newspaper founded by Ernesto Montaner in Miami in the summer of 1959. Accessible at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami.

4. Proceedings of the 15th Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Quito, Ecuador, 8–12 November 1974 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <http://www.oas.org/council/MEETINGS%20OF%20CONSULTATION/Actas/Acta%2015.pdf>

time they obtained the votes in favour of a majority of the countries, including the United States. Only Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay voted against, while Brazil abstained this time, along with Nicaragua.⁵ This vote allowed countries to choose whether to reinstate diplomatic relations with Cuba (Krepp, 2017). It should be noted that several countries (Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina and Panama, as well as several small Caribbean countries) had already resumed relations with Cuba without waiting for the vote (Kruijt, 2017).

The creation of the Latin American Economic System (SELA) in 1975 has already demonstrated the existence of an even greater desire for autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. This organisation included Cuba and excluded the neighbouring superpower, in a context in which military regimes remained in power in the Southern Cone. The organisation's headquarters were located in Caracas and Venezuela was its largest financial contributor (Balfour, 1999). Thus, under the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–1978), Venezuela was already using its extraordinary oil resources to play a major role in the subcontinent's claims to economic and commercial independence. As can be seen, the normalisation of relations of all kinds with Cuba took place long before both the transitions to democracy and the so-called leftward turns in Latin America. It was a pragmatic normalisation as far as economic and commercial relations were concerned, which also benefited from the rise of "Third World" countries coordinating in the Non-Aligned Movement. Indeed, unlike the Cuban case, the OAS refused to take action against the Sandinista guerrillas in 1978–1979 and even issued a resolution advocating "for the replacement of Somoza and leaving the solution of the conflict in the hands of the Nicaraguan people" (Shaw, 1999). All these examples show that Latin American states had much more leeway in decision-making at the OAS than scholars had thought (Shaw, 2004).

The relative depoliticisation of the Cuban issue from the 1980s onwards

This pragmatic normalisation was in play until the 1990s. Before that, in the 1980s, Cuba had been involved in the negotiations conducted by the Contadora Group to find a way out of the crisis in Central America, thus partially bypassing the OAS (Heller, 2003). In 1994, it was César Gaviria, former centre-right Colombian president and then Secretary General of the OAS, who expressed the desire that the organisation take the Cuban question in hand and begin the process of fully reintegrating Cuba into the inter-American system (Gaviria, 1994). In 1996, the OAS General Assembly passed a resolution on "Freedom of Trade and Investment in the Hemisphere", which was a clear and unanimous rejection (except for the negative vote of the United States) of the Helms-Burton Act, which the US Congress passed that same year to strengthen the sanctions against Cuba (Heller, 2003). After joining the Association of Caribbean States in 1994, Cuba joined ALADI, the Latin American Integration Association, in 1998. Governments of both right and left were thus not only tolerating the existence of the Cuban communist regime, but building new regional cooperation organisations with Cuba (Heine and Weiffen, 2014) well before Hugo Chávez became president of Venezuela. Of course, this

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5. Proceedings of the 16th Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, July 29th, 1975, San José, Costa Rica, (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <http://www.oas.org/council/MEETINGS%20OF%20CONSULTATION/Actas/Acta%2016.pdf>

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process accelerated after Chávez won the presidential elections in 1998. He crafted an alliance with the Cuban government that resulted in the creation of ALBA in 2004, which made Cuba a member of eight of the continent's ten regional organisations (Gratius, 2018). The possibility of welcoming Cuba back into the OAS was also regularly discussed during José Miguel Insulza's mandate until the lifting of the 1962 suspension.⁶

Indeed, from the year 2000 onwards, there was bipartisan consensus on the failure of the policy of sanctions and isolation pursued by the United States (Griswold, 2009) and the OAS since the 1962 resolution on Cuba's suspension from the organisation (Gaviria, 1994; CIDH, 2006). The same consensus can also be found in the academic literature (Lowenthal, 2009; Legler, 2012; Kornbluh and LeoGrande, 2015). The 1990s and 2000s were also marked by a growing desire for autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. Latin American support for the principle of non-intervention is thus not a hallmark of leftward drifts. As early as 1992, Mexico and many small Caribbean countries opposed the Washington Protocol (which included the possibility of suspending a member of the organisation for failing to comply with democratic norms) for what they perceived as an intrusion in their internal affairs (Ribeiro Hoffmann, 2019). At the time, they were not yet benefiting from the oil subsidies granted under the Chávez and then Maduro governments as part of the PetroCaribe cooperation. It should also be underlined that the newly founded regional organisations like CELAC and UNASUR, which competed with the OAS and included Cuba, were supported by right-wing governments as well as by left-wing ones.

Thus, in 2009, when the members of the OAS voted unanimously to abolish the resolution suspending Cuba from the organisation, it was a decision that was as much the result of new power politics on the subcontinent, such as leftward turns, as of more long-term economic, political and diplomatic processes. Nonetheless, other long-term issues were still in play at that time. Long-term divisions persisted between the governments that continued to support the Cuban government (Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina) and others which were looking for a new strategy to promote democracy and human rights on the island. Engagement thus meant rather different things to different countries: support for the socialist experiment on the one hand and the implementation of non-coercive democracy promotion on the other (Merke, 2015). All in all, there was convergence over the need to adopt a more pragmatic and less polarising approach that would be based on dialogue, cooperation and negotiation.

2. Repoliticisation at the OAS General Secretariat after 2015

In this section I will show that since his election in 2015 the new OAS Secretary General has inaugurated a new era for the hemisphere's international regime (Legler, 2012): whereas the institutional design of inter-American democracy promotion is state-centric (Legler and Tiekou, 2010), Almagro has promoted civil society participation. This participation departs from the previously encouraged "insider civil

6. *CNN en español*, "Insulza: cuando llegué a la OEA no se hablaba de Cuba", 25 May 2015 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2015/05/25/insulza-cuando-yo-llegue-a-la-oea-no-se-hablaba-de-cuba/>

society” (Smith and Korzeniewicz, 2006) based around well-established knowledge-based NGOs and foundations focused on creating expertise that have connections to the political world. Although Luis Almagro also relies on this “insider civil society”, he has opened the door to “militant, combative civil society groups” (Legler, 2012), who work to provoke the demise of authoritarian governments through different means, some of them coercive and even violent. He has also relied on conservative executives to push his agenda within the OAS, especially at the Permanent Council. How can we explain this turn of events? Into what concrete forms has it translated? Finally, what does it tell us about the leadership of the Secretary General and the OAS as an international organisation?

The re-emergence of Cold War discourse

When Almagro was elected Secretary General of the OAS, few expected his mandate to become a crusade against certain Latin American governments. Almagro himself puts special emphasis on the need for dialogue and negotiation:

We are also living in a world of uncertainty in which power is expressed in the most diverse and increasingly less conventional ways, in which we must advance a positive agenda to help the OAS rise to the occasion and prevent the Hemisphere from relapsing into Cold War practices, which we must avoid by every means. To do so, we have to shore up the negotiation, mediation, and consensus-building skills of this OAS, which brings together all countries of the Hemisphere. (Excerpt from his swearing-in speech, May 26th 2015)⁷.

The new Secretary General even warns against “relapsing into Cold War practices” that may lead to violent confrontation at the expense of the people of the Americas. He presents himself as a diplomat intent on opening up dialogues and wary of the sanctions strategy. One of his objectives is to welcome Cuba back into the OAS;⁸ he even stresses Cuba’s capacity to bring its expertise to the continent’s development agenda. Where Venezuela is concerned, Almagro very clearly positions himself against the sanctions diplomacy implemented by the United States, as it hinders the necessary dialogue between different sectors of the society.⁹ He thus proposed to work with all countries “without exceptions” and “put an end to unnecessary fragmentations” (Gaudan, 2015).

Nonetheless, less than a year into his first mandate, the Secretary General started acting in a way which contradicted his early speeches. He put pressure on Nicolás Maduro’s government to allow OAS observers to attend the Venezuelan elections, which took place in December 2015. He openly supported the Venezuelan opposition. And he publicly insulted Maduro, calling him a “*dictadorzuelo*”. So marked was the change that his former mentor, José Mujica, sent him an open letter, making clear that their political paths had diverged too much to keep working together.¹⁰ Three years later, Luis Almagro was expelled from the Frente Amplio.¹¹ In 2017 and especially 2018, he began developing a new discourse about Cuba, reformulating some of the tropes of the Cold War era, especially those put forward by Latin American governments and which led to Cuba’s suspension from the OAS¹².

7. Luis Almagro, « Towards an OAS for the 21st century », May, 26th, 2015, Remarks by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro Lemes, on the occasion of his inauguration https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-009/15
8. *El País* (Uruguay) “OEA debe hacer mea culpa por haber expulsado a Cuba”, May 27th 2015 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <https://www.elpais.com.uy/informacion/almagro-oea-debe-mea-culpa-haber-expulsado-cuba.html>
9. See his interview “Luis Almagro: ‘Cuba puede aportar mucho a la OEA’”, *El Comercio*, March 21st 2015 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/entrevista-luisalmagro-cuba-secretario-oea.html>
10. See: subrayado.com.uy/pelea-almagro-y-mujica-provoca-renuncia-asesores-la-oea-n51064; the open letter can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/unetvhn/posts/1497046300424079>
11. *CNN en español*, “Luis Almagro es expulsado del Partido Frente Amplio en Uruguay”, December 15th 2018 (online). [Accessed on 09.02.2022]: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2018/12/15/almagro-expulsado-frente-amplio-uruguay-partido/>
12. I have selected all of Luis Almagro’s official speeches and press releases on the Cuban situation and I have added his more general speeches (general statements, statements on Venezuela, speeches on democracy and the inter-American democratic system) in which Cuba is mentioned, as they often mention Cuba’s negative influence on the hemisphere (29 speeches in total). I have taken into consideration both his official speeches (available on the OAS website) and press releases, as well as his speeches in other kinds of venue. Table 1 is a short synthesis of the ideas he develops in his speeches.

Table 1: Cuba's influence on the hemisphere according to the OAS Secretary General's speeches (2015-2021) (translated from the Spanish original)

How Cuba is defined politically	Its effects on the hemisphere	Need for action
<p>Authoritarianism/totalitarianism "Cuba is a perfect example of a captive nation. The communist dictatorship not only enslaves, tortures, murders, persecutes, intimidates and forces its people into exile, it also exports its totalitarian practices to the rest of the region"¹³ "stays in power through brute force and fear"¹⁴ "state terrorism against its citizens"¹⁵</p>	<p>Exporting authoritarian practices "Cuba today controls the Venezuelan civilian intelligence service, as well as the military intelligence service; it controls the Bolivarian National Guard, as well as <i>colectivos</i>, armed gangs, who are asked to do the government's dirty work, shooting and terrorising demonstrators"¹⁶</p>	<p>Need for confrontation "Unfortunately, those who look the other way, those who support these actions by the dictatorship, are supporting this violent solution, sometimes even while saying that they do not support a violent solution they are doing so. [...] Permissiveness won't solve anything, it has never existed in any part of the world where a dictatorship has ended, dictatorships end when they are confronted and they are ended by those who confront them and that is why we especially welcome the resolution that has been approved today"¹⁷</p>
<p>Human rights violations "Cuba is the longest-lived dictatorship in the Americas, the absence of rights is flagrant. They call themselves a dictatorship of the proletariat, but in reality it is a dictatorship against the proletariat and against the workers, where the basic right of independent unionisation does not exist and forms of forced labour persist, some of which we have denounced within the framework of medical missions"¹⁸</p>	<p>Creates polarisation and violence "When there is a dictatorship, it is completely dysfunctional in the rest of the hemisphere"¹⁹ "dictatorships are the origin and the root cause of polarisation in this hemisphere"²⁰ "Cuba is a "central lab" of "destabilisation"²¹ "their old methodology of exporting polarisation and bad practices to essentially finance, support and promote political and social conflict"²²</p>	<p>Need to fight back "In democracy, we still have the need to seek mechanisms to fight impunity, and to confront phenomena and bad practices that threaten the preservation of human rights, such as organised crime, drug trafficking and corruption"²³ "The responsible path for Venezuela is that of R2P, the irresponsible path is that of Hands Off Venezuela. Today, we have to ask for all hands on Venezuela, because we have to solve the most important humanitarian crisis that the continent has ever had"</p>
<p>Economic failure "the clearest and most pathetic example of political, economic, social and productive failure. Complete destruction of the productive apparatus, complete destruction of the economic variables and complete destruction of the full exercise of sovereignty by the people"²⁴</p>	<p>Use of Venezuela for Cuban purposes There is an "occupation army in Venezuela"²⁵ "The Cubans have been intervening in Venezuela for years. It is the only military intervention that has ever happened in that country. The Cubans are a parasite that keeps sucking on the carcass of Venezuela's dead economy"²⁶</p>	<p>Drive Cuba out of Venezuela "For too long the Cuban dictatorship has enjoyed impunity; the OAS is working to put an end to this state of affairs"²⁷</p>
<p>Organised crime and drug trafficking "The Cuban dictatorship was the first to make the state work according to the logic of drug trafficking. It came out of a very Cuban methodology, finding 6 or 7 scapegoats, including war heroes such as General Ochoa"²⁸</p>	<p>Organised crime and drug trafficking "Corruption, crimes against humanity and drug trafficking, that is the complete dictatorial combo of the Venezuelan dictatorship. It was not even invented by the Venezuelan dictatorship, the origin is the Cuban dictatorship, those old leftovers of the Cuban dictatorship were introduced into the logic of the 21st century in a process that we could call the "thousand steps", for the installation of the Venezuelan dictatorship"²⁹</p>	<p>Organised crime and elections "What does drug trafficking and organised crime mean in political terms? It means money, money that is pumped into the democratic system and then pierces it like gruyère cheese. If there is one thing I would like to do more than anything else in the world, it is to go after Bolivarian money in every campaign in the hemisphere, from Canada to Tierra del Fuego. It is what would clean up the political systems of the hemisphere the most, what would generate the best conditions for the functioning of democracy, to clean up that money pumped into campaigns and political activities for all those years"³⁰</p>

Cold war discourses about Cuba have been marked by five characteristics: 1. an emphasis on the Cuban government's ideology (Marxist-Leninist) and its incompatibility with representative democracy; 2. a focus on the violations of human rights and due process; 3. the

idea that Cuba was a Soviet proxy and not an autonomous communist regime; 4. the idea that the mere existence of the Cuban regime posed a security threat to the hemisphere, as the Cuban government was exporting its Revolution abroad and supporting Soviet-led communist expansion; 5. the fact that social policies were needed to steer state action towards reformism and prevent revolutionary dynamics (and especially to undermine Cuban communist propaganda and agitation). These views led to Cuba's exclusion from the OAS, as we saw in the first part of this chapter, but they also led to the promotion of the Alliance for Progress. Anti-communism and the focus on security went hand in hand with a reflection on the social roots of political upheavals and the need to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

Luis Almagro's speeches about Cuba only feature three of these five dimensions. Interestingly enough, those that are ignored are the ideological and social dimensions. Indeed, no mention is made of repudiating the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the social underpinnings of revolutionary warfare in Latin America are not addressed, meaning the political debates are ignored that took place at the time and which still have bearing on contemporary Latin American politics. On the contrary, the three other characteristics of Cold War discourses about Cuba (Cuba as a human rights violator, as a Soviet proxy and as a security threat) are reformulated and combined with new elements. In Table 1, I have arranged all the aspects of the Secretary General's speeches since he took office in 2015 into three categories: the way he defines the Cuban regime, the effects this regime is deemed to have on the hemisphere and the way to deal with them.

As we can see, the Cuban political regime is defined as "dictatorial", "authoritarian" and "totalitarian". It is relevant to point this out because the notion of authoritarianism has become hegemonic in social sciences and expertise because of the intense controversies, ideological inconsistencies and strategic uses of the notion of totalitarianism for Cold War purposes (Traverso, 1998; Guilhot, 2005). Cuba is singled out as a "perfect example of a captive nation", "the longest-lived dictatorship" and the first one to be based on drug trafficking.

The threat posed by the Cuban regime, another Cold War trope, is also put to the forefront. It builds on old discourses (Cuba as a threat to democracy, human rights and security) but with two new components. First, Cuba is deemed to be exporting bad practices that lead to social conflict, specifically repression and propaganda. From this perspective, the contemporary political polarisation of the Americas (stemming from many different dynamics, including fascist, racist, populist and religious ones) is simply and purely ascribed to Cuba. Secondly, the Cuban regime is now seen as a threat to security, not only because it is deemed to be exporting its know-how in terms of social repression, but also corruption, drugs trafficking and organised crime. From that perspective, only leftist regimes seem to be prone to having their states penetrated by these dark networks. Emblematic cases like Mexico under Enrique Peña Nieto, Colombia under Alvaro Uribe and Honduras under Juan Orlando Hernandez are simply disregarded. Thus, in this view, Cuba is not only defined as an authoritarian regime per se, but also as a regime with a strong and malign influence on other Latin American countries – it endangers the whole hemisphere and creates the need for a specific regional response. Particular emphasis is placed on the criminal nature

13. "Luis Almagro : 'Cuba es un ejemplo perfecto de nación cautiva'", Radio Television Marti, July 16th 2019 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/luis-almagro-cuba-sigue-siendo-una-amenaza-a-los-derechos-humanos/242744.html>
14. Speech at the United Nations about Cuban political prisoners, New York, Oct. 16th 2018.
15. <https://www.dw.com/es/almagro-acusa-a-cuba-de-terrorismo-de-estado-contra-sus-ciudadanos/a-57021304>
16. Speech at the inauguration of the new academic year in Santiago de Chile, June 9th 2020.
17. Speech at the Permanent Council on the political situation in Venezuela, Washington D.C., Dec. 9th 2020.
18. Speech at IDEA: presidential dialogue: "Latin America, now or never ?", Washington D.C., Nov. 17th 2020.
19. Speech at the presentation of the book *Derecho Internacional de la Democracia*, Washington D.C., Sept. 29th 2020 (online). [Accessed on 24.02.2022]: https://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=20-0061
20. Speech at the forum "Defensa de la democracia en las Américas", Miami, May 5th 2021.
21. Speech at the forum "Defensa de la democracia en las Américas", Miami, May 5th 2021.
22. Press release, 16 October 2019 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-081/19
23. Speech at the conference on organised crime, Miami, Oct. 23rd 2018.
24. Speech at the forum "Defensa de la democracia en las Américas", Miami, May 5th 2021.
25. This formulation has been heavily quoted by journalists in media outlets, by experts from think tanks and by activists. See, for instance, Infobae, July 19th 2017 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.infobae.com/america/eeuu/2017/07/19/luis-almagro-ante-el-senado-de-los-eeuu-venezuela-es-el-pais-mas-corrupto-del-continente-toda-la-estructura-del-estado-esta-tomada-por-el-narcotrafico/>. But the OAS transcript of Luis Almagro's speech at the Senate hearing does not mention it. See: Statement of OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro to U.S. Senate Hearing on Venezuela, July 9th 2017 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-020/17

of the Cuban government's activities and their exportation to Venezuela. The Cuban government is explicitly presented as responsible for the present political and economic crisis in the country, while the Venezuelan government is conceived as a puppet of the Cuban government, which recalls the Cold War trope that Cuba was a Soviet proxy.

As a result, political and diplomatic coexistence is presented as undesirable and strong action as necessary. At the core of this vision is the idea that you cannot negotiate with dictatorships, as this would be both immoral and inefficient (Clemens, 2011). In Luis Almagro's terms, coexistence is equivalent to "permissiveness" or "looking away".³¹ He argues that these policies fail to put an end to dictatorships and that "confrontation" is the only way to achieve this. In his discourse, confrontation is presented as a set of institutional solutions to put pressure on authoritarian regimes' elites, but he does not completely rule out the possibility of an external intervention, albeit within the confines of international law.³²

Interestingly, the Secretary General presents the policy of confrontation as the only legitimate path, even though these types of policy have been criticised for their inconsistency and inefficiency. Indeed, scholars and experts have shown that sanctions have often disproportionately hit the people, rather than the elite and the government (Kuntz and Jackson, 1994; AAWH, 1997; Napier, 2010). They have also demonstrated that sanctions and isolation do not lead to regime change (Fontaine and Ratliff, 2000; Borer and Bowen, 2007). Finally, they have pointed out that these politics have also had an adverse effect on security in the US and the wider hemisphere (Pape, 1997; Clemens, 2011; Russo and Haney, 2012). On the contrary, research has shown that a less ambitious strategy, focused on policy change rather than on regime change can achieve results (Jentleson, 2006; Bach, Espach and Rosenau, 2017). How can we then explain the Secretary General's confrontational stance and his emphasis on coercive diplomacy?

Explaining the Secretary General's newfound confrontational stance

Different explanations have been given for the Secretary General's unexpected change, but thus far none seem very convincing. First, Almagro has been accused of siding with Donald Trump in order to keep the US Congress funding for the OAS, as Trump wanted to slash funds for multilateral organisations (Shifter and Raderstorff, 2017). I believe this argument is misleading. Almagro's tougher stance on Venezuela began in autumn 2015, thus pre-dating Trump's election (November 8th 2016) by more than a year. However, Trump's policy on Cuba and Venezuela can rightly be seen as key in reinforcing Luis Almagro's stance on both issues *after* his first moves, with priority for dealing with Venezuela given to the OAS rather than to other regional institutions (Palestini, 2021).

Another hypothesis suggests that Almagro comes from a rather conservative political background and has a tendency to change sides on certain issues (Marcetic, 2019). This would explain his recent repositioning. This is an interesting hypothesis, but it needs refining. Indeed, between 2010 and 2015, Almagro has generally acted in harmony with José Mujica's government. His record on human rights defence was already

26. "Cuba en Venezuela, la conquista del siglo XXI", CASLA Institute, Washington D.C., June 9th 2020.
27. "Cuba en Venezuela, la conquista del siglo XXI", CASLA Institute, Washington D.C., June 9th 2020.
28. Conference on the interamerican system of human rights (Boston University), Oct. 30th 2020.
29. Conference on the interamerican system of human rights (Boston University), Oct. 30th 2020.
30. Speech at the forum "Defensa de la democracia en las Américas", Miami, May 5th 2021.
31. "No es con permisividad, jamás ha existido en ninguna parte del mundo que se haya terminado una dictadura, las dictaduras se terminan cuando son confrontadas y son terminadas por quienes las confrontan y por eso saludamos especialmente la resolución que ha sido aprobada hoy": (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: https://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=20-0081
32. DW, "OAS chief: 'Military intervention' in Venezuela cannot be ruled out", September 15th 2018 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.dw.com/en/oas-chief-military-intervention-in-venezuela-cannot-be-ruled-out/a-45496823>. After the media picked up his quote, Luis Almagro repeatedly said he had been misquoted and/or misunderstood. At the same time, another interview in *Americas Quarterly* revealed that he would not disagree with an intervention if it took place within the limits of international law: "Luis Almagro: Venezuela cannot become another Rwanda", *Americas Quarterly*, September 20th 2018 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/luis-almagro-venezuela-cant-become-another-rwanda/>

notable at the time he became OAS Secretary General and he worked to confront the legacy of Uruguay's dictatorial past, advocating in favour of refugees and supporting the decriminalisation of marijuana, all moves associated with more progressive leanings. It is true that Almagro emerged from a rightist political tradition, as he first joined the Uruguayan Foreign Service as a member of the National Party (a broad centre-right to right-wing coalition). Further study would be needed of this early political socialisation to understand the extent to which it was downplayed during Almagro's mandate under the Frente Amplio and how it re-emerged when he became OAS Secretary General, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Rather, I argue that the Secretary General's activism in the Venezuelan case and then his interactions with Cuban exiles are key to understanding his new stance on Cuba. Luis Almagro's first involvement was in the resolution of the Venezuelan crisis. At the time, his stance on Venezuela was softer than the Obama administration's, which inflicted sanctions on top Venezuelan officials in order to protest against human rights violations in Cuba in March 2015.³³ He took a more active role at the end of 2015, when he voiced concern about the upcoming legislative elections, and then in 2016, after President Maduro manoeuvred to constrain and marginalise the new majority at the National Assembly after his party lost the December 2015 elections. Almagro's conflictive stance was surprising, given his former political credentials and the polarisation in Latin America over the Venezuela crisis, but his more radical approach aligned with the majority of OAS members. Stefano Palestini (2021) explains the unexpected 2017 OAS sanctions as the consequence of the alignment of preferences between MERCOSUR (and its two strongest states, Argentina and Brazil) and the US (Palestini, 2021). Palestini writes that threats to democracy posed by incumbents are rarely sanctioned, especially when they take place in powerful states like Venezuela. But in 2017 the political context had changed in the Americas. Indeed, some of the more powerful countries in the hemisphere had either elected or re-elected right-wing presidents (Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico [2012], Mauricio Macri in Argentina [2015], Donald Trump in the United States [2016], Michel Temer in Brazil after Dilma Rousseff's impeachment [2016]), and the Lima Group had managed to build a wide coalition of countries: 12 at first (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru), then 15 (with Haiti, Guyana and Santa Lucia) and finally 19 (with the US, Barbados, Jamaica and Granada). These countries supported the group's attempts to find a solution to the Venezuelan political crisis by trying to broker a deal between the opposition and Maduro's government. In this continental context, although Luis Almagro's activism was notable (open support given to Leopoldo López for instance), his position was in line with those of the majority of the governments of the hemisphere. However, this position progressively evolved and became much more confrontational as his discourse over Venezuela went far beyond a condemnation of the breach of the political order and began to stigmatise all progressive governments in the region.

I argue that this more confrontational stance correlates with the place Cuban exiles have managed to carve out for their perspectives at the OAS. Luis Almagro's first moves with regard to Cuba took place in a

The Secretary General's activism in the Venezuelan case and then his interactions with Cuban exiles are key to understanding his new stance on Cuba.

33. "'Deeply concerned' Obama imposes sanctions on Venezuelan officials", *The Guardian*, March 9th 2015 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/obama-venezuela-security-threat-sanctions>

Almagro's first official speech on Cuba, at the United Nations on October 16th 2018, specifically mentions that Cuba has been exporting methods of repression and specific political know-how to Latin America.

context in which exiled Cubans had built a new discursive framework for understanding the Cuban regime as the mother of all evils (i.e. as the force responsible for most political turmoil) in Latin America, and especially responsible for the Venezuelan crisis. This discourse builds on existing credible evidence that high-ranking Cuban officials are advising the Venezuelan government on many state issues such as defence and security, electoral matters and political institutions (see the reports and publications by CASLA, 2019; FHRC, 2019; and Werlau, 2019). This discourse is crafted so as to make the Cuban government the origin of the Venezuelan social and political crisis, thus stripping Nicolás Maduro of political agency and responsibility.

Despite being an interpretation that is highly contested, Almagro's first official speech on Cuba, at the United Nations on October 16th 2018, specifically mentions that Cuba has been exporting methods of repression and specific political know-how to Latin America.³⁴ In other speeches, Almagro states that witnesses have mentioned that they saw and/or heard Cuban officials during their detention – and sometimes poor treatment – following the 2018 protests in Nicaragua and on many different occasions in Venezuela.³⁵ He thus endorsed the interpretation provided by both Venezuelan and Cuban exiles, that is, that the Cuban issue is intrinsically connected to the Venezuelan one and more broadly that progressive governments all tend to become dictatorships. Evidence shows that this endorsement can be linked to Luis Almagro's regular interactions with the exile community and the lack of counter-discourse.

The role of the Cuban exile organisations at the OAS

Civil society had already carved itself a space at OAS before Luis Almagro's tenure. Canada and several other countries, including the US, were especially intent on opening the OAS up to civil society organisations and since 1998 they have been granted observer status at the Permanent Council and offered a space to share their perspectives at the new Summits of the Americas (Shamsie, 2000). As I underlined earlier, the civil society involved was mostly what Smith and Korzeniewicz (2006) have called an "insider civil society", in other words, civil society organisations with relatively strong connections to the political world and legitimate resources, expertise and know-how that are intent on co-building and co-implementing the guidelines delineated by the organisation.

Luis Almagro has inaugurated a new era for civil participation at OAS. Although he still relies on "insider civil society", he has opened the door to more "militant, combative civil society groups" (Legler, 2012). In the Cuban case the two are interconnected due the specific characteristics of Cuban American networks, which encompass both political actors (congressmen, senators, governors) and civil society actors (NGOs and foundations). Combative civil society groups are generally thought to be positioned towards the left of the political spectrum, but in this case they are mostly anti-communist think tanks and activists. These activists have been regularly invited to the OAS headquarters in Washington D.C. during Luis Almagro's mandate and he has also participated in events they have organised. He has also regularly commented on his appearances at such events on social media.

34. "Speech on Cuban political prisoners", October 16th 2018, United Nations. http://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=18-0091

35. *Ibid.*

Table 2: Secretary General Luis Almagro's speeches, press releases and events relating to Cuba		
Events/Years	Speeches and public statements by L. Almagro	Civil society involved (including think tanks, foundations and parties)
2015	Tweets favourable to more opening up towards Cuba (April 12th, May 26th, June 16th) ³⁶	
2016		
2017 May 10 July 22	Meeting with civil society, including Cuban exiles <i>Message from Secretary General on anniversary of the death of Oswaldo Paya (PR)</i>	Justice Cuba (with Directorio Democrático Cubano)
2018 Feb. 10 March 8 Sept. 28 Oct. 16 Oct. 23 Dec. 7	Presentation of a documentary on Oswaldo Paya <i>Message from Secretary General about the Oswaldo Paya prize (PR)</i> Meeting with Cuban exile organisations <i>Speech about the crisis of political prisoners in Cuba (at the UN)</i> 3rd presidential debate (about organised crime in Latin America) Speech at the first Conference on Human Rights in Cuba	Voice of Communism Memorial Foundation, Cuba Decide Asamblea de la Resistencia Cubana, Justice Cuba IDEA, Catedra N. Mezerhane (Miami Dade College) Cubalex, Cuba Decide, M.A.R. por Cuba, Justice Cuba
2019 Feb. 7 May 6 May 14 June 5 June 26 June 27 July 16 Aug. 22 Oct. 16 Oct. 28 Dec. 18	Conference "The new Cuban constitution and the Inter-American democratic charter" at the OAS Conference on artistic freedom in Cuba Speech about the use of Cuban doctors and the exportation of the Cuban model Endorsement of US Treasury sanctions against the Cuban government Forum on crimes against humanity in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela Meeting with Cuba Decide Endorsement of "captive nation" description of Cuba Speech about the necessity to democratise Cuba and Venezuela Statement about the role of Cuba and Venezuela in destabilising Latin America ³⁷ Speech about the Cuban medical missions Signature of the Agreement on Democracy in Cuba Conference on the obscure reality behind Cuba's medical missions	Cubalex, Cuba Decide, Transparencia Electoral América latina Revista <i>La Hora</i> and artists Cuban Defenders (press conference on crimes against humanity in Cuba) Casla Institute, Cuban Defenders Cuba Decide, Fundacion x la democracia, JuventudLAC Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation ODCA seminar Cuba Decide, Directorio Democrático Cubano Cuban Defenders
2020 May 7 June 9 Sept. 17 Dec. 10	Interview with influencer A. Otaola on his show Speech about Cuban intervention in Venezuela "Cuba en Venezuela, la conquista del siglo XXI" ³⁸ IDEA: 5th presidential dialogue: "Latin America, now or never?" Speech about the need to fight the spread of the authoritarian virus ³⁹	"Hola Ota-Ola" CASLA Institute IDEA ⁴⁰ Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (Conference on Human Rights and Democracy in Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua)
2021 March 23 May 5	Press conference about repression in Cuba Conference on the defence of democracy in the Americas	Cuba Decide Interamerican Institute for Democracy, Radio y TV Martí, Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba

Scholars have already shown the critical importance of exile organisations on the crafting of US foreign policy. Quite a few studies exist on the Cuban case and testify to their importance (Haney and Vanderbush, 2005; Vanderbush, 2009; Badella, 2014; 2016). These organisations have also become very active at the OAS. Just as exiles have become regular figures at Congressional hearings, especially since the 1980s (Vanderbush, 2009), so they have become frequent attendees of the OAS General Secretariat. It is not the intention of the following section to question the right of Cuban exiles (or Venezuelan, for that

There are hundreds of organisations in the Cuban diaspora whose main objective is to promote a transition process in Cuba.

matter) to be heard in such an important venue as the OAS, the purpose is to stress that only specific organisations manage to be heard.

I have put together the most exhaustive list possible of speeches and events referring to Cuban issues in which the Secretary General has participated since he took office in 2015. The aim of this table is to objectify the networks with which he has been working so as to shed light on the particular political position he has sided with. Three elements are striking here: first, the lack of either discourse or action concerning Cuba during the first two years of Luis Almagro's mandate (May 2015–May 2017) and the subsequent importance the Cuban question has acquired; second, the Secretary General's regular participation in organised civil society events; and, finally, the notably limited circles with which he has been working on this issue since 2018.

There are hundreds of organisations in the Cuban diaspora whose main objective is to promote a transition process in Cuba. An extreme minority supports the legitimacy of the Cuban government and denounces US interference in Cuban affairs. As for the others, they are split into two major positions: an anti-communist position that favours a policy of sanctions, isolation and confrontation, and an anti-authoritarian position that advocates a policy of "engagement" on the grounds that sanctions and isolation are not effective and even counterproductive (Torres, 1999; Garcia, 1996). The anti-communist position is defended by longstanding exile organisations, which are both professionalised and politicised, and which have been joined by younger activists since the 2010s (Grenier, 2018). They enjoy significant political and institutional support, both in conservative think tanks (Heritage Foundation, Fundación Internacional para la Libertad, Voice of Communism Memorial Foundation) and in various political spaces (the city of Miami, the State of Florida, the US Congress and the State Department). The "anti-authoritarian" position is less well-represented in Florida, where it is regularly attacked and caricatured. It includes non-profit organisations (Cuba Study Group, Cuban Americans for Engagement), political parties in exile (social democrat and Christian democrat), more informal collectives organised around digital platforms (Cuba Posible, 23 y Flagler) and is upheld by think tanks such as the Brookings Institution.⁴¹

The popularity of these two positions among the Cuban diaspora has fluctuated depending on the period and the political and social events in Cuba and the United States (migration flows, diplomatic incidents, economic crises). While in the Miami enclave, anti-communism has generally remained the majority position, in spite of modulations in the 2010s the pro-engagement position was widely favoured by younger generations of Cuban Americans until the election of Donald Trump. While Trump's election led to a new degree of polarisation and a reclaiming of the anti-communist position, in general this has lost its hegemony over the past 20 years. And yet the OAS Secretary General has almost exclusively been interacting with representatives of the pro-sanctions position.

With the exception of the Cuban artists mentioned in the table and Cubalex (an organisation of lawyers who defend the rights of people under arrest or incarcerated),⁴² the other organisations in the table are all positioned towards the right of the political spectrum. Internationally,

36. Tweeted before and after he took office on May 26th.
37. Statement of the OAS General Secretariat, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-081/19
38. https://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=20-0039
39. Speeches and other documents by the Secretary General (in Spanish only), "Día de los derechos humanos, conferencia sobre derechos humanos y democracia en Cuba, Venezuela y Nicaragua" (online). [Accessed on 24.02.2022]: https://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=20-0080
40. IDEA is a network of former Latin American presidents. It is presented as bipartisan, but active members almost exclusively belong to right-wing parties.
41. See FIU's list of Cuban American institutions and organisations: <https://cri.fiu.edu/cuban-america/org-institutes/>
42. Cubalex and the artists whose names appear are associated with this network, except in a more peripheral way, and their position on sanctions is less unanimous. The Cubalex association, for example, did not defend the embargo for the time it worked in Cuba and it has been inactive on this issue since the exile of 14 of its members to the United States.

they have supported or sought the support of political figures such as Donald Trump (United States), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Ivan Duque (Colombia) and Jeanine Áñez (Bolivia). In terms of relations between Cuba and the United States, they all promote a policy of isolation (embargo, sanctions) and confrontation. Some of them campaigned for a “humanitarian” intervention by the US following the repression of the July 11th 2021 demonstrations.⁴³ Most promote a model of transition based primarily on criminal justice and the building of cases to be presented in national or international courts, rather than the more traditional transitional justice process of uttering the truth, building memory and crafting reconciliation. Among their models are the International Criminal Courts created for Yugoslavia and Rwanda.⁴⁴

The point here is not to judge the relevance or otherwise of the position of these organisations, but to underline that they belong to the same conservative political world, with converging Cold Warrior views on handling the Cuban political situation: coercive diplomacy, lack of negotiation and a transitional justice based on criminal law. It is thus necessary to stress that despite the growing diversity of organisations and positions in the Cuban diaspora, the Secretary General has chosen to connect the OAS General Secretariat with one specific political line only. Even more surprisingly, the Secretary General has bestowed legitimacy on one of the most controversial of the Cuban exiles in Miami, Alexander Otaola, an alt-right social media influencer, by participating in his show in 2020. Otaola is particularly renowned for his histrionics, racism and systematic practice of denigrating those who do not share his positions, invariably calling them “communists”⁴⁵ and placing them on a “red list” (a blacklist of communists), all of which gives his show a McCarthyite air. It is also important to stress that the OAS’s connection with this single political line was reinforced by the nomination of Cuban American conservative Carlos Trujillo as US ambassador to the OAS under Donald Trump.⁴⁶ Indeed, Trujillo is a political ally of conservative Cuban American Florida Senator Marco Rubio, who has in turn consistently supported the most conservative leaders of Cuban exile civil society.

The relationship between the Secretary General and these exile organisations translates into very concrete consequences. As the OAS General Secretariat is prevented by the obstruction of the Cuban government from drafting reports on the human rights situation on the island, it often relies on evidence given by exiles to shape its discourse and policies on Cuba. As a result, the words they use to frame the political and human rights situation on the island are found in most of the Secretary General’s speeches (“captive nation”, “a state based on drug trafficking”, “state terrorism”, “slave labour”). Although most international NGOs (like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) agree that Cuba’s record on human rights is problematic, their framing is quite distinct and they refuse to use those terms, which they deem false and counterproductive.⁴⁷

One can therefore question the support given by an OAS Secretary General to this single political line, which goes well beyond the OAS mandate of defence of democracy and human rights. Indeed, partisan politics have consequences for the framing of possible forms of action for dealing with Cuba as well as Venezuela. The discursive support and legitimacy given by

Despite the growing diversity of organisations and positions in the Cuban diaspora, the Secretary General has chosen to connect the OAS General Secretariat with one specific political line only.

43. Padgett, Tim. “Call for US military intervention amid Cuban protests sparks Miami exile debate, *WLRN*, 13 July 2021 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.wlrn.org/news/2021-07-13/call-for-u-s-military-intervention-amid-cuba-protests-sparks-miami-exile-debate>

44. See the online presentation of Justice Cuba, one of the main organisations, which intends to build cases prior to the fall of the communist regime, so as to anticipate the transition and steer the transitional justice process towards a criminal justice dynamic: <https://justicecuba.wildapricot.org/>

45. Padgett, Tim. “Can a racist demagogue be a serious defender of human rights”, *WLRN*, December 3rd 2020 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.wlrn.org/commentary/2020-12-03/hola-otaola-can-a-racist-demagogue-be-a-serious-defender-of-cuban-rights>

46. Klas, Mary Ellen & Patricia Mazzei “Carlos Trujillo named as US ambassador to the Organization of American States”, 26 October 2017 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.tampabay.com/florida-politics/buzz/2017/10/26/carlos-trujillo-names-as-u-s-ambassador-to-oas/>

47. See for instance José Miguel Vivanco’s tweet (January 11th 2021) about calling Cuba a sponsor of terrorism and his “Written testimony to the US House Western Hemisphere Committee on Cuba”, July 22nd 2021, as well as Amnesty International’s call (2020) for a more balanced political vision at the OAS in the wake of Luis Almagro’s re-election.

The Secretary General's activism does not impact the way the Permanent Council of the OAS deals with pressing political issues in the hemisphere.

Luis Almagro – with all the social and political capital he enjoys as the OAS Secretary General – to hardline confrontational politics, sometimes verging on warmongering, once again raises questions about the autonomy of the OAS in relation to US power. Susanne Gratius (2018) has described this in her research,⁴⁸ and it seems all the more applicable when this same Secretary General asks for more US leadership in the organisation. But it also raises questions about OAS autonomy with regard to politicised organised interests and the ability of the General Secretariat to maintain a balanced and diplomatic position when it systematically sides with conservative political networks in the Americas and elsewhere.⁴⁹

3. Shaping the OAS General Secretariat into a political and moral authority

This third and final part will address one of the effects of the Secretary General's stance on Cuba – and more generally Venezuela and Nicaragua – in the Americas. Very recent research (Palestini, 2021) has shown that the Secretary General's activism does not impact the way the Permanent Council of the OAS deals with pressing political issues in the hemisphere. Indeed, this activism is “neither sufficient nor necessary” for the enforcement of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. This enforcement is rather inconsistent and depends upon “the preferences of the executives of the most powerful member states” (Boniface, 2002; Palestini, 2020; 2021). I thus argue that this activism serves another purpose: that of shaping the Secretary General to be a kind of political and moral authority in the Americas with the legitimacy to distinguish between good and bad democratic practices and between good democratic government and bad authoritarian rule, thus contributing to granting (partial) autonomy to the role of Secretary General and the action of the OAS in relation to its members states (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; 2004). It also contributes to repositioning the OAS as the major regional organisation in the Americas and returning its leadership to the US.

The following interesting excerpt from one of Almagro's speeches formulates one of his objectives as OAS Secretary General: to shed light on Cuban and Venezuela human rights abuse *with a purpose*.

We at the OAS are intentionally illuminating the terrible tragedy that the Venezuelan dictatorship imposes on the people of Cuba and Venezuela. We want the world to see clearly the abuses committed by the Cuban regime on its own island, in Venezuela and elsewhere on the continent.⁵⁰

These few sentences are worth analysing. Here Almagro is being clear that he is putting special emphasis on Cuba and Venezuela (“intentionally illuminating”), for “the world to see”. He is also tying the two situations together: the Cuban and Venezuelan people are first presented as tragically affected by the Venezuelan dictatorship, and secondly the Cuban regime is given as responsible for abuse committed in Cuba, in Venezuela and in other parts of the continent. The Secretary General's objective here is first and foremost to expose what is presented as a tragic situation, to communicate it to the “world”. In doing so, he is also assigning responsibilities in moral and political terms to the Cuban and Venezuela governments.

48. For Susanne Gratius, the return to hostile relations shows the “still hegemonic position of the United States in (the) inter-American system”, in: Gardini, Gian Luca; Koschut, Simon & Andreas Falke (eds.), *Interregionalism and the Americas*, Lexington, 2018, p. 147.

49. Luis Almagro has been constantly working and debating with conservative parties and governments in the Americas and Europe (for instance FAES – José María Aznar's foundation – in Spain, ODCA – the Organization of Christian Democrats in the Americas, the new right-wing South American organisation PROSUR).

50. Author's translation from the Spanish: “En la OEA estamos iluminando intencionalmente el flagelo, la terrible tragedia que significa la dictadura venezolana para los pueblos de Cuba y de Venezuela. Queremos que el mundo vea claramente los abusos cometidos por el régimen cubano en su propia isla, en Venezuela y en otros lugares del continente”: “Cuba en Venezuela, la conquista del siglo XXI” CASLA Institute, Washington D.C., June 9th 2020 (online). [Accessed on 24.02.2022]: http://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discursos_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=20-0039.

Luis Almagro's purpose is twofold: he seeks both to delegitimise the Cuban and Venezuelan governments *and* to stage that delegitimation in order to steer the OAS towards a new role – as an arbiter of democracy and human rights in the Americas. The opposition between the way José Miguel Insulza understood his function as Secretary General and the way Luis Almagro understands it is very telling.

There is one thing that will not change: this is a body consisting of 34 states, not a supranational power. I am not the president of the OAS, nor the president of the Americas. I am the Secretary General that implements the resolutions of the Permanent Council, and this is something that no one will change.⁵¹

José Miguel Insulza presents himself as a kind of facilitator between 34 states and the legal embodiment of the decision-making process between them. He embodies the realist approach to international organisations, in which these organisations are perceived as having no autonomy of their own. On the contrary, Luis Almagro explicitly contradicted José Miguel Insulza's statement in an interview with *El País* in 2018, claiming that the Secretary General has "powers according to the OAS Charter, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and Resolution 1080 for the defense of democracy, for the defense of security, and regional stability".⁵² He is promoting a wider and more normative interpretation of the Secretary General's mandate.⁵³

Moreover, Luis Almagro understands the OAS as an international organisation with its own norms and principles, above and beyond the governments that form part of it.

(...) democratic states must act more to support democracy and human rights. Governments come and go. Changes are inevitable. But principles remain and the OAS continues to defend those principles. The organisation is much more than an individual, than a member state, than diplomats, than officials. Let us not forget for whom and for what the OAS has existed all this time. For what and for whom it will continue to work in subsequent decades. The peoples of the Americas. The OAS will be what the people want the OAS to be.⁵⁴

In Almagro's view, the Secretary General thus embodies a kind of distinct, autonomous authority that gives voice to *the people*, not only to the member states. He thus becomes an interpreter of those voices. This justifies the occasional overlooking of internal procedures (Zamorano, 2017) in defence of a greater good, which the Secretary General, with the support of like-minded governments, must uphold.

We must never forget these principles. The geopolitical configuration formerly based on bullying and against wills has fallen apart. Today we are building a geopolitical architecture based on principles. Some will be on the side of principles, others will not. That is the logic that we have to face in the organisation and that we have been facing for a long time.⁵⁵

This quote is especially interesting for two reasons. First, despite the Secretary General's constant invocation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and other pro-democracy instruments as the best ways to defend democracy, he actually states here that his policy on that matter

51. Quoted in Zamorano, Patricio. "The OAS and the crisis in Venezuela: Luis Almagro in his labyrinth", Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 28 April 2017 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.coha.org/the-oas-and-the-crisis-in-venezuela-luis-almagro-and-his-labyrinth/>

52. Naím, Moisés, "Sometimes failures can also bring progress towards democracy", *El País*, July 3rd 2018 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/06/29/inenglish/1530282967_359823.html

53. See: Kille (2013) on Secretaries General's leadership.

54. Author's translation from the Spanish original: " (...) los Estados democráticos debemos acentuar el hecho de actuar en favor de la democracia y los derechos humanos. Los gobiernos van y vienen. Los cambios son inevitables. Pero los principios permanecen y la OEA permanece defendiendo esos principios. La Organización es mucho más que un individuo, que un estado miembro, que los diplomáticos, que los funcionarios. No olvidemos para quién y para qué la OEA ha existido todo este tiempo. Para qué y para quién seguirá trabajando en décadas subsecuentes. Los pueblos de las Américas. La OEA será lo que la gente quiere que la OEA sea", http://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=19-0013

55. Author's translation from the Spanish original: "Nunca debemos olvidar estos principios. La configuración geopolítica que antes se armaba con base a bullying y en contra de voluntades, se desmoronó. Hoy estamos construyendo una arquitectura geopolítica con base en principios. Unos estarán de lado de los principios, otros no lo estarán. Esa es la lógica que debemos enfrentar en la Organización y que hemos enfrentado durante mucho tiempo", http://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discurso_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=19-0013

There is a clear imbalance in the importance given to democratic backsliding, which is conditioned by the political leaning of the governments concerned.

has much more to do with the building of power politics: “a geopolitical architecture”, with those who will “be on the side of principles” and “those who will not”. Moreover, he presents the struggle for democracy and human rights as a black or white set of two alternatives.⁵⁶ Here, the “principles” are presented as universal and the opposition between those who will defend them and the others as a moral divide between a good side (morally unquestionable) and a bad side (prone to “bullying”). This logic justifies ongoing action, which is presented as a kind of crusade that he proposes to carry out with or without approval:

We will not retreat an inch in our fight against dictatorships. If everybody likes it, fine, and if nobody likes it, fine too.⁵⁷

In that sense, there is a blatant contradiction between the will to create “consensus” and support “political dialogue” (terms used in the paragraphs just before this quote) and the statement that he does not care about those who disagree with his perspectives, methods and actions. Luis Almagro here seems to be considering his job as that of a truth bearer:

Our reports have always been based on facts, we do not issue opinions, we do not have political opinions, we cannot have political opinions, we are not ideological.⁵⁸

While at the same time he consistently rejects other approaches, like those that are habitual in most diplomatic activity, grounded in low-key negotiations between parties and behind closed doors.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, we must mention here that other events and processes might have prompted the concern of the Secretary General. Here is a small table of relevant cases of repeated human rights abuse and attack against democracies, which are either mentioned only “in passing” in the Secretary General’s communications (although they are generally addressed by the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights - IACHR) or are not addressed at all, even though they have marred the American continent’s political record in recent years.

It is important to underline that the OAS Secretary General generally addresses most human rights concerns, like the Ayotzinapa murders in Mexico in 2014, the widespread social and political violence in Colombia and Peru, and journalists and community leaders’ murders in Honduras and Mexico. However, there are blatant exceptions, like George Floyd’s murder by the police in the US and the horrendous state of Brazilian prisons. His statements have a different weight depending on whether they are published as tweets or as Secretary General’s press releases. Social violence is generally addressed in tweets, while any political processes that are responsible for that violence are mostly downplayed or ignored. Moreover, attacks on democratic institutions are unevenly addressed: Brazil and the US, which have strongly supported Luis Almagro’s activism against the Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan governments, are almost completely spared from criticism. And, finally, there is a clear imbalance in the importance given to democratic backsliding, which is conditioned by the political leaning of the governments concerned. Right-wing governments (the US under Donald Trump, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and El Salvador under Nayib Bukele) are much less scrutinised than left-leaning governments.

56. Almagro used this dichotomy to describe his fight for human rights in this interview: Ordoñez, Franco. “Uruguayan diplomat makes OAS a player, again”, *McClatchy*, March 13th 2016 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article65423642.html>

57. Author’s translation from the Spanish original: “Nos vamos a ceder un ápice en nuestra lucha contra las dictaduras. Si les gusta a todos muy bien y si no le gusta a nadie, muy bien también”. Reelection speech, http://www.oas.org/es/acerca/discursos_secretario_general.asp?sCodigo=20-0030

58. Author’s translation from the Spanish original: “Nuestros informes han estado basados siempre en hechos, nosotros no emitimos opinión, no tenemos opinión política, no podemos tener opinión política, no somos ideológicos”. Speech at the presentation of the book *Derecho Internacional de la democracia*, Washington D.C., Sept. 29th, 2020.

59. “Almagro : Election would lead Venezuela to 6 more years of dictatorship”, *Miami Herald*, January 21st 2018.

Table 3. Relevant human rights abuse or attacks on democracy with less visibility		
Date & country	Event	OAS Secretary General's public response
Sept. 2021 Brazil	President Bolsonaro's policies on human rights and democratic institutions threaten the rule of law, endanger people's lives and the environment (the Amazon) ⁶⁰	No statement, no tweet. Constant praise of President Bolsonaro's support for the OAS policy on Venezuela
May 2021 El Salvador July 2021 El Salvador	Dismissal of the Attorney General and the judges of the Constitutional Chamber Deportation of Mexican journalist, harassment of the media and anti-transparency measures (on public information)	Statement (May 2nd 2021). No follow-up since then. No statement, no tweet
Jan. 2021 US	Mob attack on US Capitol & President Trump's attempt to organise an "auto-coup"	Statement (on the Capitol events only, no mention of President Trump's repeated attacks on the democratic process) ⁶¹
June 2020 US	George Floyd's murder (returning police killings in the US to the news)	No statement, no tweet
Oct. 2019 Bolivia	Violent repression of protesters during contested electoral process	No statement against violence (press releases and tweets on the electoral process and against the incumbent president)
Oct. 2019 Chile	Violent repression of protesters (including torture, sexual abuse and deaths)	Statement (Oct. 24 th) endorses IACHR's condemnation of human rights violation during protests in Chile while at the same time accusing the Venezuelan and Cuban governments of instigating the protest. ⁶² Later public speeches supported President Piñera's actions ⁶³
Oct. 2019 Ecuador	Violent repression of protesters	Statement (Oct. 8 th) calling for the protection of freedom of expression, but which at the same time condemns protesters' violence. ⁶⁴ No condemnation of police violence. Later public speeches supported President Moreno's actions ⁶⁵
May 2019 Brazil	Widespread violence in Brazilian prisons leading to more than 60 deaths	No statement, no tweet
March 2018 Brazil	Murder of activist and politician Marielle Franco	One tweet (March 15 th). No follow up despite evidence of involvement of President Bolsonaro's entourage
Jan. 2018 US	Donald Trump signs an executive order to keep Guantanamo Bay prison open despite well documented violations of human rights	No statement, no tweet (despite Feb. 23 rd 2016 tweet welcoming Obama's decision to close the prison)

The OAS Secretary General's newfound activism has not generated new forms of institutionalisation of the democratic norm, as occurred for instance under João Clemente Soares Baena, who played a leading role in shaping resolution 1080 in 1991. There are talks around making OAS instruments more effective for defending democracy and human rights but so far no concrete steps have been taken.⁶⁶ Luis Almagro instead relies on the reformulation of the debate about democracy and human rights in the hemisphere, opposing "dictatorship" with "democracy" and using the OAS General Secretariat as a political platform, together with the mainstream media and the social media, in order to name and shame. By doing so, Luis Almagro has crafted new discursive power politics that have put the OAS back in the spotlight.

Although we might rejoice at the liveliness of debates about democracy within regional organisations, the OAS Secretary General's stance has in fact led to an increased polarisation within the organisation and in the Americas more generally. Within the OAS, his activism has alienated quite a few countries at the Permanent Council and created mistrust, especially on the issue of Cuba (see: Sanders, 2020b; 2021). It led, for instance, to the adjournment of a meeting

60. See: Human Rights Watch, "Brazil : Bolsonaro threatens democratic rule", September 15th 2021 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/15/brazil-bolsonaro-threatens-democratic-rule>; as well as US senators' note: "Top senate democrats sound alarm on Brazil's democratic decline", September 28th 2021 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/top-senate-democrats-sound-alarm-on-brazils-democratic-decline-and-creeping-authoritarianism-under-president-bolsonaro->

Institutional mechanisms remain in place that de facto limit the General Secretary's powers when the representatives of OAS member states reject the direction in which he is taking the organisation.

on human rights in Cuba in July 2021 after the social uprisings of July 11th and 12th were repressed by the Cuban government. Thirteen countries out of 34 sent a letter criticising what they saw as a divisive and conflictive policy that did not promote peace and cooperation in the hemisphere.⁶⁷ This shows that institutional mechanisms remain in place that de facto limit the General Secretary's powers when the representatives of OAS member states reject the direction in which he is taking the organisation.

Luis Almagro's broad interpretation of his role has been especially criticised by Caribbean states, who have repeatedly voted against his positions and his broad interpretation of his mandate, especially in terms of setting priorities (Sanders, 2020a). Beyond the OAS, Amnesty International (2020) has been very critical of the Secretary General's actions and tried to raise concerns to member states' when Almagro was seeking re-election in 2020. The organisation wrote to the representatives of OAS members to draw attention to the need to elect an impartial and independent representative to the position of Secretary General. Indeed, the NGO deplored the OAS's lack of consideration for the massive human rights violations committed in countries other than Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the dispassionate, bipartisan and pragmatic policy towards Cuba pursued since the mid-1970s was quickly called into question after the election of Luis Almagro as Secretary General of the OAS. This reversal of the OAS position on the subject can be linked to several factors. First, the Secretary General's position on Cuba is correlated with his stance on the Venezuelan issue. Indeed, his activism on Cuba only intensified after the 2017 institutional crisis in Venezuela. The close relationship between the Secretary General and pro-sanctions organisations of Cuban exiles led him to endorse their narrative, which emphasises the role played by the Cuban government in the Venezuelan crisis and in supporting the Venezuelan government. This narrative frames the Cuban state as a thoroughly criminal agent, thus making it into an enemy with whom it would be morally questionable to negotiate. From that perspective, the Cuban government can only be part of the problem and not part of the solution, as other voices advocate (Zamorano, 2017; Rendon, 2020; Stuenkel, 2021). As these exile organisations have monopolised access to the Secretary General, despite the existence of other perspectives, their views have become hegemonic in his discourse.

Nevertheless, the influence of Cuban civil society actors needs to be understood in the new political context of the second part of the 2010s. From 2015 onwards, general elections (and the removal of a president) did indeed lead right-wing presidents to govern powerful countries, in both the US and Latin America. The role played by some of these new presidents, like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, in defending the OAS's role in the hemisphere and Luis Almagro's activism on the Cuban and Venezuelan issues, reinforced the Secretary General's position on those issues, leading to an imbalanced focus on democratic backsliding and human rights abuses under left-leaning governments.

61. OAS press release, E-001/21, January 6th, 2021.
62. OAS press release, C-088/19, October 24th, 2019.
63. del Pino, José María. "El secretario general de la OEA defendió a Sebastian Piñera y acusó a Cuba y a Venezuela por las protestas en Chile", *El Clarín*, January 9th 2020 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: https://www.clarin.com/mundo/secretario-general-oea-defendio-sebastian-pinera-acuso-cuba-venezuela-protestas-chile_0_Y5-Wx_KL.html
64. OAS press release, E-078/19, October 8th 2019.
65. El Universo, "Luis Almagro felicita a Ecuador por aislar las protestas sociales", October 30th 2019 (online). [Accessed on 10.02.2022]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8A8DSxtVk4>
66. See the propositions mentioned in the introduction, for instance. Eduardo Gamarra, Professor of Political Science at FIU, also mentioned during that conference José Miguel Insulza asked for a report about possible early warning mechanisms that would allow better assessment of the threats and thresholds around democratic backsliding. But to his knowledge the report has never really been discussed or implemented.
67. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/latin-americas-resurgent-left-caribbean-spurn-us-policy-cuba-2021-08-02/>

A third factor is the Secretary General's broad interpretation of his mandate, which allows him to push forward some of his priorities at the OAS Permanent Council and in other venues and to promote his sanctions-oriented perspective on Cuba, as well as on Venezuela and Nicaragua. This activism has been successful as it has also been supported by executives with an interest in the sanctioning of regimes associated with 21st century socialism, such as in Colombia and Brazil.

By upholding this non-compromising stance, the Secretary General has repoliticised the issue of Cuba and the role of the General Secretariat. He has also crafted a new public image for the organisation, which has regularly made it into the headlines of both mainstream and social media since Luis Almagro's election. This new discourse has given the Secretary General political prominence and enabled his re-election at the OAS Secretariat, mainly thanks to the support of right-leaning governments. But his activism has not translated into efficiency on the Cuban or Venezuelan questions. Both countries are facing deep crises and are confronted with ever-stronger polarisation in the hemisphere. We must conclude that, rather than flagrant declarations, there is a need for a lower-profile multilateralism that involves political engagement, dialogue and negotiation.

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