

AFTER THE PROTESTS AND THE PANDEMIC: REASSESSING THE INTERNATIONAL PROFILE OF POST-CASTRO CUBA

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In 2021 the “Europe-Cuba Forum” concentrated on the acute domestic governance challenges now facing the Cuban regime, as the resulting volume on social policy and institutional transformation attests (Hoffmann, 2021). The final round in the project turns towards the tremendous external difficulties that interact with and reinforce these internal issues. Even before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine there were massive imponderables and unpredictable short-term risks attached to both these dynamics. But they also have an underlying structure that has persisted for several decades, and that may well continue to generate gridlock and dysfunctionality for years to come. Just as we explored the potential for a domestic course correction guided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, so should our next contribution try to look beyond the immediate situation to reflect on the underlying international pressures and constraints that will shape the options for the Cuban nation over the next decade, however the current potentially “critical” juncture unfolds.

US–Cuba relations

Inevitably the starting point must be the dynamics of the US–Cuba relationship. While the Florida election of 2022 and the presidential contest of 2024 pose existential risks to the current fragile cross-straits equilibrium, there remain certain parameters that are predictable. While it may be an open question whether or not Puerto Rico becomes a US state, the Republic of Cuba will remain a separate sovereign nation with its own historical consciousness and a set of inheritances that diverge radically from the US worldview. For example, the healthcare system and its distinctive profile can hardly be scrapped and replaced by the fundamentally different US approach to such matters, at least not over the coming decade, whatever other realignments may occur. While it is conceivable that Washington might gain an opportunity to pour resources into the island on other fronts (tourism, for example, or real estate) the US Congress will never assume financial responsibility for social programmes in Cuba that it flinches from funding even for its own citizens (food stamps, for example, or unemployment benefits

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or pensions). On the security front, whether denouncing Havana as a source of terrorism or embracing its military as the essential partner for controlling refugee flows and the penetration of organised crime the Pentagon and Homeland Security will be operating on a state-to-state basis with Cuban counterparts that are highly professional and distinctly autonomous. This is why, as LeoGrande and Kornbluh (2014) documented so well, even at the moments of greatest conflict between the Castro regime and Washington, certain stabilising "back channels" were always kept open. This included coastguard communications and some collaboration over hurricanes and similar shared natural hazards.

Under current conditions the scope for co-operation on matters of common interest is much reduced and the hopeful opening of the Obama years is long past. However, even following the protests of July 2021 and heightened tension concerning Havana's ties with Moscow not all US-Cuban interactions are antagonistic. One significant line of bilateral dialogue is apparently channelled through the church hierarchy, as most recently illustrated by the visit of the Cardinal of Boston to Cuba on September 26th 2021 (see González, 2021). The White House still claims that it will in due course resume consular relations and family remittances.

But even before the July 2021 protests the Biden administration had resiled from its campaign promises to ease the sanctions on Cuba that Trump had tightened just before leaving office (LeoGrande, 2021). Following the street outbursts and their repercussions in Miami he went further, placing economic sanctions on Cuba's Defence Minister and the "Black Berets" unit of the Interior Ministry and promising to assist dissidents on the island whose social media access had been interrupted. In October 2021 the US Congress also unanimously adopted a "Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks Act" which was titled the "Havana Act" – notwithstanding the fact that such attacks had taken place in several other countries as well as Cuba, and that while their origins remain unknown it is quite implausible to assign main authorship to the authorities in Havana. Even more implausible is the State Department position that bracketed Cuba with Iran, North Korea and Syria as the world's four "state sponsors of terrorism" in 2021.

However, even on the US left, Havana's repressive response to the street protests made a mark. Both former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, whose friendly words for the Cuban government even in the thick of the 2020 presidential race horrified Cuban Miami, and the figurehead of the socialist left within the Democratic Party, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, condemned state violence and called for respect for freedom of expression.

In any case, beyond bilateral relations, Havana's interactions with Washington are also mediated by various third parties, notably Canada, Mexico, the EU, and a range of regional and international fora that require separate analysis. The Cuban regime also possesses a complex and diverse network of external relationships with other powers that, far from any suspicion of acting as US proxies are now clearly aligned as potential counterweights – China, Russia, Iran - and of course the much degraded but still relevant player that is Venezuela.

Canada

Although south Florida is seen as the key player in North American positioning towards the Cuban Revolution it is not the sole significant actor in that world region. Indeed the intense and personal animosity Miami directs against the Castro regime has elicited something of a backlash in some other parts of the “Free World”, including Canada. It was noteworthy that even the Conservative government of John Diefenbaker resisted pressure from the Kennedy administration to enforce sanctions against Cuba (see Molinaro, 2016). At a more personal level, in 1960 a rising young Canadian liberal politician from Quebec, Pierre Trudeau, was rescued in the straits of Florida while trying to paddle to Cuba. Diefenbaker taunted him in the House for conducting his “love affair” with the Cuban Revolution “by canoe”. Forty years later Fidel Castro travelled to Montreal to serve as a pall bearer at Pierre Trudeau’s burial. Sixteen years afterwards, in 2016, his son, the incoming Canadian premier Justin Trudeau, spoke at the University of Havana in the presence of Raúl Castro and Miguel Díaz-Canel, saying Canada would be a “steadfast and unflinching friend to Cuba. We disagree with the approach the US has taken with Cuba. We think that our approach is much better – of partnership, of collaboration, of engagement” (Trudeau, 2016).

Canada’s friendly disposition towards Havana reflects more than the personal inclinations of a handful of politicians. There is an underlying national interest at stake.

On July 15th 2021 the younger Trudeau’s government initially reacted mildly to the protests of July 11th, merely stating that “Canada supports the right to freedom of expression and assembly” (Dyer, 2021). Since that risked provoking an electoral backlash, however, Justin Trudeau soon condemned any official violence. As he was re-elected two months later, this moderate stance towards Havana seems destined to continue. Indeed in August 2021 Canada donated two million syringes to help with the COVID vaccination programme, which was being impeded by US sanctions; while tourist flows are expected to resume in time for the coming winter season (in 2019 a quarter of all tourists to Cuba – 1.1million entries – came from Canada).

Canada’s friendly disposition towards Havana reflects more than the personal inclinations of a handful of politicians. There is an underlying national interest at stake. Among other things, the Helms-Burton Act – were it to fully prevail – mandates a US-approved electoral system with the Fidelistas barred, which would once again leave Cuba subject to heavy supervision by the US Congress. This could have damaging implications for Canada’s scope for political independence – a sentiment that also sways nationalist opinion in Mexico and various Caribbean democracies. On the economic side, Canada’s significant investments in nickel mining and other areas would face massive competition from US investors. In cultural terms, Quebecois insecurities within a predominantly anglophone federation, and academic and intellectual identification with a proud and sophisticated nation subject to external intolerance tend in the same direction.

But there are definite limits to this friendly disposition. Ottawa can only go so far in diverging from Washington on questions considered to be of vital interest to the latter. Moreover, as a liberal democratic regime with a foreign policy that stresses human rights and political dialogue the acceptance of an avowedly communist one-party regime can only

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be sustained to the extent that Cuba appears to practice moderation. Canadian public opinion would not remain quiescent in the event of Hong Kong or Belarus-style open mass repression in Havana. Trudeau junior's government has not hesitated to take a tough line with Ortega's Nicaragua and Maduro's Venezuela, meaning Díaz-Canel's Cuba can be in little doubt about Ottawa's red lines.

Mexico

Mexican relations with Cuba reflect similar dynamics. Fidel Castro's 1956 Granma expedition was launched from Mexico and the Cárdenas wing of the ruling party viewed it as a parallel movement of national liberation. Although the higher reaches of the Mexican government were always ambivalent – and much of the elite disliked Cuban radicalism – Mexico was alone in the western hemisphere in maintaining diplomatic relations, and always opposed US sanctions against Havana. Ana Covarrubias (1996) explains this convergence in terms of a shared commitment to non-intervention (although the phrase might be narrowed down to non-intervention against anti-Monroeist regimes). The two governments worked to some extent in parallel over the Central American crises of the 1980s and the (in domestic respects quite conservative) administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari hosted the Salvadoran peace agreement of 1992, working in part with Havana.¹ Similar co-operation helped to advance the peace process in Colombia (the talks were hosted by Havana between 2012 and 2016), another progressive foreign policy offset endorsed by a domestically conservative PRI government. And in 2021 Mexico hosted a negotiation over the impasse in Venezuela, with Cuba again treated as a valid intermediary. Once again, the contrast is stark with the US State Department's continuing classification even under the Biden administration of Cuba as a "state sponsor of terrorism", alongside Iran, North Korea and Syria.

The most striking evidence of Mexican sympathy for the Cuban cause surfaced following the Trump administration and the pandemic outbreak. Within weeks of the July 11th protests the Mexican authorities despatched three shiploads of humanitarian aid – fuel, medicines and food – to help alleviate the immediate distress. More explicit signs of political solidarity soon followed. Cuban President Díaz-Canel was given a place of honour at the celebrations commemorating the 211th anniversary of Mexican independence on September 16th 2021. Receiving him at the Chapultepec Castle, President López Obrador spoke at length on Cuba: "We can agree or disagree with the Cuban Revolution and its Government, but to have resisted 62 years without subjugation is an indisputable historic feat [...] the country should be recognized as the new Numantia and I think for that reason it must be declared a World Heritage Site [...] [So we respectfully call] on the United States to lift the blockade on Cuba because no state has the right to subjugate another people, another country... it is wrong for the U.S. government to use the blockade to hinder the welfare of the Cuban people so that they, forced by necessity, have to confront their own Government. [...] If that perverse strategy were to succeed, which does not seem likely, it would turn into a pyrrhic, vile and despicable victory, one of those stains that cannot be removed even with all the water in the ocean. [...] Hopefully Biden, who possesses sufficient political

1. Salinas has published an extensive account of his efforts to mediate between Castro and Clinton in the mid-1990s. He devoted a full chapter to this in his massive *México: Un Paso Difícil a la Modernidad* (editorial Norma, Madrid, 2000), and expanded that into the full length *Muros, Puentes y Litorales: Relaciones entre México, Cuba, y Estados Unidos* (Penguin Random House, Madrid, 2018).

sensitivity will ... end the policy of aggravating Cuba forever" (cited in: Telesur, 2021). Like their Canadian counterparts, Mexican airlines are in the process of restoring flights to Cuba.

The position of the OAS towards Cuba has transformed dramatically since Luis Almagro was elected Secretary General in 2015. From an institution seeking the re-integration of Cuba into the hemispheric organisation it has become closely allied with Washington in attacking Cuba (and the left-wing governments of Venezuela and Nicaragua) for failing to comply with liberal democratic norms (see Geoffray, 2022). As John Kirk (2021) reports in his insightful account of international reactions to the July 11th 2021 protests in Cuba, Almagro's call for an OAS emergency session was roundly condemned by 13 Caribbean Community (CARICOM) nations, showing the ongoing support for Cuba in the region. He then cites Sir Ronald Sanders, the ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the OAS and coordinator of the CARICOM group there, stating that "the OAS can enforce nothing on [Cuba]. Any discussion can only satisfy political hawks with an eye on US mid-term elections, where winning South Florida with the backing of Cuban exiles would be a prize. The task of the OAS should be to promote peaceful and cooperative relations in the hemisphere, not to feed division and conflict" (Kirk, 2021).

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Europe

Tourist flights from Europe are also in the course of being restored to normal, with Spain particularly interested in the reopening of the major hotels. As long as the Trump administration was in office and tightened US sanctions, European nations refrained from closing ranks with Washington. As the Biden administration took a wait-and-see attitude, so did Europe. However, the nationwide street protests on July 11th 2021 changed matters. The lack of civil liberties in Cuba has always been a thorny issue in EU–Cuban relations, but at the same time there was a foundation of goodwill within many western European societies (and governments) on the grounds of Cuba's social development, and a broad reluctance to sign up to the US's aggressive policies. Over the years this goodwill has been diminished by the accession of post-communist states in eastern Europe, and in the west it has also undergone a process of gradual erosion, as Europe's social democratic parties have waned, Cuba's domestic economic reform process came to a halt and civil society voices on the island were met with stiff responses from the government.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic Cuba gained a great deal of respect internationally by sending medical brigades to fight the pandemic in numerous other countries, most prominently Bergamo in Italy, the early epicentre of the pandemic in Europe. But this was soon obscured from view by Havana's hardline response to the July 11th 2021 street protests, and the strains in EU–Cuban relations became fully visible. Within the EU's institutional framework, it has above all been the European Parliament that has taken high-profile public stances criticising the Cuban government, as highlighted by the award of the Sakharov prize to the "Ladies in White" dissidents in 2005 and to Guillermo Fariñas in 2010. After the July 11th protests, the European Parliament

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stepped up its position, not only condemning violence against protesters and human rights activists, but also calling on the 27-nation bloc to impose sanctions on those responsible for human rights violations in Cuba. The broad majority in favour of this move – with 426 in favour, 146 against and 115 abstentions – would have been unthinkable in the past.²

For Cuba 2021 not only brought a terrible slump in the economy. The island also saw COVID19 infection rates skyrocket from June when the highly contagious Delta variant entered the country following an ill-prepared opening to tourism. But once the vaccines developed on the island reached the stage of mass production, the vaccination process advanced at remarkable speed. As a result, Cuba re-opened the country to international tourism from November 15th 2021, just in time for the important winter season. As Spain has particularly significant investments in Cuba's tourism industry, this will also have a bearing on the country's policies towards the island. Flows of tourists from other European countries will also revive, but staying well below pre-pandemic levels.

However, in its bilateral relations with European countries the Cuban government will struggle. Germany will be a case in point. With the change of government and the Greens to head the Foreign Office, Cuba's notion of national sovereignty and its allergic reactions to anything it decries as meddling in its domestic affairs will be at odds with the Greens' traditional understanding of standing up for human rights issues anywhere. Even before the events of July 11th the failure to respond with more openness to the emergent bottom-up digital media and to enter into meaningful dialogue with critical artists and intellectuals has eroded some of the tacit support and goodwill Cuba retained among many in the social democratic and green social constituencies in the past. Meanwhile, a heightened ideological confrontation with China will not ease matters.

Russia

These days, another potential source of tourism is the Russian Federation. In April 2021 President Putin phoned President Díaz-Canel to congratulate him on his promotion to the leadership of the Communist Party and to propose what he termed a "strategic partnership" in the fight against COVID-19. The Russian Foreign Ministry promptly labelled the July 11th protests an "attempted colour revolution", with Moscow also sure to view them through the prism of similar events in Belarus. Evaluating this source of support requires a long historical perspective and a sharp focus on the geopolitics involved (see Loss & Prieto, 2012; Bain, 2015; Chaguaceda, 2019; and Simes, 2020). In contrast to the friendly democratic regimes discussed above, Moscow's approach reflects a national strategy that is hostile to the West's democracy promotion agenda and ready to weaken US global leadership in its Caribbean "backyard", provided the costs and risks involved are not too high. The Ukraine conflict casts this old relationship in an unpredictable new light.

For three decades, from the Cuban Revolution until the collapse of the USSR, Moscow provided the fundamental economic, military and

2. For a more detailed analysis of EU-Cuba relations from a Cuban perspective see Perera, 2021.

political backing that enabled the Castro regime to sustain its high international profile and ambitions. In exchange, Cuba delivered major strategic, symbolic and reputational benefits, although the partnership was obviously unequal and at times quite stormy. The three decades since the Soviet collapse are far less studied. Yet, Cuban–Russian relations are still a significant factor in the island’s affairs and their oscillations have a bearing on current circumstances and near-term prospects. The low point came just after Yeltsin replaced Gorbachev and the US Congress adopted the Torricelli Act. Moscow not only withdrew its troops and its aid, but went as far as abstaining in the 1992 UN vote condemning that legislation. Between 1992 and 1994 the Russian Federation actually voted with the US and against Cuba at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. But that changed in 1995 (at the time of the first Chechen War), and the following year Moscow joined the vast majority of states in condemning the 1996 Helms-Burton Act codifying and tightening unilateral US sanctions.

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It was in that year that the “Latina” Travel Agency was opened, paving the way for Russian tourism at a time when trade and investment flows also restarted. Among other things Cuba desperately needed to import spare parts for all the material it had acquired during the Soviet period. Once Putin came to office he was quick to visit Havana, where he signed an exchange deal for 2001–2005 involving sugar, rum, medicines and medical equipment from the island in return for oil, machinery and chemicals. Subsequently Cuban nickel overtook the supply of sugar. However, on the other side of the balance sheet, and to Havana’s displeasure, the Lourdes military listening post was closed.

Cuba was, however, unable to sustain a balanced trade relationship and by the time of the global financial crisis in 2009 it could no longer service its accumulated debts to Moscow. So, rather than commercial benefits, it was a new geopolitical event (Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014) that spurred further outreach from Moscow during the 2015–2020 period. First Moscow forgave 90% of the outstanding Soviet-era debt of \$22.2 billion, and then in 2017 (responding to the crisis in Venezuela) it resumed oil shipments to Havana for the first time since 1990 and committed to revitalise the island’s decapitalised rail system. Two years later, as the Trump administration stepped up its pressure, Russia offered help to maintain Soviet-era military equipment, and in June 2019 it despatched an advanced warship on a visit to Havana. Foreign Minister Lavrov visited in February 2020 and Putin twice phoned the new president in 2021. In short, Moscow’s long engagement with the Cuban Revolution remains a relevant factor in the island’s security and continues to be driven more by Great Power considerations than by commercial logic.

Venezuela

Ideological solidarity was more strikingly in evidence in Havana’s relations with Caracas, although the instability of the economic and commercial links was once again clear. It is important to be aware of the centuries-long prehistory and the initial convergence of the Cuban and Venezuelan rebellions in 1958/9, before Caracas and Havana became Cold War antagonists. The personal bonds linking Fidel Castro and Hugo

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Chávez also deserve attention, particularly after the failed coup against Chávez in 2002 that made his divorce from Washington complete and precipitated his regime's close security dependence on Cuba. Once oil prices surged the Cuban offer of healthcare and social mobilisation proved a spectacular success and the two governments (still quite divergent in their beliefs and practices) achieved a decade of partnership and international influence that temporarily promised a breakthrough.

But the foundations of the "Bolivarian" project to establish "21st Century Socialism" were always fragile and the death of Chávez, followed by the collapse of PDVSA gradually turned a honeymoon into a nightmare. The chimera of Venezuelan largesse as a substitute for Soviet aid has proved another illusion. But Havana has proved unable to disentangle itself from Caracas's failed experiment in "21st Century Socialism" and solidarity among progressives in the Western liberal democracies has also been undermined by its continuing endorsement of the Ortega autocracy's 2021 electoral charade in Nicaragua.³

It is the downswing in Cuba–Venezuela relations since about 2014 that most concerns us here (see Mesa-Lago & Vidal, 2019; Fonseca and Polga-Hecimovich, 2021). Perhaps Havana could have diversified its sources of support and reduced its exposure to the vagaries of the Maduro regime if the Obama administration's "normalization" of relations with Cuba had remained in place, but the arrival of Trump in the White House was followed by the rise of Juan Guaidó to head the Venezuelan National Assembly, with the resultant polarising consequences. As the crisis in Caracas spiralled downward, Havana scaled back its health and welfare commitments to Venezuela, but maintained its unswerving political support for Maduro and perhaps reinforced its security assistance. (Evidence on the latter point is much disputed, with implausible claims in abundance and few trustworthy sources). To the surprise of many observers Maduro has outlasted "maximum pressure" from the Trump administration, but by the time the pandemic arrived it was no longer able to meet Cuba's needs for imported energy. Although it is possible that negotiations promoted by Norway (and supported by Cuba) might broaden the base for a durable settlement of Venezuela's internal conflicts and help steer the country towards a slightly more stable oil economy, the scope for an early return to any kind of mutually beneficial exchange between Caracas and Havana is very slender. Nearly all the risks remain on the downside for Cuba – that the negotiations will fail; that US hostility will continue to besiege Maduro; and that Havana's commitment to a floundering regime will generate further problems and harmful consequences, instead of supplying the island with much needed relief.

China

The People's Republic of China might provide a much more solid, broad-based and long-term source of likeminded partnership – and even some short-term assistance – but it is doubtful whether the authorities in Beijing will judge this a sound move. Diplomatic relations were established in 1960, shortly after the Revolution, but Havana's embrace of Moscow was not to the PRC's liking and relations were erratic until the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the wake of the Special Period, Fidel Castro

3. It is telling that ahead of the "Marcha Civica" planned for Cuba on November 15th the most vocal advocates of popular protest in neighbouring Puerto Rico were on the colony's "progressive" wing – the Independence party (PIP) and the Movimiento Civico (MVC).

travelled to China and seriously examined whether the best solution for Cuban communism might be to learn from their model. However, he eventually reported back that this would be unfeasible, given the proximity and dominance of the US and the counter-revolutionary spirit of the exiles in Florida.

In 2011 Beijing agreed to write off \$6 billion of Cuba's old debt. This was an exceptional gesture – Beijing normally stretches out foreign debts, and has only rarely forgiven them (Iraq and Serbia are the only other instances so far). When President Xi Jinping visited Havana in 2014 he stated that “The two countries advance hand in hand (towards) construction of socialism with its own characteristics, offering *reciprocal support* on issues related to our *respective national interests*” (Xi, 2014, authors' italics). This led to a \$120 million Chinese bank loan to expand the Santiago container port and the establishment of biopharmaceutical and artificial intelligence enterprises in the Mariel Free Trade Zone. But a proposed \$300 million investment in Cuban nickel and a much larger (\$6 billion) project to upscale the Cienfuegos oil refinery fell through. China partly funded Cuba's ALBA-1 underseas cable to Venezuela, and Huawei has a contract to install fibre optic cables across the island. By 2017 it is reported that Cuban imports from China were worth \$1.35 billion (including new cars from Geely, trucks from SinoTruck and buses from Yutong), but in exchange it only exported \$379 million (mostly raw sugar and nickel) (Jiménez Enoa, 2019). In 2018 Cuba signed up to the Belt and Road Initiative to secure tractors, irrigation equipment and support for sugar and rice production. It also gained a computer assembly plant, renewable energy investments and a Confucius Institute was opened at the University of Havana. While China became a key trading partner for Cuba, the relationship was clearly very lopsided and even before the pandemic the prospects of repayment were poor. In 2022 the sugar harvest looks so poor that Havana will be hard-pressed to find the 400,000 tonnes it had promised to the PRC. Whereas China sold weapons systems to likeminded Andean partners it made no such commitments to Cuba.

The most significant security commitment may have been the technology provided by Huawei TP-Link and ZTE to ETECSA, the state telecoms company (US sanctions meant that Havana had no access to Western alternatives). It is alleged (Lazarus / Ellis 2021) that these suppliers provide the “key to the regime's ability” to shut off internet and telephone services in the wake of the July 11th protests. According to Sweden's Qurium, Huawei's network management software eSight was used to filter web searches. Indeed, on August 31st 2021 President Xi Jinping phoned President Díaz-Canel for the fourth time since the pandemic began. According to reports of the conversation (Xinhua, 2021), he said “China is willing to walk together with Cuba in building socialism and be good partners in pursuing common development” as well as “being good exemplars of anti-COVID-19 fight and good partners in strategic coordination”. But he also said: “*No matter how the situation changes* (our italics) China's policy of sticking to long-term friendship with Cuba will not change, and its willingness to deepen co-operation in various field with Cuba will not change” (Xinhua, 2021). It is worth underscoring the first six words, as they can clearly be read as saying that Beijing, ultimately, does not see its relations with the island as bound to the political status quo or the regime currently in power.

While China became a key trading partner for Cuba, the relationship was clearly very lopsided and even before the pandemic the prospects of repayment were poor.

At the onset of the COVID crisis Cuba was once again able to turn its medical sector into a key instrument of international soft-power projection.

Although Cuba hoped to rely exclusively on its own vaccines to suppress the pandemic, by mid-2021 it was clear that production bottlenecks were slowing this essential rollout and President Díaz-Canel appealed for humanitarian assistance. But President Biden was only prepared to allow external vaccines onto the island if they were distributed by an international organisation independent of the Cuban government – an intolerable infringement of sovereignty from Havana’s point of view. So at the end of August Cuba agreed to roll out China’s Sinopharm vaccine with a Cuban booster. Whether or not these were donated by Beijing has not been clarified, but the incident illustrates the scope for China to select strategic areas where it can usefully “deepen collaboration” with Havana, no matter how the internal circumstances unfold.

Cuban vaccines: Cuba's new source of soft-power diplomacy?

In its international relations, soft-power diplomacy has traditionally been of crucial importance for Cuba, be it the early campaign for literacy, cultural institutions such as Casa de las Américas and the Havana Film Festival, the sporting triumphs at the Olympic Games or the medical missions abroad. When Cuba entered a phase of rapprochement with the US in Obama’s second term in office, the island’s soft-power capital was once again key for the truly high levels of goodwill and sympathetic perceptions of Cuba in North America and Europe. Havana became the place to be and pop stars, politicians and businesspeople all flocked to the island. Politically, Obama’s presidential visit in 2016 and, culturally, the Rolling Stones concert became events that seemed to mark a new era. In hindsight, they marked the zenith after which things once again soured – not only in US–Cuba relations, but also with regard to the timid opening process within Cuba itself.

Trump brought the Cold War back to US–Cuba relations. While the island suffered from the economic fallout of sharpened US sanctions and a deteriorating image due to its domestic failures to reform, it could count on Trump’s bullying eliciting enough opposition throughout the Western world and within Latin America to perfectly maintain its traditional David vs. Goliath imagery. Even while other sources of soft power eroded, this consistently held firm to provide a baseline of (albeit defensive) international support.

At the onset of the COVID crisis Cuba was once again able to turn its medical sector into a key instrument of international soft-power projection as the island quickly sent its Henry Reeve Brigades of doctors and medical staff to numerous countries affected by the pandemic. Most notably this included the Italian city of Bergamo, the devastating images of whose collapsed hospital in the rich North became emblematic and put it at the centre of global attention. That help came not from European neighbours but from poor, distant Cuba was seen to underscore not only Cuba’s medical achievement but also the country’s humanitarian vocation.

Honing in on its reputation as an international medical power punching way above its weight, Cuba started to develop its own anti-COVID-19 vaccines (Drexler & Hoffmann, 2021). However, before they became available in sufficient quantity (with the names of Abdala and Soberana) in summer

2020 the island itself became an epicentre of the global pandemic as the Delta variant spread with such force that the health system – the pride of Cuba’s social achievements – was quickly overrun. The dramatic health crisis, combined with the dire economic situation, were the sombre background for the July 11th street protests. While the Cuban vaccines are not yet recognised by the WHO, once the island managed to mass produce the vaccines they proved their worth. The massive vaccination campaign in the second half of 2021 was key to bringing the pandemic under control, with daily case numbers falling from more than 9,000 at the peak in August to some 200 by the end of November. With Cuban vaccines being administered to children from 2 years onward, by February 2022 90% of the population has been fully vaccinated.

This success allowed Cuba to restart international tourism by mid-November without fearing a new wave of the pandemic hitting the island. (In fact, the entry of Omicron then pushed infection numbers up somewhat but with hardly any effect on the national health care system.) Moreover, as much of the Caribbean suffers from low vaccination rates, the mass roll-out of vaccines (which will also include vaccine updates becoming a routine healthcare provision over the coming years) makes Cuba stand out in a region where most neighbouring islands’ vaccination rates are low. This could give Cuba a competitive edge in marketing the island as a “safe” tourist destination. However, the worsening economic situation and the negative international image from the increased social and political tensions will outweigh this effect and will impede a speedy and strong rebound of Western tourism.

Cuban vaccines are not sophisticated mRNA or vector vaccines but “old-school” protein-subunit-based vaccines. As such, their great advantage is their comparatively simple production process and their ease of handling, which requires no deep-freeze storage. The lack of independent monitoring of their efficacy is a drawback, but their main issue is the absence of international recognition. Even with these limitations, though, Cuba’s home-grown vaccines have revived some of the soft-power diplomacy historically associated with its medical achievements.

Cuba also tied considerable economic hopes on the vaccine development that their export could become a new source of foreign exchange. Given the lack of international recognition of the vaccines and the greatly increased availability of other vaccines, initial ideas of vaccine tourism to Cuba have been shelved. But country-to-country exports to Venezuela and Vietnam and licensed production in Iran have begun. However, so far this is limited to a handful of countries. For the Cuban economy, the vaccines are good news, but they are far from being a magic bullet, and will be hardly enough to offset the island’s other economic troubles.

Conclusion

Cuba is a strategically located nation-state with a proud history, a strong cultural identity and a globally recognised political profile as an anti-imperialist revolutionary beacon. But it has only a modest population (the same as both Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and a crippled economy. It still projects an international presence far beyond the scale

Havana has progressively lost ascendancy over the domestic narrative as its capacity to deliver has faltered.

of its domestic base, and the success or failure of Havana's revolutionary endeavours matters to external opinion far more than its reduced capabilities would suggest. In short, the Castro regime offended US national pride and produced an unequal contest with Washington that still conditions international reactions to the fate of the island. The result is a precarious stasis with Havana and Washington both heavily invested in incompatible narratives and worldviews, while the rest of the world – from the most liberal of democracies to the most hardline of autocracies – all view the contest with a certain degree of incomprehension (even as they take sides on human rights issues or against the extra-territoriality of US sanctions under the Helms-Burton Act).

For the first half-century after the Revolution the Cuban regime was successful in separating external assessments of its affairs from the domestic sphere. It could rely on a wellspring of national sentiment and a controlled internal public opinion to support its assertions of sovereignty against the domineering “empire” to its north. Those islanders who doubted its message could typically leave, but then they would lose much of their access to their families and communities of origin.⁴

Over the past decade, however, Havana has progressively lost ascendancy over the domestic narrative as its capacity to deliver has faltered, while cautious liberalisation has led to more exposure to external influences (through tourism, remittances, foreign travel for nationals, social media advances and the effects of the 2014 Obama “normalization” programme). A more plural and more disenchanted citizenry has emerged. With *exit* blocked and *loyalty* to the regime fading, only the third pillar of Hirschman's trio of potential responses to poor conditions remains: *voice* (Hirschman 1970). When in the state-sponsored referendum of 2019 the people endorsed the reformed Constitution many may not simply have acted out of obedience to authority, but also have harboured hopes that the revised Magna Carta will allow for greater *voice* on key public issues.

For the most part external observers have little exposure to such glacial realignments of Cuban domestic sentiment. The varied reactions to the COVID pandemic and the July 11th protests surveyed in this chapter are not driven primarily by an informed appreciation of the changing attitudes and balance of forces within the island. As in the past, they largely reflect the assumptions and political commitments of the diverse external players engaged in the ongoing Cuban drama. The established pattern has been for such actors to project onto the blank slate of internal Cuban opinion the beliefs and expectations that derive from their own worldviews, ideals and pragmatic considerations. The real task of revising and adjusting those interpretations in the light of feedback emanating directly from the Cuban people remains a matter for future elaboration, rather than a process that is already under way. The three-stage programme of this Europe-Cuba Forum project, with shared participation and distribution both on and off the island, is one attempt from a European perspective to advance such dialogue and closer ties.

In the short run it remains difficult for outsiders to assess the scale and distribution of domestic opinion on post-pandemic Cuba's alternatives. Setting aside the impulses transmitted from outside the island, it seems clear that islanders have expressed some forceful views about family

4. To put this into comparative perspective, this clearly is different from, for instance, the Korean case, where the rupture was more absolute and the fate of internal dissenters was even more dire. In the Cuban variant of communism exile and domestic sanction are less decisive and a good deal of regime legitimacy has been gained through more positive means.

law, in addition to their protests over shortages and social hardships. Reassertions of local identities, and perhaps some revival of religiosity, may also be emerging. On the most directly political issues of policing, official censorship and redress for government errors polemics still crowd out trustworthy testimony and solid evidence. Past cycles of regime “*tira y afloja*” (tug of war) make it difficult to distinguish temporary clampdowns from major inflection points. Credible observers report that in contrast to previous periods, this time the regime’s intolerance of even quite moderate expressions of dissent may be proving unacceptable to major segments of the hard-pressed Cuban people, especially to many educated young people who make extensive use of the social media outlets that remain available. This chapter has focussed on external reactions to the 2021 protests, but even the relatively supportive responses from abroad are generally tentative and conditional on domestic calm. Such foreign partners could easily pull back if they reach the conclusion that a clear majority of the Cuban people are withdrawing their acquiescence to the prevailing dispensation.

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But external observers can also reflect on probable longer-term dynamics. Looking, say, a decade ahead, regardless of how the current emergency unfolds, Cuba will still be a highly organised and independent sovereign state. Biden’s latest references to “state failure” (CNN, 2021) may apply to Haiti, but sorely mischaracterise Cuba.

Even if the Díaz-Canel leadership remains in power, sooner or later this cohort will no longer be entitled to hold office, and one way or another the islanders will be called upon to consider the next stage in their national development. It remains to be seen whether the forces of continuity can prevail over pressures for accelerated change. (*Patria o Muerte* compared with *Patria y Vida*, to cite the current alternative slogans). Too much continuity would almost certainly accentuate the demographic decline and internal demoralisation of the past decade. Too reckless a course correction is likely to create cross-straits population flows and asset redistributions so violent that they destabilise the wider region, perhaps opening the way for an upsurge in organised crime and even armed confrontations. The international community therefore has a collective interest in supporting some intermediate path over the coming decade.

Various analysts have reacted to the events of July 11th and the sequels by observing that the myth of Cuban “exceptionalism” has been destroyed. It is true that the long-cultivated rosy official image of the Cuban Revolution was substantially dented, and that underlying currents of dissatisfaction and dissent have now surfaced in a manner that will be hard to disguise, let alone to reverse. It is still too early to be sure whether this marks a true breakpoint, or whether the regime can succeed in containing the shock and reconstructing its legitimising narrative. But, in any case, the core of the “exceptionalist” thesis was much broader and far less dependent on Havana’s self-description than this critique supposes.⁵ Scholarly attempts to explain the course of Cuba’s national development by shoehorning its long-term political trajectory into any of the standard formulae – authoritarian (or totalitarian) deviation; Communist Party takeover; Third World charismatic nationalist revolution; Soviet proxy; let alone historically inevitable exercise in building socialism – all these framing devices are more liable to distort or mislead about the history of the past six decades

5. For a broader discussion of the debate on Cuban exceptionalism see Hoffmann & Whitehead, 2007.

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than to illuminate them. There are still major anomalies in the unfolding of this experience that require careful Cuba-specific analysis. Although the Fidelista prospectus of voluntarist transformation unconstrained by any of the normal forces determining political possibility has been tested to destruction, the resulting regime is still fairly unlike what any of these predictive schemas would foretell.

Perhaps 2021 will be viewed in retrospect as the moment when the crushing pressures of social reality extinguished all the regime’s margin of manoeuvre, but that juncture has been falsely proclaimed on many previous occasions, and even in the current straitened circumstances it would be prudent to acknowledge that Havana still has significant defensive resources. This chapter has outlined the international assets it retains, and our previous volume highlighted the unusual strengths (as well as acute weaknesses) of its domestic policy inheritance.

So perhaps Cuba is now less “exceptional” than it was in the past, but even so it remains fairly sui generis, and false analogies with other political trajectories still need to be debunked. President Biden may think Cuba is a “failed state”, but a Washington policy that confuses Cuba with Haiti is unlikely to work well. In contrast to Puerto Rico, Cuba is not an unincorporated territory of the US under the ultimate authority of the US Congress, and it does not have the remotest prospect of being admitted as an additional state of the Union. Whatever else happens it will remain a separate sovereign nation, internationally recognised as such, and required to provide for its own citizens rather than to seek welfare handouts from Washington.

Unlike Venezuela, the Cuban nation has always been energy-short, and has had no alternative to relying on its human capital to generate any productive capacity it may have. Whereas the Bolivarian Republic has turned into a mismanaged electoral autocracy with very reduced internal legitimacy, Cuba has been consistent in resisting electoral contestation and in claiming patriotic unity on programmatic grounds. In contrast to the oligarchic democracy of Honduras the revolutionary regime has never allowed the US military presence in Guantanamo Bay to exercise the slightest influence over the internal affairs of the republic. Unlike the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Cuban communism did not degenerate into dynastic rule by a family, it is not bent on acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, and does not operate a gulag system of repressive control. In contrast to the German Democratic Republic, the Castro revolution was not imposed by the Red Army on one occupied zone of a defeated enemy, and its claims to nationalist authenticity were projected across the entire territory on the basis of its own internally generated legitimacy. Unlike the Soviet Union, Cuban communism was not continental in scale and Cuba’s “socialism in one country” signified a compact project with a restricted geopolitical potential that rested its survival on winning international goodwill through persuasion and alliances, soft-power projection and an ambitious foreign policy, rather than by projecting hegemonic dominance. The Yeltsin debacle inoculated various party regimes against perestroika and glasnost, with Cuba one of the first to resist that siren song. To sum up, even if Cuba is less “exceptional” than some previous authors imagined, it is different enough from all these comparators to require a separate evaluation based on its own reality, not that of any supposed counterparts.

From comparative experience as well as the evidence of domestic tendencies it would be prudent to assume that a substantial current of opinion will continue to value various key aspects of the “revolutionary” inheritance, while the strength of pressures for a different social pact will depend in large part on the influence (or otherwise) of the emigrant community, above all in Florida, and on whether any internal leverage it might obtain is used to bridge the gap in worldviews, rather than to attempt the extreme project of suppressing all traces of the past six decades. As indicated in the course of this chapter, such a “Plattist” (referring to the early years of Cuba’s independence under US tutelage) ambition may remain alive and well in Dade County, but on the international stage it would be greeted with widespread scepticism, if not indignation. On balance it seems more realistic to conclude that the last word will rest with the inhabitants of the island.

But following Moscow’s military assault on Ukraine a new caveat is in order. Ever since the 1959 Revolution Cuba has seen the defence of sovereignty against the encroachments of its powerful neighbour to the North as the nation’s ultimate value. This included, of course, the sovereign choice of its allies up to the point, in 1962, of stationing Soviet nuclear missiles just 90 miles off the US coast.

Russia has become a key economic partner of Cuba but Putin’s open disrespect for Ukraine’s sovereignty made Havana’s stance a diplomatic high wire act. While state media follow Russia’s wording and speaks of “special military operation” rather than war (e.g. Granma, 24 February 2022), in the United Nations vote of 24 February Cuba abstained⁶. The notion that a powerful country, if it judges its security to be at risk, can invade a neighbouring country with impunity sets most perilous precedents from a Cuban point of view. The long-standing history of US hegemonic policies towards the island, as embodied in the US-mandated Platt amendment of the early 20th century and the Helms-Burton Law of 1996, indicate that Havana is not immune to such risks.

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6. While Havana refers to “the use of force and non-observance of legal principles and international norms which Cuba strongly supports, and are, particularly for small countries, an essential resource in resisting hegemony, abuse of power and injustice”, at the same time it puts all blame for the war on the US and NATO and underscores that “Russia has the right to defend itself” (“Rusia tiene derecho a defenderse”) (MinRex, 2022).

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