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“Back to the future?” Cuban–Russian relations under Raúl Castro



Mervyn J. Bain

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Since Raúl Castro has become the President of Cuba relations between Moscow and Havana have displayed a number of reminiscence of the halcyon days of Soviet–Cuban relations, which has included Raúl Castro and Dmitry Medvedev traveling to Russia and Cuba twice, respectively and Vladimir Putin visiting the Cuban capital in July 2014. Correspondingly, this article will examine the relationship that is developing between the two countries with the aim to find out whether the bilateral relationship has “gone back to the future” since August 2006. Also it should conclude if a “Raúl doctrine” similar to the “Putin doctrine,” which has been vital for this relationship, has emerged within the realm of Cuban foreign policy.

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Since Raúl Castro has replaced Fidel Castro as Cuban president, first temporarily in August 2006, and then in February 2008 becoming the permanent president of Cuba, the relationship between Moscow and Havana appears to be at its most robust since the end of the Cold War, displaying a number of features reminiscent of the halcyon days of Soviet–Cuban relations. This has included Raúl Castro and Dmitry Medvedev traveling to Russia and Cuba twice, respectively, and Vladimir Putin visiting the Cuban capital in July 2014. Moreover, in the twenty-first century the relationship has become increasingly important for both Russia and Cuba, which is evidenced by the support which each provides for the other in various United Nations (UN) forums, including Cuba voting against the UN resolution which condemned the Russian referendum held in the Crimea in early 2014 (www.un.org). Key for understanding of this relationship has been the emergence of the “Putin doctrine” in Russian foreign policy in the opening years of the twenty-first century. The latter insists on returning of Russia to great power status; establishing a multipolar world; it is expansionist in nature but is ultimately underpinned by defensive realism (Aron, 2013; Grachev, 2005, 262–264). A key question which this article addresses is whether Russian–Cuban relations are ‘gone back to the future’ since August 2006 as a consequence of Raúl Castro’s close association with the Kremlin since the early years of the Cuban Revolution. Furthermore, has a phenomenon similar to the “Putin doctrine”—and which could be called a “Raúl doctrine”—appeared in Cuban policy, towards Russia? If it has, what possible impact could this have for Havana’s foreign policy in general?

In order to answer these questions, this article will examine the development of Moscow’s foreign policy with particular focus being given to the post-Cold War era and its impact on Russian–Cuban relations. The article will commence with an examination of the analytical framework which will be used throughout this study. This will allow us to analyze the emergence of the “Putin doctrine” and its central tenets. The impact of the “Putin doctrine” on Russian–Cuban relations will be examined before attention will be given to Revolutionary Cuba’s foreign policy since 1959. An analysis of the relationship since Raúl Castro’s ascendancy to the Cuban presidency will then be provided. The final section of this article will focus on Cuban foreign policy since August 2006 and the appearance of a possible “Raúl doctrine.”

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1. Analytical framework

During the Cold War International Relations thinking was dominated by realism, which posits that sovereign states are the most important actors in the international system, but that this system is inherently anarchic. As states' pre-eminent goal is their own survival, it is thought that their actions are centered on their own interests. The outcome is being that the states frequently strive to maximize their own power. As Hans Morgenthau has famously written, "...international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power." (Morgenthau, 1972, 25) This takes a variety of forms, including political control and economic dominance of one country over another, and was most certainly the case with the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The ideas of realism are traceable to the writings of Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War. However, over time realism has evolved with a number of different strands. Kenneth Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* detailed the tenets of defensive realism, which posits that security is the most important aspect for states and as a result they are not power maximizers but rather security maximizers. He insisted that: "...self-help is necessarily the principle of action." (Waltz, 1979, 111) Conversely, Mearsheimer (2001) has provided the ideas of offensive realism which suggests that states act to maximize their relative power at the expense of other states.

At times during the Soviet era both offensive realism and defensive realism were important for Soviet–Cuban relations, but this article will examine whether in the second decade of the twenty-first century realism, in particular defensive realism, continues to have resonance for Russian and Cuban foreign policies both individually and also for mutual Russian–Cuban relations. This will be ascertained by focusing on key themes in the relationship, including: trade, bilateral agreements, Cuba's Soviet era debt, military links and symbolism, such as elite visits and cultural connections. Government speeches, published documents and elite interviews, official statistics, newspaper reports and scholarly works will all be utilized in order to answer the above questions.

2. Moscow's foreign policy

Throughout its history a number of issues have underpinned Russia's relationship with the outside world with Stephen White having written that a wish for warm-water harbors and the question regarding the country's role in the world have been of fundamental importance (White, 1991, 179–180). Moreover, Tsygankov and Caldwell believe that Russian national security, and in turn its foreign policy, have been dominated by a feeling of vulnerability along its borders and an inferiority complex due to a perceived backwardness. These have been key factors in Russian foreign policy, which have transcended the tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet eras (Tsygankov, 2006, 6; Caldwell, 2007, 280–283).

During the Soviet era the ideas of Marxist–Leninism¹ were the cornerstones of the Kremlin's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the aforementioned Russian inferiority complex and feelings of insecurity along its borders made the ideas of defensive realism also significant. The prominence of realism in Soviet ruling elite's thinking was evident since the time of Lenin (Grigor Suny, 2007, 57) and explains the interest which Moscow took in the Cuban Revolution in the months after January 1959. Cuba's geographical location and relationship with Washington were key for Soviet interest in the Cuban Revolution, which only increased further as Havana's relationship with Washington deteriorated in no small part due to the anti-American nature of the Revolution (Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, 2). The timing of its victory at the height of the Cold War, and the changes in Soviet foreign policy in the aftermath of Josef Stalin's death, increased Soviet interest in the Developing World. This also meant that the time was right for the Kremlin to acquire an ally in the Western hemisphere, especially in such geostrategic location. Thus, Moscow's relationship with the new regime in Havana demonstrated to the United States that Moscow was becoming a global power that challenged U.S. hegemony not just in Latin America, but also in Cuba, a country in the U.S. "backyard." This new direction in the Soviet foreign policy has shown that the country decided not to limit itself with defensive realism but moved beyond it, making offensive realism, according to which a state attempts to increase its power at the expense of others (Mearsheimer, 2001), an important instrument of its foreign policy.

This new approach has provided part of the foundations of Soviet–Cuban relations for the next 30 years that came to an abrupt end with the implosion of the Soviet Union in December 1991. "...The new Russia had to accommodate itself to a world in which it was no longer a superpower, and in which its economic weakness mattered more than a stockpile of rusting missiles" (White, 2004, 215). With the Liberal Westernizers winning the debate regarding the Kremlin's foreign policy (Light, 1996, 33–100), the latter became much more Western orientated and: "America represented the single greatest external influence on Russian foreign policy" (Lo, 2002, 8). Moreover, as Eugenio Larin, Director of Latin American Studies at the Institute of Cold War History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, noted: "In order to improve political ties Washington demanded of B.H. Yeltsin that he must cut ties with Cuba. This course of action dominated the 1990s" (Larin, 2007, 164) and it became the key to the downturn in Moscow's relationship with Havana.

However, from the mid-1990s the relationship began to improve. This was demonstrated in 1996 when bilateral trade turnover reached 616,086,000 pesos which made Russian Federation Cuba's chief trading partner, something which had not been expected or predicted in the early 1990s (Anuario Estadístico, 2000, VI-5–VI-7). A colossal legacy from the Soviet era was important for the trade that was conducted in the early to mid-1990s, as very quickly after December 1991 both countries realized that it was easier and cheaper for elements of bilateral trade to continue, rather than to buy certain

¹ Marxist–Leninist doctrine posited that a vanguard party was required in order to lead the working class to overthrow capitalism.

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