

US Foreign Policy in Latin America

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SHAYDA SABET, JUN 14 2013

US Foreign Policy in Latin America: An Ideological Perspective

The predominant interpretation of the Cold War draws from a realist perspective which attributes the Soviet Union and the United States' pursuit for economic, military, and influential superiority over one another as an inevitable characteristic of powerful states seeking hegemony within an anarchic international system.[1] From this perspective, the two superpowers of the 20th century (the United States and the Soviet Union) rationally designed their policies in order to serve their best interest.[2] Vladislav M. Zubok challenges this perspective, however, arguing that throughout most of the Cold War, *ideological* factors shaped and influenced the Soviet Union's decisions and policies.[3] Similarly, the United States responded to Soviet foreign policy with ideological fervor, determined to contain (and eventually dismantle) the forces of Communism. "U.S. presidents," states Jorge I. Dominguez, "were committed to combat *communism*, not just the Soviet Union." [4] This paper will argue that anti-Communist ideology shaped the United States' foreign policy toward Latin America during the Cold War, particularly after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. I challenge the neorealist perspective by arguing that such ideological forces drove the United States to implement irrational and costly policies toward Latin America (such as supporting military coups).

The end of the Second World War and particularly the Soviet's decisive victory over the Nazis at the Battle of Stalingrad cultivated within many Russians sentiments that the Soviet Union should be and could be a global power.[5] Likewise, Zubok maintains that the Kremlin's expansionist ambitions, coupled with the Marxist-Leninist ideologies that pervaded the nation, gave rise to the Soviet Union's adoption of the *revolutionary-imperial paradigm* – an ideology through which the Kremlin assumed the responsibility to spread Communism throughout the world.[6] These ideological forces prompted the Soviet Union to adopt aggressive policies toward Eastern and Central Europe and later toward Asia and the Middle East.

Like the Soviet Union, the United States adopted policies toward Latin America that reflect the same vision of exporting values – a vision that was significantly influenced by ideological sentiments. Although the United States' pursuit for economic and military power over Latin America dates back to the 19th century, the Cuban Revolution marks a distinct period in US-Latin American relations, since it is then when American foreign policy fell under the ideological spell.[7] At the 1960 presidential debate, John F. Kennedy accurately expressed American sentiments when he said, "Castro is only the beginning of our difficulties throughout Latin America. The big struggle will be to prevent the influence of Castro [from] spreading to other countries..."[8]

The Cuban Revolution was the only moment in history "when a country in this region [Latin America] became a military and political ally of the chief adversary of the United States." [9] Moreover, the United States' failure to prevent Castro's rise to power in 1959, according to Dominguez, bore traumatic effects on US decision-making – traumatic because it punctured the rationality of US foreign policy toward its southern neighbours, and led it to "incur costs well beyond what rational calculations of the relationship between ends and means would suggest." [10] Although the United States had rational reasons to counter Castro's Communist movement, US foreign policy became illogical when it imposed its fear of a 'Cuban threat' beyond Cuba.[11] Dominguez suggests that not only were the chosen policy instruments costly, but also inappropriate for reaching the intended goal.[12] He argues that since the Cuban Revolution, whenever the United States sensed traces of Communism among Latin American governments, it illogically sought their downfall (through military force and other violent means), regardless of

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whether its economic best interest was truly under threat.[13] Conversely, when there was no apparent ideological threat, the United States sought to protect its economic interests through peaceful negotiations, rather than military force.[14]

Latin America witnessed the rise of many guerilla rebel movements in the 1960s.[15] In Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, and Uruguay, openly anti-American and anti-imperialist revolutionaries who espoused Marxist ideology and who felt inspired by Cuba's successful challenge of United States dominance, began to challenge the status quo in their own nations.[16] These movements prompted the Kennedy administration to increase the United States' military support for Latin America. American military advisors were assigned to Latin American armed forces with the aim of suppressing the revolutionary movements, and between 1950 and 1970, 54,270 Latin American armed forces were trained under US programs. [17] Furthermore, convinced that poverty breeds revolution, the Kennedy administration proposed a development plan for Latin America called The Alliance for Progress, which it believed was the surest way to prevent a 'second Cuba' in the region.[18] Through the military strategies that accompanied the Alliance for Progress, the United States responded to the guerilla movements of the 1960s with unwarranted force.

President Kennedy's humiliating defeat at the Bay of Pigs, and his personal competition with the Soviet Union's current leader, Nikita Khrushchev, may have compelled his administration's reaction. It is clear, however, that the United States believed that these movements had close ties with the Soviet Union, and perceived them as Soviet tools for spreading international Communism in Latin America, that is, tools of the *revolutionary-imperial paradigm*. [19] As Cole Blasier illustrates, though, this was not a well-founded perception, since most guerilla movements, although Marxist, had strained and, often, hostile relations with the orthodox Communist parties in their regions.[20] Moreover, there is little evidence of Moscow or Beijing's support for their rebel movements.[21]

When Salvador Allende's Marxist-socialist coalition party was democratically elected in Chile in 1970, his government immediately began to undertake socialist reforms such as raising wages, extending the land reforms, and nationalizing Chilean and American firms and companies.[22] Unfounded fears of a second Cuba and of Soviet-Chilean relations led the United States to act irrationally. Before his election, the United States tried to prevent Allende's rise to power, and after it failed, US officials ceaselessly sought to destabilize and overthrow his government.[23] Eventually, Allende suffered an American-supported military coup in 1973.[24] The Nixon administration's overreaction to the occurrences in Chile was "disproportionate and inappropriate" [25] since there is little evidence of any Soviet military or economic assistance toward Allende's government.[26] According to Dominguez, "the nature of the Soviet-Chilean relationship could hardly justify U.S. policies toward Allende's Chile"[27]

In the 1970s, Peru faced similar political changes and economic reforms. When Juan Velasco Alvarado's new, leftist government began to expropriate American firms, the Nixon administration acted swiftly, but rationally, to protect its interests.[28] Alvarado, who spoke openly *against* the international Communist movement, underwent economic reforms similar to those of Allende's, such as land reform and the nationalization of firms.[29] Despite his economic ties to the Soviet Union and expropriation of American firms, however, the United States resolved its issues with Alvarado through conciliatory negotiated settlements.[30]

During the early 1970s, both Allende and Alvarado implemented the same social reforms in Chile and Peru, but the United States reacted to one with force and to the other with conciliation. What explains this contradiction in US response? Alvarado's government, although economically tied to the Soviet Union, did not "smell Communist" and even spoke out against Communism.[31] The Americans reacted to Chile's ideological ties to Marxism, and feared a second Marxist country in Latin America that would be independent of and hostile to the United States.[32] As stated by Dominguez, it was reasonable for the Nixon administration to oppose Allende's expropriation of US firms, but it did not require his overthrow (and murder).[33] The United States could have negotiated a peaceful settlement with Chile like it did in Peru, but rather, it "attempted to subvert Chilean democracy out of the ideological fear that an Allende government might become a second Cuba, too"[34] Dominguez's point is strengthened by the fact that Allende's government was democratically elected, while Alvarado rose to power through a violent coup, and undemocratically.[35]

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American ideological fears carried well into the 1970s and 1980s. In Nicaragua, a coalition of revolutionaries, the Sandinistas, defeated the authoritarian Somoza dynasty (which had close ties to the United States).[36] Most members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, although Marxist, opposed the Nicaraguan pro-Soviet Communist party and did not accept the Soviet discipline.[37] Moreover, the Sandinistas' government, with its mixed economy, plural political system, and nonaligned position, provided a perfect climate for conciliatory negotiations with the United States.[38]

Nevertheless, the United States took a different route. When Reagan was elected to office in 1981, in an effort to flaunt his firm stance against Communism, he canceled all aid to Nicaragua, attempted to block aid from the IMF, and he instructed the CIA to arm and mobilize an opposition group (the Contras) and to launch a secret campaign against the Sandinistas.[39] In fact, Reagan consistently undercut all efforts from the Sandinistas and other Latin American governments to reach a negotiated settlement (which would have been the most cost-effective option), and chose to intervene forcefully, instead.[40] Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua underlined the centrality of ideology since he and his policy advisers were willing to break the law and provide military and economic support for the Contras, "despite the explicit prohibition of such actions by the U.S. Congress." [41] He justified his nation's actions by claiming that Nicaragua had become a military base for a Communist takeover of Central America.[42] Once more, however, US foreign policy toward Latin America was unfounded, since the Soviet Union did not supply any significant military assistance to Nicaragua (i.e. weapons which could be used for offensive purposes), nor did it offer the Sandinistas a military alliance or any security guarantees.[43]

The Reagan administration also faced revolutionary changes in Grenada when the New Jewel Movement (NJM) seized power against the authoritarian, repressive and corrupt rule of Sir Eric Gairy in 1979.[44] Upon rising to power, the NJM nationalized many Grenadian firms but did not confiscate or expropriate any. [45] Most importantly, the NJM's power in Grenada did not threaten the US' economic interest.[46] Moreover, Grenada's financial and military support from Cuba and the Soviet Union, although existent, was rather modest and not enough to project any threat to the region.[47] The Reagan administration, however, "saw red in Grenada and it charged ahead"[48] by deploying a costly and massive invasion of Grenada, in order to "kill a threat that existed only in ideological terms." [49]

The Chilean, Peruvian, Nicaraguan, and Grenadian cases all demonstrate how ideological fear of a second Cuba in Latin America influenced the United States' foreign policy toward the region and caused it to be costly, irrational, and unfounded. Alternate theories (such as the realist one), however, argue that US military presence in Latin America is not unique to the Cold War. For example, Gordon Connell-Smith maintains that the United States has been pursuing continental hegemony (i.e. seeking to exclude other powers from the region and to create an imbalance of power among the Americas) since the 19th century when it passed the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.[50] He claims that the United States has displayed its hegemonic ambitions by attempting to expand its economic, political, and cultural influence throughout the region, while protecting its image by disguising its ambitions as protecting the world from Communism, drug trafficking and so on.[51] Douglas Farah offers a similar argument, claiming that since the fall of the Berlin Wall (and the end of the Cold War), US military presence in Latin America has not diminished, but rather, the United States has merely modified its role in the region while continuing to carry out the same functions.[52]

Connell-Smith and Farah's arguments, although well founded and worth consideration, are insufficient for explaining the United States irrational behaviour toward Latin America specifically after the Cuban Revolution. Following Castro's rise to power, US decision-makers became embedded in the fear of a 'second Cuba', which would further threaten the United States' ideological control over the region. Consequently, American officials carried out costly, illogical, and inappropriate policies in order to battle a perceived ideological threat in the region. Like the Soviet Union's *revolutionary-imperial paradigm*, the United States felt responsible for spreading its values with force and without invitation, as a means of countering the opposing ideology.

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[1] Richard Ned Lebow, "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism" *International Organization* 48, no. 2, (1994), 250.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Vladislav M Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2007): 336.

[4] Jorge I. Dominguez, "US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath" *Working Paper 99-01, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, January 1999, 4.*

[5] Ibid.

[6] Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 336.

[7] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath*, 1

[8] John F. Kennedy, "US Presidential Debate" (speech given at the Fourth US Presidential Debate with Richard Nixon, New York, NY, October 21, 1960)

[9] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath*, 6.

[10] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath*, 8.

[11] Ibid., 6

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[12] Ibid., 2.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 15.

[15] Cole Blasier, *The Hovering Giant: U.S. Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America 1910-1985* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985): 242.

[16] Ibid., 242-43.

[17] Ibid., 243.

[18] Cynthia Arnson and Michael T. Klare "Exporting Repression: U.S. Support for Authoritarianism in Latin America" in *Capitalism and the State in U.S.-Latin American Relations*, ed. Richard R. Fagen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1979): 141-42.

[19] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 243 & 247.

[20] Ibid., 247

[21] Ibid.

[22] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath*, 9; Wayne C. McWilliams and Harry Piotrowski "The World Since 1945: A History of International Relations" (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009): 319.

[23] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 9; McWilliams and Piotrowski, *The World Since 1945*, 320.

[24] McWilliams and Piotrowski, *The World Since 1945*, 321.

[25] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 10.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.; Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 258.

[29] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 258.

[30] Ibid., 259; Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 10.

[31] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 10.

[32] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 268.

[33] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 9.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 258.

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[36] Ibid., 288; McWilliams and Piotrowski, *The World Since 1945*, 335.

[37] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 288

[38] Ibid., 291.

[39] McWilliams and Piotrowski, *The World Since 1945*, 335; Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 292.

[40] McWilliams and Piotrowski, *The World Since 1945*, 336.

[41] Ibid.; Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 10.

[42] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 292.

[43] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 10.

[44] Blasier, *The Hovering Giant*, 281.

[45] Ibid., 282; Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 10.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Dominguez, *US-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and its Aftermath*, 12.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Gordon Connell-Smith, "The United States and Latin America: A Historical Analysis of Inter-American Relations" (London, UK: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1974): 267.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Douglas Farah "U.S. Military Engagement in Latin America" in *The Globalization of U.S.-Latin American Relations: Democracy, Intervention and Human Rights* ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002): 149.

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