

Interview - John M. Kirk

Written by E-International Relations

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John M. Kirk is Professor of Latin American Studies at Dalhousie University, Canada. He has authored and edited numerous books on Cuban international relations, history and culture, including *Cuba at the Crossroads* (2020), *Cuban Foreign Policy: Transformation Under Raúl Castro* (2018), and *Healthcare Without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism* (2015). He has also worked as an interpreter for the former Premier of Nova Scotia John Savage in meetings with President Fidel Castro, as well as with Aleida Guevara (daughter of Che), Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Nobel Peace Prize laureate from Argentina), Chilean musical groups Inti Illimani and Quilapayún, and Mexican presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There are two areas worth noting. The first is the pressing nature of Cuba-US relations, and the second is the debate on the type of economic reform that is needed in Cuba. The former is the age-old issue of Cuba's ability to survive, when faced with the ever-increasing (and multifaceted) pressure emanating from the Trump administration, whose policy towards the revolutionary government could be summarized as "death by a thousand cuts". This US administration appears to have deliberately sought to undo all of the measures taken by the Obama administration.

The second issue evolves around the economic measures that are required to kickstart the Cuban economy, when faced with external (US) pressure and internal maladministration. The issue of opening the economy to greater participation from small and medium-sized enterprises, and from cooperatives, is steadily becoming more urgent as the two main sources of income (the exportation of professional services abroad and tourism) decrease. On a related note, Cuba's dependence upon the importation of some 70% of its food, and the insufficient incentives provided to its own farmers to produce more food, is also worth noting.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Two main issues have become increasingly clear in recent years: 1) the climate crisis which our planet is facing; and 2) the rupture with the old political order. In terms of the climate crisis, it is clear that our planet is facing dire consequences unless our leaders (throughout the planet) can put aside their defensive poses and selfish interests and develop proactive policies to reduce the increase in climate change as soon as possible. This is difficult when the leader of the world's only superpower refuses to accept the severity of this challenge, and when the population of emerging superpowers China and India demand greater consumer rights. With regards to the shifting sands of international politics, the decision of the United States to reduce its international political footprint, combined with the rising political fortunes in the developing world of China and, to a lesser extent, Russia, indicate a dramatically new international order starting to take shape. In both cases the developing world looks destined to be either exploited or left behind.

In April of 2019 a new Constitution was enacted in Cuba that included numerous political, economic and legal reforms. How significant is the new Constitution in terms of the revolutionary government's 60-year history and how will it affect the lives of ordinary Cubans?

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The new Constitution in essence solidifies—while modernizing—the traditional structure of the revolutionary socialist political-economic model. After massive consultation with the Cuban people it sets out the essence of the revolutionary socialist model, while also incorporating features that indicate a more streamlined, efficient government model. It will not have a major impact on the lives of ordinary Cubans, who are far more concerned with the increasing shortages of food and materials, and the tension resulting from the Trump administration's tightening of the economic screws on revolutionary Cuba. It is worth noting that Cuba now has a modern constitution, greater international access than ever, and a leadership that is not a part of the Castro family.

During the 2000s through to the early 2010s Cuba developed favourable relationships with many of the leftist or left-leaning governments of the so-called 'Pink Tide'. What has the resurgence of right-wing governments in the region meant for Cuba's relations in the region?

The “Pink Tide” of socialist and social democratic governments has now become a “Blue Sea” of extremely conservative administrations in the region. In particular the reactionary Bolsonaro government in Brazil has had a major impact upon Cuba, by forcing the end of Cuban medical cooperation—and therefore reducing badly-needed income for Cuba. At its height there were 11,000 Cuban medical personnel working there, almost entirely in underserved communities. The recent military coup in Bolivia (resulting in the departure of Evo Morales) completes this cycle as Latin America—with the exception of Mexico and Argentina—has largely returned to a right-wing model of government. And of course, Cuba's steadfast support for the Maduro government has also led to friction with other countries in the region, as several governments have joined to form the “Lima Group,” supporting the ouster of Maduro in favour of their candidate, Guaidó.

In geopolitical terms Cuba clearly has lost several allies in the region. The continuing dilemma over the Venezuelan situation will hopefully be resolved in 2020 when national elections are slated to be held, at which point it will be interesting to see whether Cuba's political fortunes improve or decline. All of this said, Cuba continues to provide medical and educational support to most countries in the region—a policy which is appreciated, as is shown by the overwhelming support for Cuba in the November 2019 condemnation of the US embargo of Cuba at the UN General Assembly. All of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean supported Cuba with the exception of Brazil—one of three countries, along with the United States and Israel, to support it and Colombia—which, together with the Ukraine, abstained. The final vote was 187 to 3, with 2 abstentions.

What has the Cuban government's stance been towards the multifaceted economic and political crisis in Venezuela, and how prepared is the Cuban economy for the shock that may potentially come if a hostile government were to come to power in Venezuela?

The Cuban government has stood firmly alongside the Maduro government throughout the political and economic crisis facing Venezuela, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Relations were particularly strong during the Chávez years, due to the extremely close personal ties between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. Hundreds of development projects were initiated during those years, and tens of thousands of Cubans worked in collaborative projects with Venezuelans. And of course, Cuba depends upon the importation of Venezuelan fuel—the primary source of supply's energy. Cuba will continue to support the Maduro government, and believes that only a political solution to the impasse is possible. Significantly the Lima Group is coming around to this perspective, whereas before they appeared to be tacit “junior partners” of the hard-line Washington approach. Clearly a political solution, made by Venezuelans, is the optimal solution. In terms of fuel imports from Venezuela, Cuba has steadily been developing relations with alternative sources (including Russia and Algeria), in case there is a change of government in Caracas. While Havana appreciates the close ties with Venezuela under Maduro, and while it would be a significant blow to see that relationship disappear, it would not be disastrous for Cuban geopolitical or economic relations.

The policy of 'normalisation' in US-Cuba relations that began late in the Obama administration has been swiftly reversed under Trump. Has the normalisation process continued in other ways or had any lasting effects that might not be seen when we only focus solely on high-level government policy?

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The policy of “normalisation” under Barack Obama had a variety of impacts—mainly positive—on Cuban society. US investment began, commercial ties were strengthened, Cuban entrepreneurs felt emboldened (and saw several enterprises flourish), the number of US tourists to Cuba increased dramatically, cultural connections thrived, and exchanges flourished. It appears as if the Trump administration—seeking to win the state of Florida and therefore achieve a strategic victory in the US electoral college system—has gone out of its way to undo all the initiatives promoted by Obama. There has not been any progression in the normalisation process between the two countries—which is a pity for both the US and Cuban populations. US tourism has decreased dramatically, both because of limitations put upon Americans flying to Cuba (they are allowed only to fly to Havana, whereas before there were direct flights from the United States to 12 cities), and upon the cruise industry (which has been prohibited from American ports). People-to-people contacts continue, although they have also decreased. For example, some Cuban musical groups have seen their concerts in the US cancelled because of pressure from exile groups. In essence, what remains of the various Obama initiatives is a concept of potential collaboration and mutually beneficial exchanges, but very little else.

Between 2016 and 2018 allegations were made by the Trump administration that US diplomats in Havana had been victims of ‘sonic attacks’ that damaged their health. What is your perception of the way these allegations have been reported?

Washington has used the “sonic attacks” question as a means of justifying, and solidifying, its opposition to the Cuban government. Lost in the depiction of the “attacks” is the fact that the Cubans have welcomed delegations from the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (since some Canadian diplomats were allegedly affected) to seek evidence of the “attacks”. Also important is that nobody has provided any evidence at all that there was an “attack” of any kind—although hawks in the Trump administration remain convinced that this in fact occurred. Rival American scientists have offered different explanations. Specialists in Florida have portrayed this as an attack on the diplomats’ hearing, while colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have presented this as a neurological issue affecting the diplomats’ brains. Meanwhile in Canada neurologists have provided evidence that the impact upon affected diplomats was the result of spraying excessive toxins to kill mosquito larvae. Sadly, US specialists have refused invitations from Cuban colleagues to examine the phenomenon in a collaborative fashion—although their Canadian counterparts have initiated a joint research programme. Historians will regard this episode as much ado about nothing, as American politicians seeking to reduce any attempts at collaboration between Cubans and Americans, have jumped on the scientific bandwagon—despite a lack of hard evidence of any form of “attack”.

In the 60s and 70s Cuba developed a clear identity as supporter of revolutionary and national-liberation movements. Later, Cuba supported other non-aligned nations through ‘internationalist’ health programmes and advocacy for a multi-polar world order. How can we characterise Cuba’s current foreign policy?

Cuba’s foreign policy in the 21st century is one based upon a mixture of pragmatism and politics. The November 2019 vote in the United Nations General Assembly condemning the US embargo against Cuba (187 supporting the Cuban motion with only three opposing and two abstentions) illustrates the level of international support for the island. In part this level of support, particularly among developing countries, is due to Cuba’s role in developing nations. At present, and despite a drastic reduction in the number of Cuban medical personnel serving abroad, there are some 30,000 medical personnel working in 64 countries—more than all the G-7 countries combined. In recent years it is also interesting to see the paradigm shift in Cuba-US relations (as belligerence under the Trump administration increases), while ties between Cuba and both China and Russia increase. China is now the second trading partner of Cuba (after Venezuela), while Russian-Cuban ties have increased dramatically. In fact, in many ways this scenario is eerily reminiscent of Cuba’s relationship with Russia and the United States in the early 1960s.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars seeking to study Cuba’s politics, economy and society?

Cuba is complex, contradictory and confusing, but never boring. It is also a country with an extremely rich history—and never forgets those historical roots. José Martí, leader of the independence movement in the 1890s, is

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revered on the island, as is illustrated by his featuring on the 1-peso note, and the fact that by law his bust is found at every school on the island. Cuba is also a country seeking to develop its own development model, but lies in the shadow (90 miles away) of the United States, which tried to purchase the island 200 years ago, became the major investor and trading partner, as well as controlling domestic Cuban politics for the first half of the 20th century, and has sought to bring about regime change for the last sixty years. It is also a country of two distinct societies—with over 10% living abroad, having voted with their feet, while most who have remained are loyal to the revolutionary socialist model. Given this rich historical tapestry, divided polity, search for a development model *sui generis*, and steadfast opposition from the United States, a strange amalgam of critical unity and nationalism has resulted among Cubans. They are patriotic, extremely proud of their achievements, and possess a love-hate relationship with the United States. Piecing all of this together is quite a challenge, but eminently worthwhile.