

Cuban Cold War Internationalism and the Nonaligned Movement

Written by Sarah Clifford and Scott N Romaniuk

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SARAH CLIFFORD AND SCOTT N ROMANIUK, DEC 19 2020

During the beginning of the Cold War and the divisive political atmosphere that resulted from it, the Republic of Cuba found itself torn with how to remain sovereign due to the increasing pressures emitted by both the United States of America and the Soviet Union to conform to their ideologies, while still being open to receiving enough aid and assistance to run the country that was currently floundering. Cuba, unlike many of its neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, elected to align itself with the Soviet Union in 1959 due to the United States' implementation of the Cuban embargo and the Monroe Doctrine, while still emitting imperialistic tendencies which Cuba had fervently opposed since the beginning of Castro's rule. With Cuba being located in the United States' sphere of influence, it became ostracized from most political and economic conglomerations in the region, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962, forcing the state to seek out new allies in an attempt to defy American isolationism in order to survive.[1] My paper will analyze how Cuba challenged American imperialism and isolation by joining the non-aligned movement and forming internationalist aid missions around the world, while still remaining sovereign and independent even though they were allied with the Soviet Union.

Immediately after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, he was seen as a direct threat to the American liberal values of democracy and capitalism as he emanated "anti-American, Communist and nationalist tendencies." [2] With the increasing prevalence of socialist and Communist governments around the world, especially with the rise of the Soviet Union, the US became concerned that Castro could spread his anti-American and anti-imperialistic viewpoints throughout the rest of Latin America. Castro's nationalistic tendencies not only began to jeopardize American relations in the region, but also came to threaten their economic interests too, seen through Castro's decision to nationalize the oil industry and expropriate businesses such as the United Fruit Company.[3] With the increase in tensions between the US and Cuba because of the expropriation of American businesses and Castro's refusal to cooperate, the US retaliated and instituted an embargo upon the country while also using its influence to expel the state from the OAS in June 1962.[4] Many countries, not specified in the OAS resolution, believed the political atmosphere in Cuba at the time had resulted from "the subversive offensive of Communist governments" and that the "purpose of this offensive is the destruction of democratic institutions and the establishment of totalitarian dictatorships..." in the region.[5] Although Cuba did not possess these goals, it was immediately ostracized from the region and lost relations with most Latin American countries. Cuba, being deemed as a 'pariah' state by the US, began working towards ending its international isolation, which eventually came 8 years later with Chile agreeing to reinstate relations after the election of the Marxist, Salvador Allende.[6] Although the re-establishment of relations with Chile and other Latin American countries in the 1970s did help Cuba battle its isolation and re-enter the international community, it was not until it became involved in the non-aligned movement and introduced the policy of internationalism that it finally re-entered the international community.[7]

Even before Cuba was removed from the OAS and the American embargo was enforced, Castro was already making plans to outmaneuver the Americans in a way that would also result in them asserting their independence as a nation against the Soviet Union. Thus, in 1961, Cuba joined the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) and became the only member of the organization in the Western Hemisphere.[8] The purpose of NAM is to "protect the right of nations to independent judgements and to counter imperialism while also committing itself to restructuring the world economic order," which not only coincided with Cuba's very core ideals, but it also encouraged multilateral cooperation and

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thus, aided Cuba economically by providing it with more allies to trade and collaborate with.[9] Although Cuba did not perfectly fit the criteria for the 'non-aligned movement' as they were affiliated with the USSR, they joined the organization to help differentiate themselves from the Soviets as they wanted to display how the country could act independently and sometimes even against Soviet wishes, but to also show how even with the strong American influence throughout the world, it could not prevent every political move that Cuba made.

While also going against the will of the United States after its entrance into NAM, Cuba began to join and form a plethora of Latin American organizations that helped Cuba gain more prominence on the international stage. These organizations, such as the Latin American Economic System (SELA), were created not only to unite the continent but also to allude to the Cuban Revolutionary struggle in that it became a form of anti-American expression and independence.[10][11] These companies helped loosen the American ties in the region, while assisting in reforming the many broken relations between Cuba and the Latin American countries after Cuba's dismissal from the OAS in 1962. By doing this, many Latin American countries were able to band together and develop common positions on economic and political issues which gave each state more control over their own foreign policy instead of being an American puppet with little control over their own nation.[12]

While realizing the struggle that many Latin American countries were going through with their oppressive and pro-American puppet governments, Ernesto "Che" Guevara brought the idea of *internationalism* into Cuban foreign policy with the hopes of overthrowing dictatorships in the Caribbean and liberating all countries in the Western Hemisphere from oppressive and imperialistic leaders.[13] By February 1959, Guevara was given the approval to set up a 'liberation department' which focused on overthrowing dictatorships in the neighboring countries of Panama, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic.[14] With these operations failing, Guevara set out towards the African continent which he considered "one of the most important if not the most important battlefield against all forms of exploitation in the world." [15] By 1961, Guevara had begun to train guerrilla troops and by December, he launched his first internationalist aid mission in Algeria.[16] Guevara continued to provide assistance to many African countries, such as Guinea in 1966 and Sierra Leone in 1972, but their mission in Angola in 1965 was by far their largest.[17] Both Guevara and Castro came to realize that Cuba could have a massive influence in Africa as the United States was currently not very active within the continent, which gave Cuba almost unrestricted access to promote their interests and ideology, while also developing new alliances in the Third World.

With the growing desire for independence throughout Africa and the start of decolonization, many colonies began to form independence movements. Shortly after in 1956, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was founded and became one of the largest independence movements in the Angolan colony.[18] With Cuba's already strong presence in Africa and the lack of Soviet support given to the MPLA, the group turned to Cuba for help. Since Cuba's new foreign policy objective was mainly the expansion of its influence in the Third World, while also counteracting American attempts at isolating the nation, it quickly became embroiled in Angola. Shortly after the Portuguese's attempts at decolonization, the Soviet Union became involved and also backed the MPLA, but Soviet help was very minimal at best. According to Edward George in *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991*, "the Soviets took no part in the decision [for Cuba to intervene in Angola] and showed a noted reluctance to get involved in Cuba's Angolan operation." [19] Many scholars, such as Stephanie Kessler, have come to question whether Cuba's involvement in Africa represented an attempt at escaping American isolationism and gaining independence, or if it was merely a facade for Soviet imperialism? [20] Although this discrepancy is important to note, it must be realized that the Soviet Union had no real reason to intervene in Angola at the time and thus Cuba's decision to offer aid to Angola and other parts of Africa was completely autonomous. In reality, "Cuba [also] had little to gain economically or strategically by promoting revolution... ideologically, however, Cuba has always taken the principle of international solidarity very seriously..." which was the main reason that Cuba joined in the African struggle while the Soviet Union remained indifferent towards the situation.[21] Thus, Cuba's internationalist policy led to it differentiating itself from its socialist counterparts while also helping it escape the American imposed isolation. With Cuba now having new allies in the Third World, it gave them a stronger foothold in the non-aligned movement, granting them the ability to conduct relations with other states with little American interference.

It did not take Cuba long after first intervening in Angola before the country truly began to garner world attention. By 1976, just one year after officially beginning to fight in the Angolan Civil War, Cuba was voted as the site of the next

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NAM summit and then in 1979, Castro became the organization's chairman and stayed in the position until 1983.[22] With Cuba now re-entering the international community and emerging as a leader for the Third World, it became a powerful link between Moscow and the non-aligned community, helping the country gain bargaining power in order to ascertain political and economic concessions, such as having more beneficial trade agreements with the Soviet Union for certain goods, such as oil. By gaining these concessions, Cuba was able to be less effected by the US embargo, resulting in it emerging from isolation with more access to resources and allies. Thus, Guevara's internationalism and the subsequent entrance into African foreign affairs resulted in Cuba gaining a stronger presence on the international stage, as well as the power to have some say in dictating their future even though the Soviets were in firm control over both Cuba's political and economic situation.

During the Cold War, with the superpowers being preoccupied with other commitments, such as the American involvement in Vietnam, Cuba took the opportunity to escape American isolationism and to assert itself on the world stage as a Third World Leader. Cuba was able to use its internationalist aid missions to promote independence movements that were anti-imperialistic and pro-Marxist all around the world, helping them gain prominence and bargaining power amongst the superpowers. Although Cuba provided aid to over 20 countries in Africa, their 16 year mission in Angola stood out as proof that Cuba was an independent state and although they were aligned with the USSR and enemies with the US, they could still exert their own influence around the world.[23][24] Cuban foreign policy, therefore, was not a facade for Soviet imperialism, but instead reflected their own opinions on the power of internationalism which only go to demonstrate that Cuba, unlike many other nations, escaped isolationism by never starting wars, but instead, only aiding them.[25]

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Notes

[1] Pamela S. Falk, *Cuban Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 1986), 43-45.

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[2] "The U.S. Government Responds to Revolution, Foreign Relations of the United States," in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. A. Chomsky, B. Carr, P.M. Smorkaloff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 530.

[3] Oscar Zanetti, "The United Fruit Company in Cuba" in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. A. Chomsky, B. Carr, P.M. Smorkaloff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 290-295.

[4] Carlos A. Montaner, "The OAS Should Not Have Lifted the 1962 Suspension of Cuba's Membership," *Americas Quarterly*, (2009), <http://www.americasquarterly.org/carlos-alberto-montaner-no-cuba>.

We recognize that although there was already an American embargo in place in 1958 on arms during the Fulgencio Batista regime, the embargo was tightened during Castro's rule, which is why we state that the embargo was imposed after 1958.

[5] Pan American Union: General Secretariat of the Organization of American States, "Eight Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs," *OAS Official Records*, (1962): 5, <https://www.oas.org/columbus/docs/MFA8Eng.pdf>.

[6] H. Michael Erisman, *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 83.

[7] *Ibid.*, 73-78.

[8] *Ibid.*, 102.

[9] "Non-Aligned Movement," *BBC News*, updated August 7, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/2798187.stm>.

[10] Erisman, *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*, 84-85.

[11] Falk, *Cuba's Foreign Policy*, 45.

[12] "What is SELA?" Latin American and Caribbean Economic System, updated 2015, <http://www.sela.org/en/>.

[13] Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 17.

[14] Erisman, *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*, 17.

[15] Stephanie S. Kessler, "Cuba's Involvement in Angola and Ethiopia: A Question of Autonomy in Cuba's Relationship with the Soviet Union" (M.A. diss., Monterey Naval Postgraduate School, 1990), 37, Calhoun Institutional Archive of the Naval Postgraduate School.

[16] George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 20.

[17] Kessler, "Cuba's Involvement in Angola and Ethiopia," 34.

[18] Falk, *Cuba's Foreign Policy*, 84.

[19] George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 65.

[20] Kessler, "Cuba's Involvement in Angola and Ethiopia," 34-53.

[21] *Ibid.*, 38.

[22] Erisman, *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*, 102.

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[23] George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 1.

[24] Erisman, *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*, 101.

[25] Pedro, (lecture, Universidad de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, May 15, 2018).

About the author:

Sarah Clifford is studying political science at the University of Copenhagen with a focus on international relations.

Dr Scott N Romaniuk received his PhD in International Studies from the University of Trento. He holds an MRes in Political Research, an MA in Terrorism, Crime and Global Security, and an MA in Military Studies (Joint Warfare).