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## **The deep, historical-roots of Cuban anti-imperialism**

**Ernesto Domínguez López and Helen Yaffe**

Colonialism, imperialism and anti-imperialism have been decisive in shaping Cuban history for hundreds of years. Spain took possession of Cuba as a colony in 1492. For Cubans, building an independent nation and mapping out a development path have been fundamental goals that could only be achieved through a national project that includes coping with the problem of dependence-independence. The presence and vested interests of European colonial powers and the emergence of the United States as a regional and global power marked a sequence of domination, resistance, revolution and conflict.

The revolution of 1959 marked a rupture. The advent of a revolutionary and socialist Cuba in the international system impacted many other processes and projects, and unleashed forces opposed to social transformation and national sovereignty for peripheral nations. To study its history is to study the history of the clash between hegemonic powers and the national projects in the Third World.

(Anti)imperialism remains a central issue since the restoration of diplomatic relations with the United States in 2015. The Cuban government has declared that ‘normalisation’ between the Cuba and the United States is impossible without the cessation of the US blockade, the end of the US occupation of Guantanamo Bay and termination of regime change programmes including attempts to foment an internal opposition. The issue of imperialism remains key today, in the post-Fidel, President Trump era. This article offers a synthesis of the roots and tenets of Cuban anti-imperialism, which is vital for understanding the most recent events in Cuba-US relations and Cuba’s foreign policy. The instruments provided by history, political science and political economy contribute to a deeper understanding of those complex processes.

### **Some starting points**

The discussion about Cuban anti-imperialism should be based on two pillars. First, an operative definition of the concept itself. Put briefly, it means a coherent and conscious opposition to

imperialism in general and in its specific forms. Therefore, it is dependent of a second concept: imperialism. Lenin's definition of imperialism describes the core features thus:

(1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; (2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this "finance capital", of a financial oligarchy; (3) the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance; (4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves, and (5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed.<sup>1</sup>

An extensive discussion and any revisions of this definition is beyond the scope of this article. Here, imperialism is defined as the structural domination of peripheral countries and regions by core powers through different means. Hence, anti-imperialism encompasses projects, actions and policies oriented to revert domination and to build a 'balanced' relationship between countries and regions based on the promotion of sovereignty.

The second pillar is history. The building of colonial empires in the Americas was crucial to the formation of the Atlantic system. The Americas was a key site for the rivalries between European powers fighting for the hegemony and the control of global trade networks.<sup>2</sup> The Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Basin, in particular, were the centre of multiple conflicts among old and new powers and multiple interests.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the formation and evolution of the Cuban nation have been conditioned by two main features. First, the open, or dependent, character of its economy; Cuba's evolution was partly shaped by the type and intensity of its insertion into economic networks connecting the different components of the modern World-System.<sup>4</sup> Second, the geopolitical value of Cuba's location. Particularly from a military and economic perspective, Cuba occupies a key geostrategic position.

For US elites, control of Cuba was within the goals of their national project. Foundational documents of US foreign policy, such as the Monroe Doctrine or Manifest Destiny, reveal two essential corollaries: first, US elites asserted the importance of securing a base in the region; second, in many ways what is today known as Latin America was not considered ‘external’ to the country. The United States’ aspiration meant that Cuba was, by merit of its geostrategic position and economic potential, a clear and important target for control. This was considered both a necessity for the survival of the American Republic and a right stemming from nature, politics and predestination.<sup>5</sup>

Interest in controlling Cuba was reinforced by the existence of a sugar industry that by the 1820s had surpassed all competitors.<sup>6</sup> In parallel, the United States became Cuba’s fundamental trade partner. A network of US companies were formed to operate with and on the island. Thousands of US citizens established residence in Cuba as investors, traders and corporate representatives, increasingly influencing the island’s economy and augmenting Cuba’s importance for US elites.<sup>7</sup> Finally, capital accumulated in the United States sought profitable sources for investment. Meanwhile the destruction of property and commerce during the Cuban Independence Wars (1868-1878; 1879-1880; and 1895-1898), and the embargo ordered in 1869 by the Spanish government for any person associated with the independence struggle, opened space for increasing US ownership in Cuba’s economy.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the economic relationship between Cuba and the United States was determined by the logic of the expansion of US corporate capitalism, or emerging imperialism, and the subordination of Cuban industries to its interests. Absorbing Cuban estates and factories at an increasing rate was part of the expansion of the vertical integration of productive processes under corporate management, a trade mark of US capitalism and a major factor in its transition to a hegemonic position.<sup>9</sup> From the geopolitical perspective, Cuba was in a key location to serve as a base to protect New Orleans and Florida, and to control Central America and the interoceanic communication vital for the US economy.<sup>10</sup> Building a power structure in the region was a necessary step in the process of transforming the United States into the centre of the World-System.<sup>11</sup> Thus US strategic imperatives were to wrestle control of Cuba from Spain and stop other European powers from establishing control of the island. The war with Spain and the

occupation of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and a few Pacific islands were the immediate outcomes of that perspective.<sup>12</sup>

The context of Cuban independence was the broad transformation of trans-Atlantic relations via independence revolutions, the collapse of imperial powers, state formation and the emergence of the United States.<sup>13</sup> The independence wars of 1868-1898 were largely the outcome of the shortcomings of Spanish colonial rule, the accumulation of economic and social crises and the rise of *independentismo* as the hegemonic core of Cuban political ideologies; driving an emergent national project to the goal of building a sovereign country.<sup>14</sup>

In 1898, when Spain was losing control of Cuba to the independence fighters, the United States' intervened, effectively preventing the triumph of a social revolution. The US managed the construction of a Cuban Republic in which traditional elites, threatened by the radicalism of the intended independence, maintained a privileged position.<sup>15</sup> The Cuban oligarchy was willingly incorporated as a subordinated component in a US-centred power structure, becoming in the process a key tool in producing and reproducing US hegemony. The Republic of 1902 was shaped by mechanisms created to secure US domination over Cuba, clearly embedded in the Platt Amendment. This provided the legal framework for the new polity in its relationship with United States, and essentially put control of Cuban foreign policy and domestic politics legally in US hands.<sup>16</sup> It also created the framework for the establishment of US naval stations in Cuba.<sup>17</sup>

Domination over the Cuban economy was reinforced through the Trade Reciprocity Treaty of 1904, which granted Cuban agricultural products exported to the United States a 20% tariff discount. In exchange, a long list of US goods received up to 40% tariff discount in Cuba.<sup>18</sup> In 1895, the total value of US investments in Cuba was estimated at \$95 million.<sup>19</sup> By the 1920s, US companies produced two-thirds of Cuba's sugar. Other US corporations controlled utilities and infrastructure, occasionally in agreements with European companies.<sup>20</sup> By 1955, US investors controlled 90% of the telephone and electric services, 50% of public service railways and 40% in raw sugar production.<sup>21</sup>

Washington acted as arbiter and often director of Cuban policy. Military interventions of different scales loomed, with US troops entering Cuban territory in 1906 to 1909, 1912, 1917 and 1923. These conditions generated political and social protest in Cuba, fostered by social grievances and growing awareness of the centrality of US imperialism in the country's situation. A series of interlocked processes: the economic and political crises of the 1930s; the Revolution of 1933, a social revolution in Cuba led by a coalition of working classes, intellectuals and sectors of the middle classes; and the implementation of the Good Neighbour Policy under US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, led to the crisis of the oligarchic-imperial model of domination. This could only be solved through a structural adjustment. The Cuban military crushed the 1933 Revolution, inaugurating a series of military coups in 1934, 1936 and 1952, all led by Fulgencio Batista. Between this was a brief transition to representative (multiparty) democracy in late 1930s, crystallised in the Constitution of 1940, in a process that represented the co-optation of a large part of the middle classes and the national bourgeoisie.<sup>22</sup>

This was an early version of what became a trade mark of US world-wide hegemony: the neo-colonial model. United States' hegemony incorporated European powers and Third-World elites as junior partners at different levels. Cuba had all the fundamental features: economic dependence, a local military force ready to act against domestic revolutionaries, upper and middle classes co-opted and integrated, and a political system designed to reproduce the hegemony. The armed forces were the 'controller of last resort', in a dynamic model of domination based on the alternation of representative democracy and dictatorship in which civil and military elites acted as junior partners of the hegemon.<sup>23</sup> This defined the role of Cuba's constitutional governments (1940-1952) and Batista's dictatorial rule (1934-1940 and 1952-1958).

### **The Cuban Revolution and US reaction**

By the early 1950s, national politics had reached a critical point. An anti-corruption movement emerged, led by the Orthodox Party (*Partido del Pueblo Cubano – Ortodoxo*), an amalgam of left-wing social democratic leaders and forces, disgruntled former members of the *Autenticos* (the party in government since 1944) and an emerging and a younger generation of radical

political activists, including Fidel Castro. The Party looked set to win the 1952 presidential election. This election was prevented by Batista's coup in March 1952.

The revolutionary insurrection of the 1950s was a result of the interaction among a generalised opposition to a tyrannical government, the domestic push for broader social transformations and the necessity of confronting US domination to achieve these goals. It was the convergence of social revolution and the project of full national independence. Anti-Batista forces were politically diverse, including: the newly created 'Movement', led by Fidel Castro, initially established by members of the Orthodox Youth and later renamed Movement 26 of July; the Students' Revolutionary Directorate, formed by college students and young professionals; the communist Popular Socialist Party; *Autenticos*; trade unions and militant workers; and numerous independent figures, all with distinct objectives and strategies.

Opposition to Batista was just one factor. Fidel Castro's famous trial defence speech following the failed attack on the Moncada Barracks in July 1953 demonstrates how the struggle against the dictatorship was perceived as intrinsically linked to the goal of social revolution.<sup>24</sup> Castro inferred that in order to redistribute land, reduce rents and provide general access to services, places and opportunities, a major political change was needed. The struggle required curbing the power of Cuban elites and US companies, expropriating at least part of their property, and transforming the whole political structure to prevent those sectors from reverting or corrupting the revolutionary process.

Clearly that transformation would be detrimental to US interests and those of their junior associates in Cuba and could not be achieved within the existing neo-colonial model. A hostile reaction to this programme was inevitable, particularly in the 1950s, when social revolution or agrarian reform were perceived as synonymous with communism.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the Revolution of 1959 was a process that faced only two real alternatives: either it renounced to all fundamental changes, beyond expelling Batista, so it would be acceptable to Washington, or it faced the hostility of United States. That is, it either operated within the limits imposed by Cuba's subordination to United States, or it broke that dependant relationship and built real sovereignty.

The radicalisation of the social and political transformation undertaken by the revolutionary government was matched by the increasing intensity of the conflict with United States; new policies in Cuba led to hostile responses from Washington. The first major reform in Cuba, the Agrarian Reform Act of May 1959, affected primarily the huge concentrations of land in the hands of Cuban oligarchs and US companies. These were divided among tenants who became small private farmers in the process. The adverse US reaction was the start of an economic warfare. Cuba was excluded from all trade with United States, Cuban deposits in US banks were frozen, and the island's ability to trade with other countries was severely limited as a consequence of overt pressures by Washington.

This was a traumatic rupture for the Cuban economy. The Cuban government nationalised foreign properties in autumn 1960, offering compensation to the owners based on their own property valuations for tax purposes. Eisenhower, however, ordered US companies not to negotiate a settlement.<sup>26</sup> Between 1959 and 1961, Cuba was deeply transformed, from neo-colony to an independent, centrally-planned socialist economy where state ownership and management predominated.<sup>27</sup> Measures taken from 1959 by President Eisenhower were systematised in the Executive Order 3447 by President Kennedy in 1962; the full US blockade was imposed.

The construction of socialism involved the fundamental transformation of the social structure through the nationalisation of the property of the upper classes, and later, the upper-middle classes. The process soon expanded to encompass the whole country, in a full-fledged redistribution of wealth and ownership. This process, and the political reorganisation of the country, generated a surge in emigration, mainly to the United States, by the Cuban elite, and principally driven by political motivations and the loss of status.<sup>28</sup> The early emigrants formed the core of the Cuban community in Miami and engaged in multiple plans to overthrow Cuba's new government and assassinate its leaders.<sup>29</sup>

The evolution of Cuba-US relations after 1959 was conditioned by the conflicting forces of social, economic and political change in Cuba, and the opposition. The latter consisted of creole elites and large sections of the middle classes, increasingly in alliance with the US government.



Washington faced the loss of its economic and political control of the island as the revolutionary government dismantled pre-existing mechanisms in its search for independent, (and later) socialist development in Cuba. Rejecting Cuban attempts to seek a *modus vivendi* with the United States, the Eisenhower administration established a pattern of rejection and hostility – despite sporadic secret contacts - followed by subsequent administrations.<sup>30</sup> From 1959 to 2010s, the United States, with its powerful allies in the right-wing exile community based in Miami, sought to sabotage or destroy the Revolution and Cuban socialism. This was systematised under a two-track policy including: 1) overt aggression and economic strangulation; and 2) attempts to foster an internal opposition.

In international terms, Cuba's Revolution dented the US sphere of influence, weakening the US position as a global power. These were the structural geopolitical motivations for opposing Cuba's hard-won independence. The Bay of Pigs (Playa Giron) invasion and multiple military invasion plans, programmes of terrorism, sabotage and subversion were part of Washington's reaction.<sup>31</sup> The process fostered an increasing radicalisation from Cuba's government and its people in the constant search for ways to fight back. Thus, confronting US imperialism became an integral part of the Cuban political process and of citizens' daily lives.

### **The legacy of Martí in the Revolution of 1959**

The early years of the revolution witnessed debate among intellectuals, politicians and revolutionaries over the ideological referents and definitions for the new Cuba. A key issue was the place of Cuba's national independence hero, José Martí, who died in 1895 fighting for independence from Spain. A writer, journalist and diplomat - he served as consul of Uruguay and Paraguay and lived in New York for 15 years - Martí understood the forces driving America politics, its main trends and the role of Latin America in the US national project. His perception of US interests, and the ways to deal with them, is evident throughout his articles, essays, speeches and letters. Particularly eloquent is his essay *Nuestra America* and the unfinished letter to Manuel Mercado written on 18 May 1895, the day before his death in battle. The former establishes a distinction between the Anglo-Saxon North America and today's Latin America, which he called 'Our America' (*Nuestra America*), and calls for the unity of the peoples south of

the Rio Grande. In Martí's view, this was the only way to close the door to US domination over the continent and preserve the independence of the new nations.<sup>32</sup> The letter is more explicit: Cuban independence was necessary to prevent the US from expanding throughout the Antilles and using the islands as springboards to extend its power further south.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Martí's revolutionary project included a fundamental geopolitical component based on its opposition to the US imperialist project. Anti-imperialism was part of his project for an independent Cuba. For a revolution that had Martí's ideas central to its own program,<sup>34</sup> recourse to these writings was natural. Cubans on the island got accustomed to TV programmes on Martí, el Maestro, his ideals and phrases. These texts were, and remain, included in curricula at all educational levels. On the island, Martí's anti-imperialism is central to his legacy, while the early Cuban American community tried to preserve a national hero more amenable to the neo-colonial nation.<sup>35</sup>

Martí's texts introduce a fundamental idea: the path for sovereignty and self-determination relates directly to unity among Latin American nations. This is a key perspective when analysing Martí's contribution to the ideological core of Cuba's revolutionary process. The Revolution was perceived as a project that had to go beyond the shores of the island to include a broad regional alliance of peoples and political forces to face the might of United States and any other imperialist power. The region has a history of subordination to and confrontation with many global powers. However, since the emergence of US hegemony in the early twentieth century, the 'neighbour to the North' became the focus of most of the resistance to peripheral subordination (as defined by Chase-Dunn<sup>36</sup>) and revolutions against dependence (as discussed by Amir, Arrighi, Frank and Wallerstein<sup>37</sup>).

### **The Cold War and the Third World**

Occurring in the midst of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution was inevitably interpreted by the conflicting powers through the geopolitical lenses of the global conflict. For the United States, losing control over the island brought the threat of Soviet involvement. For the USSR, these developments created an opportunity to penetrate the US sphere, and to support a revolution

leaning towards socialism. In ideological terms, the endogenous forces and trends driving Cuba towards socialism were reinforced by the peculiarities of that confrontation.

In that context, Cuban foreign policy paid special attention to the Third World, cultivating cooperation and support. In Latin America, the dominant presence of the United States, traditionally allied to the national elites, and their concerns about attempts to replicate the Cuban revolution in their countries, generated a degree of rejection and hostility towards Havana. In August 1960, at a conference of the Organization of American States (OAS) in San Jose, Costa Rica, there was open confrontation between Cuba, the United States and many Latin American delegations. The final declaration, with the pretext of condemning extra continental interventions in the hemisphere, was a clear attack against Cuba's revolutionary government.<sup>38</sup> The OAS conference of Punta del Este, Uruguay, in January 1962, voted to expel Cuba from the organisation.

Cuba's response to the events in Costa Rica and Uruguay were condensed in two documents: The First and Second Declarations of Havana. The former, presented on 2 September 1960, condemned the Declaration of San Jose, rejected US interventionism in the region, announced the acceptance of Soviet and Chinese solidarity and declared the necessity for social revolution and unity between peoples in the hemisphere as the only route to independence.<sup>39</sup>

The second document, presented on 4 February 1962 is broader. It includes a historical, socioeconomic and political analysis of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism, articulated around views and theories elaborated from the writings of Karl Marx and Martí.<sup>40</sup> US hegemony in the continent is explained as part of this general evolution, and there is an explicit juxtaposition between Cuba's revolutionary project and the US power structure and policies in the region, with a discussion of the achievements of the former and many issues hampering Latin American people's development. The text then declares the duty of revolutionaries, and the will of the Cuban people, to fight for revolution in Latin America, in alliance with its people.<sup>41</sup>

These documents were extremely important, especially the Second Declaration, which came after Fidel Castro declared the socialist character of the Cuban Revolution in April 1961. They

synthesised the ideas promoted by the Cuban revolution, and communicated directly with Latin America's subordinated classes. They contain some of the ideological bases and the prime directives of the early foreign policy of the revolutionary government in the region, based in an openly anti-imperialist global perspective.

The Missile Crisis in October 1962, was a direct result of this Cold War entanglement and conflict.

It was ended by an agreement from the USSR to withdraw missiles and warheads from Cuba in exchange for the United States removing missiles from Turkey. Cuba's demands for resolving the crisis were ignored. The settlement between Moscow and Washington, without the participation of the Cuban government and without any tangible benefit for Cuba beyond a verbal promise by US President John F. Kennedy not to invade the island, was a major disappointment for Havana and chilled relations with Moscow, which had acted in its own geopolitical interests. Even while Cuba and the USSR went on to expand their ideological, political and economic partnership, Cuba had concluded that, ultimately, it depended on itself. The Cuban leadership determined to pursue its own foreign policy.

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the 1950s to the 1970s was a period of decolonisation in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, so the future of the Third World was in play. In 1955, the Conference of Bandung had signalled the birth of a project to build a broad association of nations in the Global South – as it is now called - to promote autonomous development, without participating in the military alliances that encompassed the main Western powers and the Eastern European countries.

In 1961, also in Bandung, the Asia-Africa Solidarity Committee had its first conference; Cuba sent a delegation. The conferences that followed, with the participation of Latin American observers, insisted on the need to expand the organisation to Latin America, with the goal of consolidating a global anti-imperialist movement. The Cuban government extended an invitation to celebrate in Havana a first official gathering of the anti-imperialist movements from the three continents. This conference took place in January 1966, and was the origin of the Organisation for the Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL). The final

declaration of the first Tricontinental Conference – as the event was called - expressed the necessity of consolidating the alliance of organisations, movements, and political forces from the Third World.<sup>42</sup> This reflected the development of Cuban foreign policy and anti-imperialism as systemic approaches to a set of broader goals; promoting a global struggle against diverse forms of dependence, imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism. In other words, it served as a confirmation that Cuban anti-imperialism was not limited to the confrontation with the United States, but included a global revolutionary project. It included the application of another idea stemming from Martí: ‘Homeland is Humanity’ (*Patria es Humanidad*). It proposed a broader alliance than that of the working class promoted by Marx and therefore better suited for the characteristics of the Global South.

Cuba became a major force in that global struggle, sending combatants to and assisting liberation movements in Latin America, Africa and Asia; providing medical and technical assistance to recently liberated countries; and sending soldiers to Africa to support national revolutionary governments.<sup>43</sup> It connected national liberation movements and newly emerged independent governments struggling against neo-colonialism and foreign aggression. A key figure in Cuba’s endeavours in the early years was Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, who’s anti-imperialism evolved on his travels throughout Latin America and led him to take up arms in Cuba, the Congo and in Bolivia, from where he sent a Message to the Tricontinental, calling for the creation of ‘one, two, many Vietnams.’<sup>44</sup> The history of Cuban foreign policy, from the Revolution of 1959 to the late 1980s, sees the application of ideals defined in the early stages of the revolutionary process.

### **Between centuries: from unipolarism to *rapprochement***

With the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist bloc between 1989 and 1991, the international system that had endured since the Second World War collapsed. The bipolarity of Cold War was temporarily replaced by a *unipolar* order dominated by the United States. This represented an earthquake for national movements and governments in the Third World. For Cuba, it represented even more: the loss of its principal economic partners - the source of up to 85% of its international trade and investments - and political allies.

The US administrations of George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) and William J. Clinton (1993-2001) responded by redefining US strategic priorities; their traditional sources of legitimacy had to be revisited and adapted. Cuba was seen as the last domino; its fall was viewed as inevitable in Washington and Miami. To aid that process the system of sanctions was reinforced through the Torricelli Act of 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996.<sup>45</sup> The Clinton administration introduced the strategy of '*people to people*' programmes, turning 'normal' Cuban citizens into targets for influence by US ideas/ideals transmitted through direct contact with US visitors who required a licence to visit the island.

The Cuban revolution's survival was under threat. A deep economic crisis brought a 35% contraction of GDP between 1989 and 1993 and unleashed a wide-spread social crisis stemming from the deterioration of living standards, the reduction of available social services, and the sudden disappearance of opportunities for personal development.<sup>46</sup> The result was growing tension in Cuba's political fabric; a function of increasing difficulties in the reproduction of legitimacy, given reduced ability to provide for citizens, and the loss of referents for the socialist project. Analysts outside of Cuba tended to assume that Cuba would face a major transformation and probably a 'transition to democracy'; a term associated with Eastern Europe following the collapse of socialism and essentially meaning the restoration of capitalism.<sup>47</sup> Discussions concerned how to facilitate that process in Cuba. Few could imagine the continuity of socialism in the Caribbean country.

The emergency economic programme introduced between 1990 and 1993, 'significantly changed the economic paradigm in that, without renouncing the socialist essence of the economy, [it] opened up considerable space for market mechanisms designed to reactivate production and services'.<sup>48</sup> Small businesses were promoted and the economy opened up to foreign direct investment (FDI) in specific areas, with emphasis on sectors with a significant potential: tourism, the biopharmaceutical industry and nickel production. The strategy combined the search for means to survive with the creation of pillars for a transition towards a tertiary, 'knowledge-based' economy. It meant attempting to diversify the Cuban economy by adapting some of the most modern trends in the world economy to the specific conditions and the goals of the Cuban

model; reaping the benefits of the Revolution's welfare-based development strategy, including its investments in health and education.<sup>49</sup>

Cuba's international projection was also on the table, including, once more, the relationship with United States. Havana was advised to undertake realistic and pragmatic policies, making positive gestures to Washington that could stimulate conciliatory responses.<sup>50</sup> But such proposals fell on death ears. Instead, the diversification of international relations was Cuba's key strategy, seeking peaceful co-existence with governments around the world, focussing especially on Latin America. This posed a serious question about the continuity of its commitment to social revolution and sovereignty building. The immediate answer is that the island developed a more nuanced set of policies, in which diplomacy, intergovernmental cooperation and political mechanisms were preferred over more traditional ways to deal with core-periphery relations, hegemony and domestic antagonisms. Havana became an active promoter of regional integration as the only viable path to sustainable development outside the control of global powers. In place of the military combat missions of the past, cooperation and para-diplomacy gained importance, especially medical assistance and (medical) education for Third World countries. These programmes had existed for decades, but now increased massively in scope and centrality.<sup>51</sup>

In the aftermath of 9/11, under the George W. Bush administration (2001 to 2009), the United States adopted a more overtly unilateral foreign policy based on a preferential use of hard power and so-called pre-emptive action under the label of the 'War on Terror'.<sup>52</sup> The new US national security strategy was articulated around a deeply neoconservative worldview.<sup>53</sup> The United States' Cuba policy followed the same guidelines; reinforcing existing sanctions, expanding support for domestic and Miami-based opposition and creating a structure dedicated to promote and manage a transition in Cuba that should bring it back to capitalism under US control. This was formalised by the 2004 plan produced by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, created in 2003. The plan was updated in 2006, largely in response to domestic and international criticism, although both were based on the same ideas.<sup>54</sup>

Against the odds, the Cuban revolutionary project survived.<sup>55</sup> By the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the government found new allies in the wave of left-wing governments and movements that swept

the Western hemisphere. Latin American populations were increasingly the beneficiaries of Cuban development aid, and Cuba reaped the benefits in increased support from their governments and increased integration and influence in regional institutions. The most relevant cases were Venezuela with the Bolivarian process led by Hugo Chavez, followed by Bolivia's first indigenous President, Evo Morales and the Movement to Socialism and then Ecuador, where the Citizen Revolution led by Rafael Correa introduced a number of significant social changes and a new foreign policy. These were the pillars of a new network of regional alliances oriented to promote the breaking up of the traditional dependence from United States, thus building a new form of anti-imperialist policy.

The new regional integration projects which emerged specifically rejected US influence. Cuba was an active member in most of them, thus becoming again pivotal as an example of alternative development in the search for sovereignty in the Third World. Without reducing its close ties with Africa and Asia, Cuba's Latin American policy gave the island a renewed importance in international affairs. The growing complexity of the international system generated by the re-emergence of global players like China and Russia, countries with which Cuba had good and improving relations, made these changes in the New World even more significant.

The impact of the financial and economic crisis of 2008 led the new administration of President Barack Obama (2009-2017) to re-evaluate the international situation and US capacity, and reformulate US foreign policy accordingly. Founded on the idea of *smart power*,<sup>56</sup> the new approach adjusted US national security strategy and connected policies.<sup>57</sup> It combined hard power with soft power according to specific circumstances and scenarios, thus adopting a more flexible set of tools for a more pragmatic view on the ways to preserve US hegemony.

On 17 December 2014, the Presidents of the United States and Cuba astonished the world with their simultaneous, televised announcements of an extraordinary change in the political relationship between their countries. Following 18 months of secret negotiations, Barack Obama and Raul Castro officially started the process of restoring diplomatic relations. In summer 2015, embassies were reopened after 54 years. A series of Bilateral Commissions began negotiations



about multiple issues of conflict and mutual interest, aiming towards a second and far more complex and difficult level: an eventual ‘normalisation’ of the relationship.

Research into the decision made by both governments to initiate rapprochement is ongoing, hence evidence remains incomplete and conclusions partial. However, some ideas can be formulated. For Washington, it was important to eliminate an irritant in its relations with Latin America. The continent was increasingly assertive in demanding the end of the US blockade and a normalisation of relations. Under Obama, the US moved to reconstruct its weakened control over the region, which is fundamental for reinforcing its global clout. The US also seeks mechanisms to exercise influence within Cuba itself, not least in anticipation of the departure the ‘historic generation’ – the leaders and veterans of the Cuban Revolution. The new policy should be understood within the general framework of a necessary adjustment to an increasingly multipolar and complex international system; part of the project to build, reinforce and protect the US sphere of influence in the hemisphere.<sup>58</sup>

There were also domestic reasons. The balance of forces managing Washington’s Cuba policy had shifted at least to the point in which, given favourable conditions, a policy change could be implemented. The Cuban American community, especially in Miami, had been altering, due to the inflow of new immigrants from the 1990s and natural generational changes.<sup>59</sup> Despite the hardened attitudes of the most powerful and traditional Cuban American political organisations and most Cuban American politicians, these changes were slowly transforming the political cleavages, in a process that will reduce the political influence of the community’s elites and simultaneously increase the support for policies more favourable to the engagement with Cuba.<sup>60</sup> More research is required to study, for example, the role of entrepreneurial groups and local economic interests, or bargaining among political groups within Congress and the political parties.

For Cuba, rapprochement was necessary to reduce its greatest external threat and remove the paramount obstacle to national development - the US blockade. Cuba had entered a process of ‘updating’ the Cuban economy and accessing foreign capital, markets and technology was a fundamental goal in this process. The direct impact of rapprochement, in the form of agreements,

investment, commerce or tourism, and the indirect impact of the ‘demonstration effect’, which encouraged capital inflows, commerce, tourism and cooperation with other countries and companies (competitors of the US), were considered beneficial for the Cuban economy. Also, the possibility of reducing, and ideally ending, US support for internal opposition and subversion was an incentive for Cuba.

The actual scope and effects of rapprochement in Cuba remain uncertain. It is especially difficult to determine its impact given that it merged with the process of domestic transformations unfolding in Cuba. Most visible of those are the economic reforms which diversify the ownership and management structure, expanding non-state-owned economic actors, or businesses. Cuban state-owned enterprises still account for the bulk of economic activity and employment, but they face many challenges stemming from the opening of the market and rapprochement with the United States.<sup>61</sup>

The election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States in late 2016 introduced new variables. Immediately the rapprochement process stagnated. In June 2017, Trump announced a presidential memorandum introducing new restrictions in the relationship.<sup>62</sup> However, the rhetoric of the announcement was more dramatic than the effective changes; Obama’s Cuba policy was not entirely scrapped. Nonetheless, the actual impact was also broader, denting the business environment and the expectations of (potential) investors and trade partners. Eight months into the Trump administration, we can say that its foreign policy has been erratic; employing aggressive language and hard power instruments. Constant changes to the presidential staff, the composition of the cabinet and the conflictive relations among political actors within the administration, the Congress and their entourage, introduce further layers of uncertainty, which has come to be a salient characteristic of US foreign policy since early 2017.

What will be the final impact of the Trump administration on Cuba? It is difficult to predict, but the following is clear: Obama’s rapprochement has been abandoned. The change is limited by the complexities of US politics and the imperatives of the international system. From pulling out of multilateral agreements to the alienation of allies, Trump has generated increasingly negative reactions around the planet. Some countries that have positive relations with Cuba: Iran, North

Korea, Russia and, especially, Venezuela have received additional sanctions and were threatened by US Congress, or President Trump and his aids and associates. Consequently, it is even less probable that Cuba will change its political positions. Perhaps the most explicit expression of contemporary continuity is the public declarations of support for the Venezuelan government of Maduro and the Venezuelan people against Washington's threats and sanctions, during the worst crisis of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Questions about the future of US-Cuban relations abound. Most relevant is the definition of the term 'normal' in that context. Within the framework of history, ideologies, geopolitics, economic interests and power relations, the US definition of normal would arguably be Cuba's reintegration into the US-centred power structure in the Western hemisphere. This concept emerges clearly from Obama's own speech. For Cuba, 'normalisation' cannot mean a return to that historical norm. It must entail a new paradigm which Raul Castro refers to as 'peaceful coexistence' between two sovereign nations that negotiate as equals. The Cuban government has declared that 'normalisation' is impossible without the cessation of the US blockade, the end of the US occupation of Guantanamo Bay and termination of regime change programmes.

One of the many questions which arises with the process of rapprochement is whether Cuba will sacrifice its anti-imperialism and its foreign policy to advance normalisation with United States. In particular, there are concerns about the future of the alliance with Venezuela and other left-leaning governments in Latin America, as well as its strategic relations with other international actors, like Russia or China. Given the complex history of Cuba-US bilateral relations, the depth of Cuban involvement in world-wide international politics, and the degree of understandable distrust between the two parties, it is too soon for any major changes to have emerged.

As yet, the tenets of Cuban foreign policy, embedded since the 1990s, remain unchanged and their effects are visible in the faltering progress of the process of 'normalisation'. For example, in summer 2017, nearly 50,000 Cuban medical professionals were serving in 63 countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa.<sup>63</sup> Nearly half of the total were in Venezuela. They remained during the political crisis and despite the threat of violence by the government's opposition and of military intervention by the United States. Intergovernmental agreements saw more than

15,000 foreign students from 28 countries training as medical doctors, dentists, nurses and specialists in health technology. The figure includes over 100 American students from poor communities, as part of agreements with local authorities, specific congresspersons and social and religious organisations. This fact highlights an interesting point: The Cuban version of anti-imperialism and solidarity includes the subordinated classes and sectors of core countries, even the United States.

There are additional points to consider. First, president Obama's rapprochement speech openly explained that the policy constituted a change of means, but not the goal of US strategy.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Washington spent \$5 million on Cuban 'democracy programmes' in 2015 and a further \$15 million was planned for 2017 fiscal year.<sup>65</sup> Clearly, the US rapprochement process did not signify real acceptance of the legitimacy of the Cuban government, nor an effort to establish peaceful coexistence between two different political, economic and social regimes.

Second, as explained above, among the motivations for the change in US policy, is the fact that Cuba 'punched above its weight' in international affairs; its influence derived from its independent and consistent foreign policy based on anti-imperialist principles established early on in the Revolution. Thus, even from a pragmatic perspective, to make concessions in this field would weaken Cuba's position and therefore diminish the incentive for normalisation among decision-makers in Washington. That is to say, it would be a self-damaging policy.

Third, the ideological framework of Cuba's foreign relations remains essentially the same, with variations generated by the evolving circumstances and the weight of history. The definitions and goals stemming from the core ideas articulating the policies are still based on the legacy of Martí, as interpreted by the Revolution. Furthermore, there is understanding of the structural restrictions imposed by the hierarchy within the world-system for peripheral countries and regions, and thus the improbability of Cuba achieving sustainable development by accepting a subordinated position within it.

## **Conclusion**

The origins of the Cuban nation are deeply rooted in a complex entanglement of interests and projects of imperial powers, domestic elites, middle and subordinated classes. Conflict, interdependence, bargaining, have channelled those interests and shaped Cuba's history. These factors have determined the existence of and underlying clash between the Cuban national project and the aspirations of different powers in different moments to control the strategically-located island. The United States eventually emerged as the most important of those powers in its path towards hegemony over the entire World-System. The same process created a deep connection between social change and sovereignty in Cuba to such an extent that they cannot be separated.

Since the Revolution of 1959, Cuba's development was articulated around four interlocked axes. First, a profound transformation of social, economic and political structures, which was at the core of the emerging national project. Second, ending the traditional dependence on the United States, and dealing with the immediate hostile reaction from Washington. Third, the global conflict – the 'Cold War' – a polarised world with multiple international strategic political alliances. Fourth, an active policy supporting liberation movements and opposing imperialism internationally.

What emerged post-1959 was a coherent anti-imperialist domestic and foreign policy, expressed in an active involvement in revolutionary struggles all around the Third World. This was based on ideological postulates stemming from an original combination of Marxist theories with an interpretation of Latin American and Cuban histories and ideas advanced by Martí. It was part of the redefinition of the idea of Cuba resulting from the rupture generated by the Revolution of 1959 and the collapse and emigration of the elites.

The fall of socialism in Eastern Europe and the USSR and the crisis it triggered led to a redesign of the strategies implemented by the Cuban government, domestically and internationally, to cope with the biggest challenge: survival. This included sweeping reforms in the country and a resizing of its foreign policy. Anti-imperialism and solidarity with the Third World remained central, but the emphasis was on peaceful cooperation and co-existence. The political processes

in Latin America in the early 2000s opened space for a more active participation in projects of regional integration and created new networks of strategic alliances.

The rapprochement announced in December 2014 represents a new stage in an extremely complex and long-running relationship between Cuba and United States; a conflict that has implications for North-South relations. It is the most recent expression of the underlying contradiction. In a broader sense, it is the contradiction between the subordinated Third World and imperialist centres of power. Cuban history continues to be conditioned by relations with Washington, and more broadly with the dominant powers in the world system. The major conflict still to be resolved is similar to that which has presided over history.

The election of Trump and his foreign policy has added uncertainty, but change was limited and imprecise in his first eight months in office. Doubts and expectations loom as all actors and institutions seek to adjust without reliable information. This has fostered significant international discontent with US policies and the increasing potential for open conflict world-wide and in the hemisphere.

Anti-imperialism continues to drive Cuba's foreign policy. An anti-imperialism tempered by the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus expressed through multi-level cooperation with numerous Third World countries, and political opposition to actions by global powers, mainly the United States, that are considered harmful for the sovereignty of nations in the global south. The final outcome of the reforms and the impact of Obama's engagement and Trump policies are yet to be determined.

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin, *Imperialism*. Lenin goes on to discuss: 'the relation between imperialism and the two main trends in the working-class movement'.

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2. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*; Parker, *The Thirty Years' War*.
  3. Bailyn and Denault, *Soundings in Atlantic History*; McClusker, *Economic History*; and Morgan *Slavery, Atlantic Trade*.
  4. We apply to the Cuban case concepts and theoretical tools taken from Hopkins and Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis* and Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation*.
  5. Perez, *Cuba en el imaginario*
  6. Le Riverend, *Historia Económica de Cuba*, 151-291
  7. Perez, *Cuba and the United States*, 12-28
  8. Ibid, 55-65
  9. Arrighi and Silver, *Chaos and Governance*, 121-150
  10. Prieto Rozos, *Visión Íntegra de América*.
  11. Perkins, *Creation of a Republican Empire* and LaFeber, *American Search for Opportunity*.
  12. Williams, *Roots of the Modern American Empire*, 41; Arrighi and Silver, *Chaos and Governance*, 185
  13. Elliot, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 255-402
  14. Torres-Cuevas, *En busca de la cubanidad*; Ibarra Cuesta, *Patria, etnia y nación*; Instituto de Historia de Cuba, *La colonia* and Instituto de Historia de Cuba, *Las luchas por la independencia*.
  15. Perez, *Cuba and the United States*, 83-84.
  16. Bevans, "The Platt Amendment", 116-17
  17. Ibid, 1117
  18. Instituto de Historia de Cuba, *La neocolonia*
  19. Williams, *Roots of the Modern American Empire*, 5
  20. Lieuwen, *U. S. Policy in Latin America*, 33
  21. US Department of Commerce, *Investment in Cuba*, 10
  22. Instituto de Historia de Cuba, *La neocolonia*
  23. A pattern repeated by Washington in several countries in Latin America; encouraging a coup and quickly accepting the status of the new regime.
  24. Castro, *History Will Absolve Me*
  25. The best example of this kind of reaction to processes of social transformations in Latin America prior to the Cuban revolution was the overthrowing of the nationalist government led by Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. Ayerbe, *The United States and Latin America*, 113-125.
  26. Companies and nationals from other countries accepted compensation, avoiding future conflict over the issue.
  27. Boorstein, *The Economic Transformation of Cuba* and Yaffe, *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*
  28. Domínguez López, Machado Cajide and Gonzalez Delgado, "Nueva inmigración y comunidad cubana en Estados Unidos".
  29. Cannell, *638 Ways to Kill Castro*
  30. LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*
  31. According to the Cuban government, 3,478 Cubans have been killed and 2,099 people left permanently disabled as a result of terrorism originating in the United States.
  32. Martí, 'Nuestra America'.
  33. Martí, 'Carta inconclusa a Manuel Mercado'
  34. Castro, *History Will Absolve Me*

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- <sup>35</sup> Construction on the famous monument to José Martí in Havana took place under the Batista dictatorship, 1953-1958, demonstrating how Martí could be appropriated as a national symbol devoid of his anti-imperialist aspects.
36. Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation*, 282-285.
37. Amin, Arrighi, Frank and Wallerstein, *Transforming the Revolution*.
38. Organization of American States, ‘Septima Reunion de Ministros de Relaciones Exteriores’
39. Partido Comunista de Cuba, ‘Primera Declaracion de La Habana’
40. The synthesis of Cuban, Latin American and Marxist ideas is one of the signature marks of the Cuban Revolution.
41. Partido Comunista de Cuba. ‘Segunda Declaracion de La Habana’
42. OSPAAAL, ‘Declaracion General’
43. Gleijeses. *Conflicting Missions*. In the 1970s and 1980s some 350,000 Cubans fought to defend Angola from apartheid South Africa’s invading army
- <sup>44</sup> Guevara, *Message to the Tricontinental*. Arguably, Guevara’s anti-imperialism reinforced, rather than decisively shaped, the deep, historically rooted anti-imperialism expressed through Fidel Castro’s leadership.
45. In particular, the Helms-Burton Act created a unique situation by depriving the President of United States of his constitutional competence to determine policy toward a foreign country through the introduction of legal limits and conditions that can only be changed by Congress.
46. Campbell, *Cuban Economists on the Cuban Economy*
47. Dominguez, “La politica cubana antes y despues del congreso del Partido”.
48. Rodriguez,” Revolution in the Cuban Economy”, 36
49. Yaffe, “Cuban Socialism: Inspiration to the ALBA-TCP”
50. Smith, “Estados Unidos y Cuba posterior a la guerra fria”
51. Kirk and Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism*, 97-189
52. Bacevich, *The Realities & Consequences of US. Diplomacy*
53. President of the United States, *National Security Strategy 2002* and President of the United States, *National Security Strategy 2006*
54. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba *Report to the President 2004* and Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba *Report to the President 2006*
55. Campbell, *Cuban Economists on the Cuban Economy* offers a Cuban political economy perspective of how this survival was achieved and at what cost for the socialist development project.
56. Nye, *The Powers to Lead*; Armitage and Nye, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power* and Mundow, Wielding ‘smart power’ in world affairs.
57. President of the United States, *National Security Strategy 2010* and President of the United States, *National Security Strategy 2015*
58. Domínguez López, “Cuba in the U.S. Strategic Plan”
59. Domínguez López, Machado Cajide and Gonzalez Delgado, “Nueva inmigración y comunidad cubana en Estados Unidos”
60. Dominguez Lopez and Gonzalez Delgado. “Rupturas y persistencias entre los cubanos del norte”
61. Barrera Rodriguez and Dominguez Lopez. “L’entreprise d’État à Cuba”
62. Trump, “Presidential Memorandum on Strengthening the Policy Toward Cuba”
- <sup>63</sup> Jorge Pérez Ávila, interview.



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64. Obama, “Statement on Cuba Policy Changes”

65. Eaton, “Democracy spending down, but controversy remains”. Eaton “Cuba spending hovers around \$1 billion” calculates that nearly \$1 billion has been spent by US institutions on Cuba-related ‘democracy programmes’ since 1996.

## Notes on Contributors

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