

More Than “Authoritarian Solidarity” Unbundling the International Cooperation Survival Package of Socialist Cuba

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Abstract

To explain the resilience of nondemocracies, political science scholars have pointed to the international cooperation of authoritarian regimes. But as authoritarian regimes seek to find international partners and construct alliances, how much is it about regime type, really? Analyzing the case of Cuba’s single-party regime, this contribution argues that international cooperation is not necessarily defined by regime-type similarity. Instead, a broader concept of political like-mindedness can derive from constructivist policies, particularly rooted in identities of the Global South. Moreover, the Cuban case also shows that nondemocratic regimes can gain additional strength from engagement with governments and nongovernment actors in democratic countries.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, comparative politics, constructivism, Cuba, democracy, international relations, IR realism, socialism, Third World.

For decades, the Castro-led government in Cuba has been an extraordinarily prominent target of external democratization efforts. At the same time, the regime has been very successful in resisting such efforts. This essay argues that international cooperation has been crucial for this. But what precisely have been the defining features of this cooperation? Is it all about authoritarian solidarity against Western “democratizers,” as the thesis of the “authoritarian international” would have it? What role does ideological regime proximity really have in the overall international relations of the country?

This essay seeks to “unpack” what is bundled up in the cooperation strategies of authoritarian countries. Laurence Whitehead (in this issue) argues

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that different analytical perspectives—the focus of comparative politics on regime type as well as the so-called “constructivist” and “realist” schools of IR¹—can complement each other to explain the foreign policy choices of authoritarian regimes. The Cuban case underscores this perspective. It shows how an authoritarian regime draws on different foreign policy approaches, depending on its specific domestic situation as much as on the changing international context.

Moreover, the argument of an “authoritarian international”² faces the particular problem that the binary regime descriptions of “democracy” vs. “authoritarianism” include a semantic imbalance. “Democracy” not only is a descriptive category but also refers to a positive self-identification. “Authoritarianism” does not. It is a default category for all regimes seen as nondemocratic from a liberal democracy perspective. As such, “authoritarianism” is not a regime type with which any government would identify. Consequently, Whitehead³ and Christian von Soest suggest an analysis of “democracy prevention” or “anti-democracy promotion strategies” rather than assume an unlikely “autocracy promotion.” As authoritarian leaders regularly frame claims for Western-style democracy as infringements on national sovereignty, solidarity against such “democracy promotion” easily travels across different regime types.

Things are different if we look at the regime subtypes subsumed under the rubric of authoritarianism. Monarchies, for instance, use this term self-confidently and see nothing pejorative in it. Similarly, communism or socialism, from which the idea of the “international” is taken, have been positive terms of self-identification. When asking for the cooperation of authoritarian regimes, it thus becomes necessary to identify what constitutes like-mindedness in their respective perspectives—and this may be different from the categories of political science scholars.

The present essay will develop these arguments by way of reviewing the different historical stages of the political regime that came to power with the Cuban Revolution of 1959. It will show that, in the Cold War era, Cuba’s all-

¹ For an overview on these, see Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially the chapters by Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, William C. Wohlforth, and Ian Hurd.

² Vitali Siliti, “‘Survival of the Fittest’: Domestic and International Dimensions of the Authoritarian Reaction in the Former Soviet Union Following the Colored Revolutions,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 4 (2010): 339-350.

³ Laurence Whitehead, “Antidemocracy Promotion: Four Strategies in Search of a Framework,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (2014): 1-24; id., “International Democracy Promotion as a Political Ideology: Upsurge and Retreat,” *Journal of Political Ideology* 20, no. 1 (2015): 10-26; and Christian von Soest, “Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes,” *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 623-638. See also, Oisín Tansey, “Questioning ‘Autocracy Promotion’,” *APSA Democratization Newsletter* 13, no. 1 (2015): 4-7.

out alliance with the Soviet Union, based on shared regime identities, was crucial for regime survival—but that it nevertheless was not the only game in town, as it was flanked by a Third World internationalism that reflected Fidel Castro’s constructivist approach to international politics as well as selective cooperation with the West more in line with a “realist” IR conception. It is the latter two aspects that become crucial to explaining regime survival after the collapse of Cuba’s socialist overseas allies in 1989. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, Havana’s foreign policy increasingly followed approaches in line with constructivist IR theory, as highlighted by the emergence of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) integration scheme. Finally, with the Cuban leadership succession from Fidel to Raúl Castro and parallel to the economic decline of the island’s key ally, Venezuela, since the mid-to-late 2000s we have witnessed a return to realism—forcefully illustrated by rapprochement with the United States since 2015.

Cold War Socialist Solidarity: The Soviet-Cuban Alliance

Authoritarian solidarity has been at the heart of the survival story of Cuba’s revolutionary government since the early 1960s, when the Soviet Union gave support to the island against the U. S. policy of confrontation and economic strangulation. For almost thirty years, Cuba was part of the “socialist camp” in the Cold War. The Soviet Union provided generous subsidies to its ally just ninety miles off the coastline of the United States in what geostrategy had long sought to be the U. S. backyard, thus allowing Cuba to develop an extensive social welfare system and health and education coverage in breadth and quality far above what its economic productivity would have allowed. Not least, the Soviet Union and its European allies also provided sustained military, security, and intelligence support.

It was this international insertion that made the Cuban regime immune to the democratization processes that swept the continent in the 1980s. More than that, it was not even considered a potential case for democratization. The milestone volume of the transitions literature by Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead⁴ does not even mention socialist Cuba in the panorama of Latin American countries it analyzes.

⁴ Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Latin America*, vol. 2 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

⁵ The Cuban–Soviet alliance has been such a central part of Cuba’s post-revolutionary history and politics that it is prominent in almost all studies on the Cuban experience. See, for example, Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course and Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Historia*

There is no need to recount the history of the Cuban-Soviet alliance.⁵ For the purpose of this essay, it suffices to focus on the question of regime-type similarity. When the rebels under the leadership of Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba in 1959, their regime initially was not one of a single-party state in the Leninist mold. In fact, in her standard exercise of regime classification, Barbara Geddes listed Cuba as a “rebel regime” until 1976, when—with the first elections under the new constitution—it passed into the camp of “single-party regimes.”⁶ Following this line of argument, in a strict sense, Soviet support for the Caribbean island would not have been due to regime-type solidarity until after all major structures of economic, military, and political cooperation had been put in place.

Such a perspective, however, seems detached from reality. In 1972, for instance, Cuba became a full member of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), four years prior to its shift in Geddes’s regime classification. By all practical standards, CMEA was an integration scheme clearly based on a common regime understanding of the socialist countries. If this speaks of the mismatch between scholarly classifications and self-perceived regime identities, the question arises at what point this mismatch began to develop. Certainly, in the early days of its revolution, the Soviet Union was not at all convinced that Cuba would become a socialist country. Fidel Castro’s relationship with Cuba’s Communist Party, then called the PSP (later transformed into today’s PCC), had been strained; the alliance with parts of the national bourgeoisie still seemed key to regime survival; and while Fidel spoke of radical social reform, he did not do so in Marxist language. So as the confrontation with the United States escalated, the Soviet Union saw an opportunity to step up its international position in a highly exposed geostrategic position, more as a bet on the future than on the already achieved regime nature of the Cuban revolutionary experiment. Support, then, would be stepped up in line with Cuban signals that the Soviet confidence in the island’s future trajectory would be borne out.

There were two defining moments, both underneath the threshold of Geddes’s classification, but sufficient for the Soviet Union to see regime like-mindedness mature enough to increase its support. The first was in April 1961 when, on the eve of the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion, the regime publicly declared the “socialist character” of the revolution. After this, Moscow was willing to go far not only in economic aid but also in extending its military umbrella over the island, as evidenced in the deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles in 1962. The second defining moment came

Económica de la Cuba Socialista [Economic history of socialist Cuba] (Madrid: Alianza, 1994). For the period of estrangement and eventual rupture after the mid-1980s, see specifically, Mervyn Bain, *Soviet-Cuban Relations 1985 to 1991: Changing Perceptions in Moscow and Havana* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁶ Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Politics Science* 2 (1999): 115-144.

when Fidel Castro's voluntarist approach to economic policy ran aground in the so-called "10 million-ton sugar harvest" in 1970, which wreaked havoc on the island's economy. In the aftermath of this debacle, Cuba turned to a process of institutionalization, which included as much economic planning as permitted by the adoption of formal political structures by and large along Soviet lines. Beginning in 1972, central five-year plans, coordinated with Moscow in the framework of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, replaced campaigns and experiments; cultural policy stiffened; and Cuba's Communist Party took on its present form, holding its first party congress in 1975. The Soviet Union rewarded Cuba's commitment to its more orthodox brand of socialism with massive economic subsidies, which made this—at least with regard to the material conditions—the "golden age of Cuban socialism."⁷ Eventually, the 1976 constitution, the country's Magna Carta, enshrined the single-party system and "the brotherly friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries."⁸

In sum, Cuba's Cold War alliance with the Soviet Union was not merely the result of a "common enemy" but also was based on the perception of a shared regime identity. This also holds true prior to 1976. Even if Cuba had not yet taken on board the full formal outfit of Soviet-style socialism, Moscow clearly recognized Cuban socialism as within its camp, though not yet fully mature.

However, socialist solidarity with the Soviet Union and its allies, as important as it was, was not the whole story. This became evident with the upheavals in Europe's socialist countries in 1989 and the eventual demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. In contrast to the socialist states of Eastern Europe, Cuba's communist rulers did not fall like the next domino in line but persisted. This essay argues that one of the reasons for the resilience of Cuban socialism has been its specific form of international engagement with authoritarian as well as nonauthoritarian countries, even during the era of the Soviet-Cuban alliance, on which Cuba's political leaders could build their survival strategy in the 1990s.

Cuban Third-Worldism

If Cuba's Cold War alliance with the Soviet Union was crucial for regime survival, it was not "the only game in town" in Cuba's international relations. Under Fidel Castro's tenure, Cuba always displayed a strong Third World

⁷ Archibald R. M. Ritter, "Economy: Revolution, 1959–1990," in *Cuba: People, Culture, History*, ed. Alan West-Durán (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2011), 14; see also, Archibald R. M. Ritter, ed., *The Cuban Economy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004).

⁸ Cuba's new constitution was adopted in 1976. Its preamble highlights "la amistad fraternal y la cooperación de la Unión Soviética y otros países socialistas" [the brotherly friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries]. See República de Cuba, *Constitución de la República de Cuba* [Constitution of the Republic of Cuba] (1976), <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/consti.htm> (accessed April 13, 2018).

profile, and it dispensed enormous resources to project this to the world. From this perspective, the core of Cuba's revolutionary identity was anti-imperialism rather than Marxism or Leninism. As a result, Cuba's Third-Worldism was not so much guided by regime identity as by like-mindedness in the global struggle against domination by the United States and the former (or then, in part, still operative) colonial powers.

Cuba's Third World engagement had an important "hard power" side of military and intelligence operations to it, but it also relied on an impressive outreach of "soft power." In both, Cuba, with a population of eleven million and very limited economic resources, punched far above its weight.

Where Cuban hard-power engagement was in the support of insurgent movements, regime typology obviously is not a meaningful category. But the regime crucially was based not only on a shared identity of radical anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism but also on a commitment to a revolutionary ideology more or less openly identified with a transition to socialism. Even if this could be a broad church and included movements with a more heterodox political identity than that endorsed by the Cuban state, it was indispensable. For instance, Cuba would not engage in military or intelligence support for Iran's Islamic revolutionaries who overthrew the Shah regime, however anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist they were.

Cuban support for governments abroad with military or intelligence personnel almost always was the result of revolutionary liberation movements. Here, again, Cuban internationalism was not defined in narrow terms. Cuban support went as much to countries such as Ethiopia under Haile Mengistu Mariam, or Angola under the MPLA, which fully adopted Marxist-Leninist political structures, as to Sandinista Nicaragua, which embraced an ideologically more diffuse "socialist transition" project and maintained a multiparty structure even after the revolution's victory.

Cuba also developed a strong Third World agenda in the formal political and diplomatic sphere, in which its role never was that of a mere proxy of the Soviet Union, as the Cold War logic might have suggested. This included the Tri-Continental Conference, which summoned left-wing leaders of Latin America, Asia, and Africa to Havana in 1966, to Cuba's lead role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Fidel Castro was the NAM's secretary general from 1979 to 1983 and sought to define the organization's mission in a strong rhetoric of anti-imperialism and anti-neocolonialism.⁹

⁹ Fidel Castro, "Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Secretario del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba y Presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros, en la sesión inaugural de la VI Conferencia Cumbre del Movimiento de Países no Alineados, celebrada en el Palacio de las Convenciones de La Habana, el 3 de septiembre de 1979, 'año 20 de la victoria'" [Speech delivered by the Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba and President of the Councils of State and of Ministers, in the inaugural session of the VI Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held in the Convention Palace in Havana, September 3, 1979, "Year 20 of the Triumph"] (1979), <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1979/esp/f030979e.html> (accessed April 13, 2018).

No less important for Cuba's Third World internationalism than military and diplomatic engagement was its projection of soft power. This included "internationalist missions" by Cuban medical and educational personnel.¹⁰ But more importantly, Cuba used its achievements in health and education as well as social security and dignity for all, without regard to race or class, to project itself as a model for Third World development. This proved to be truly powerful as Cuba's achievements in these sectors stood in sharp contrast to the poverty and the deeply engrained social inequalities that characterized capitalist development in Third World countries. Moreover, as the leitmotif of these achievements were rooted in ideals fully embraced by Western humanism, the Cuban model's appeal went far beyond those identified with a socialist or communist ideology. (A very different question was the material base of Cuba's socialist welfare state, which arguably was built so much on Soviet economic aid that it was not fully replicable for others who did not enjoy the same degree of Soviet generosity.)

Socialist Cuba spent considerable resources to project its model abroad. This encompassed media outreach, including dedicated publications such as *Cuba International* and the establishment of the Prensa Latina news agency, but also the invitation of delegations and the fostering of international solidarity groups. Moreover, Cuba's projection of soft power also had a remarkable cultural side. Institutions such as the annual Festival of Latin American Cinema or the Casa da las Américas could count on extraordinary support from the state as they became internationally recognized showcase institutions of Cuba's revolutionary regime. Sports also had a highly prominent role in Cuba's international projection, where for decades Cuba showed off extraordinary rankings in the Olympic Games medal tables, usually way above all other Third World countries, as proof of the capabilities of its socialist order.¹¹

In Cuba's hard-power engagement in the Third World, the commitment to the global anti-imperialist struggle seemed to matter more than regional proximity or shared cultural identity. From early on, Cuba supported armed liberation movements and left-wing governments in Africa.¹² The most emblematic case was Che Guevara's ill-fated Congo expedition,¹³ but other and bigger engagements followed. While in Latin America support remained

¹⁰ John M. Kirk and Michael H. Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism: Origins, Evolution, and Goals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹¹ Robert Huish, "Punching above Its Weight: Cuba's Use of Sport for South-South Co-operation," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2011): 1730-1744.

¹² Dirk Kruijt, *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America: An Oral History* (London: ZED Books, 2017), 81 and following.

¹³ Ernesto Che Guevara, *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria: Congo* [Passages of the Revolutionary War: The Congo] (Milan: Mondado, 1967), and Paco Ignacio Taibo II et al., *El año en que estuvimos en ninguna parte: la guerrilla africana de Ernesto Che Guevara* [The year in which we were nowhere: Che Guevara's African guerrilla], front cover (Mexico City: Ediciones Colihue, 1994).

covert and Cuba never openly sent its armed forces into military operations, the situation was very different in Africa. In the Ogaden War, Cuba deployed 15,000 combat troops in support of the Ethiopian government in 1977–1978, and in the prolonged war in Angola between 1975 and 1989, 300,000 Cubans were engaged in military operations and, to a lesser extent, civilian tasks.¹⁴

And yet, Latin America's shared regional identity played an important role in Cuba's hard-power engagement. Latin America became the "Patria Grande," the "Great Fatherland," and the support for insurgent guerrillas in many countries was perceived as a common cause against the neocolonial dominance of the United States over what Cuban national independence hero José Martí, at the end of the nineteenth century, had called "Nuestra América"—"Our America"—emphasizing the contrast to Anglophone North America. If the Sierra Maestra mountains in Eastern Cuba had been the initial stronghold of Fidel Castro's rebels from where the revolution spread, the slogan now became to "convert the Andes into the Sierra Maestra of South America." Che Guevara, an Argentinian who joined Fidel's insurgency in Cuba, became the embodiment of the revolution's pan-continental projection. When he eventually died in Bolivia in 1967 in the attempt to ignite revolution in the Andes, this signaled the practical unviability of this project. At the same time, his death on Bolivian soil made him a martyr of the pan-Latin American identity of the Cuban revolution for many in the continent's left.

The special role Latin America played for Cuba's hard-power internationalism was also reflected institutionally, as the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) created a dedicated "Departamento Américas," for which there was no parallel for any other world region. Its leader, Manuel Piñero, alias Comandante Barbarroja, became a legendary figure for Latin America's guerrilla groups.¹⁵ Despite Cuba's much more massive military engagement in Africa, in Latin America, revolutionary camaraderie could build on much deeper cultural and historical roots of shared identities, which made the bonds forged by these endeavors much more enduring over time.

Regional and cultural identities also mattered in Cuba's soft-power projection. Broad formal programs such as Cuba's alphabetization campaign and the build-up of educational infrastructure in Angola depended on close intergovernmental cooperation.¹⁶ Beyond this, Cuba's medical and educational

¹⁴ Christine Hatzky, *Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Transfer of Knowledge, 1976–1991* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Piñero had been one of the founding fathers of Cuba's state security apparatus and Vice Minister of the Interior. He headed the so-called "Viceministerio Técnico," which was in charge of Cuba's overseas operations. The "Departamento Américas" was created formally in 1975. See Dirk Kruijt, "The Long Itinerary to Normalization: The Cuban–Latin American Relations," *IdeAS, Idées d'Amérique* 10 (Autumn 2017), <https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/2162#text> (accessed April 24, 2018).

¹⁶ Hatzky, *Cubans in Angola*.

internationalism—rooted in universal humanist values—targeted as broad an audience as possible, often addressing other countries’ governments less and their societies more, as much in Latin America as in other parts of the Third World.¹⁷

Where Cuba’s soft-power internationalism focused on the cultural sphere, however, the shared regional and cultural identity played a predominant role. If Cuban internationalism was deeply anchored in Fidel Castro’s veneration for Cuban nineteenth-century independence hero and poet, José Martí, and his advocacy of “Nuestra América,” this reference resounded strongly in Latin America but much less so in other parts of the world. Many of Cuba’s outward-oriented cultural efforts were targeted directly at the shared Latin American and Caribbean identity, such as the Casa de las Américas or the Festival of the New Latin American Film. Other events and organizations that maintained a broad Third World projection, such as the Havana Art Biennial and the International School of Film and Television in San Antonio de los Baños, left their strongest imprint in Latin America, where language and cultural codes travelled easiest.

Selective Outreach to the West

After the 1959 revolution, conflict with the United States quickly escalated. Washington imposed a far-reaching trade embargo—in Cuban official parlance called “el bloqueo,” the blockade—and pursued a policy of political isolation. As Cuba became an ally of the Soviet Union, its external relations toward other Western countries also were overshadowed by the Cold War confrontation between East and West.

However, here as well, confrontation is not the whole story. Throughout the years, Cuba maintained a selective but highly active policy toward Western countries. Fidel Castro made a point of distinguishing between their governments and their societies. In 1960, when relations with Washington already were tense, Fidel Castro went to New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly—but also to reach out directly to the American public, especially to the Afro-American community, as he stayed at a Harlem hotel and met with Black Muslim leader Malcolm X.

Symbolic gestures such as the Harlem visit were accompanied by an institutional approach that fostered Cuban solidarity organizations in all Western countries. While these usually were small in number, they found fertile ground in broader sectors of society when they pointed to Cuba’s social achievements and to the neocolonial overtones in U. S. policy toward the island. As a result, even at the height of the Cold War, socialist Cuba could engage more sympathy in the capitalist West than probably any country of the socialist camp.

¹⁷ Kirk and Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism*.

Beyond reaching out to societies, Cuba also pursued selective engagement with Western governments. The most evident case is Canada, which became a kind of “good neighbor” in contrast to the United States.¹⁸ But underneath all confrontation, even with U. S. authorities there was some practical cooperation, including between both countries’ military in securing a *modus vivendi* around the U. S. military base on Cuban soil at Guantánamo Bay.¹⁹

Notably, too, despite Cuba’s integration into the socialist economic system, Western capitalist countries remained important economically as trade partners and, after the mid-1970s—especially during the first half of the 1980s—as a source of hard currency credits. At the end of the 1970s, 40 percent of Cuban trade still was with capitalist countries.²⁰ When the domestic economic dynamism slowed in the 1980s, Cuba resorted to Western credit to maintain its economic growth rates. Between 1983 and 1987, Cuba’s debt to Western creditors more than doubled, from U. S. \$ 2.8 billion to 6.1 billion.²¹ Moreover, in 1982, Cuba passed a law to allow joint-ventures with foreign investors.

Cuba’s International Engagement in the Cold War Era: A Preliminary Conclusion

In sum, in the Cold War context, authoritarian cooperation was essential for regime survival in Cuba. It is hard to envision how Cuba could have withstood pressures from the United States without its alignment with the Soviet Union. A realist IR perspective would stress the pragmatic gains Cuba had from this alliance, from the benefits of the Soviet military umbrella to the enormous Soviet subsidies that sustained the Cuban development model. A constructivist perspective would stress that this alliance became possible only due to Cuba’s unilateral break with the U. S.-dominated order and its declared commitment, from 1961 onward, to Marxism and socialism. A comparative politics perspective would highlight that a mere marriage of convenience would not have sufficed. For such an all-out alliance encompassing economic, military, and political bonds, a shared regime identity was indispensable.

¹⁸ John M. Kirk and Peter McKenna, *Canada–Cuba Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

¹⁹ For more on U. S.–Cuban cooperation across the ideological divide, see Melanie Ziegler, *U. S.-Cuban Cooperation: Past, Present, and Future* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). For a well-documented account of “back channel” diplomacy between the United States and Cuba, even in the times of the Cold War, see William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014).

²⁰ Julio Carranza Valdés, “Los retos de la economía cubana” [The challenges of the Cuban economy], *Cuadernos de Nuestra América* [Journal of Our America] 9, no. 19 (Havana: CEA, 1992): 131-158, 132.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

However important it was, authoritarian cooperation was not all there was to Cuba's Cold War international insertion. Constructivist IR approaches seem best suited to explain Cuba's Third World internationalism, which was a key feature of the revolution's foreign policy. Its approach echoed the so-called "focus strategy" (*foquismo*) of Fidel Castro's guerrilla warfare: not to wait for the "objective conditions" for revolution to mature but to accelerate this process by the determined action of a revolutionary vanguard.

At the same time, Cuba's foreign policy in the Cold War period also included a selective engagement with the capitalist West. While the country's direct outreach to the societies of these countries reflects a constructivist approach, the Cuban government's more pragmatic approach to Western governments and creditors seems in line with assumptions of IR's realist school.

Highlighting Cuba's foreign policy mix helps to explain the country's development during the Cold War era and is crucial to understanding why Cuba's socialist regime was so resilient to the pressures for regime change, when in 1989–1991 the Soviet Union and its socialist allies in Eastern Europe collapsed. To this we will now turn.

Cuba in the Post-1989 World: Retreat to Defensive Realism

When in 1989 the socialist camp began to crumble, at first, Cuba tried to hold on to its allies— not only in an effort to keep economic and trade relations afloat, wherever possible, but also in the hope of a reversal of fortunes. This was not as far-fetched as it may seem in hindsight. Had the 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev been successful, this would have revitalized Moscow's lifeline to Havana, as many of the anti-Gorbachev conspirators had close links to Cuba.²² In fact, some observers have suggested that the postponement of the Cuban Communist Party's 4th Congress to October was not due to the scheduled Pan-American games in Havana, as the official version has it, but to convene it after the events in the Soviet Union had finished unfolding.²³

When the socialist camp eventually did fall apart and the Soviet Union disintegrated, only a small portion of the commercial ties with Cuba survived, given the new imperatives reigning in the formerly socialist economies, on the one side, and Cuba's hard-currency crunch, on the other.²⁴ Internationally, there was no alternative authoritarian benefactor in the wings to substitute for the abrupt end of Soviet support. China back then was not the economic

²² Mervyn J. Bain, "Back to the Future? Cuban–Russian Relations under Raúl Castro," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48, nos. 2-3 (2015): 85.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ For the development of Russian-Cuban relations in the post-Soviet era, see Mervyn J. Bain, *Russian-Cuban Relations since 1992: Continuing Camaraderie in a Post-Soviet World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

power that it is today, and Sino-Cuban relations were strained because, in the Sino-Soviet rivalry, Cuba had been aligned with Moscow. As Western-style democracy seemed to have become a global norm and there was no second superpower competing with the United States, scholars diagnosed a “unipolar moment”²⁵ in world politics.

For Cuba’s socialist government, the “unipolar moment” of its biggest and closest adversary was one of imminent threat. This was underscored by two almost simultaneous events in the island’s close vicinity, often overlooked by observers from Europe or North America: the U. S. invasion of Panama in December 1989, and the electoral defeat of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in February 1990, after ten years of a “war of attrition” by U. S.-backed counterrevolutionary forces. Havana’s reading of these events signaled that the United States was still ready to use its military force to depose rulers in its “backyard” at will, and that any opening to multiparty competition could easily undermine efforts to renew the revolutionaries’ legitimation, as the Sandinistas had hoped, and instead destroy revolutionary power, just as perestroika had led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result, Fidel Castro made resistance rather than reform the foremost political imperative.

The economic strategy of Cuba’s post-1989 resistance was a quasi-war economy, with a steep fall in consumption levels and an egalitarian distribution of the costs of crisis. In domestic politics, it was a return to the nationalist credentials of the revolution and a heavy-handed approach against any potential deviation by the Communist Party’s rank and file. In international politics, it was a retreat to defensive realism. Cuba terminated its overseas military endeavors and moderated its foreign policy stance. It sought broad diplomatic support against the Cuba policy of the United States, in particular, by mending relations with Latin American and Caribbean governments. Also, Cuba began to open its economy to Western tourism and, modestly, to foreign investment.

The Soviet Union’s perestroika policies in the second half of the 1980s included scaling down Moscow’s overseas commitments; so, too, Cuba’s military engagement in Angola reached its nadir, even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Tripartite peace negotiations, which included the withdrawal of Cuban troops as well as Namibia’s independence, were concluded in December 1988. Following the established time-frame, the last Cuban troops left Angola in May 1991, ending Cuba’s largest “internationalist mission,” in which over the course of thirteen years more than 300,000 Cubans had fought and worked in defense of Angola’s Marxist MPLA government. At the same time, the last Cuban troops left Ethiopia and Congo, ending all Cuban military presence on the African continent.²⁶

²⁵ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23-33.

²⁶ In Latin America, Cuban civilian and security personnel had been officially sent to Nicaragua but returned to the island after the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990.

Similarly, support for revolutionary guerrillas or liberation movements across the global South was cut back. Cuba continued to give shelter and medical care to those rebels who had taken refuge on the island, and it sought to cooperate and offer its good services in negotiated peace settlements, such as in El Salvador. But no longer did Havana promote or actively support offensive insurgency in Latin America or elsewhere. The quest to extend the revolutionary flame to other countries gave way to a concentration of the reduced resources on safeguarding the revolutionary project in Cuba itself.

Ending support for guerrilla groups was a key part of what became an overarching policy goal in Cuba's post-1989 survival strategy: to mend relations with Latin American and Caribbean neighbors. This could not be on ideological grounds. With the electoral defeat of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in February 1990, the last sympathetic government was gone. But in the region, the redemocratization process had brought governments to power that left behind the ferocious anti-communism of the military dictatorships. As Cuba moderated its policy toward them, Latin American governments by and large welcomed Cuba back into the Latin American family. In this process, Cuba's soft-power investments and its sustained outreach to the societies of Latin America paid off. Many on the continent had great respect not only for Cuba's social achievements, but also for Fidel Castro's resistance against the United States as a hegemon over such a long time. For policy makers on the continent, however, closing the files on Washington's aggressive Cuba policy would have tended to have had domestic costs they wished to avoid.

If Havana's defensive strategy needed to counter the U. S.-driven policy of condemnation and isolation, its accumulated soft power was a key asset to do so. Of special importance was Cuba's active policy toward other capitalist countries, namely Western Europe and Canada. When Fidel Castro participated in the World Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, it was a moment to showcase Cuba's health and educational standards. But more than that, for a reception held by Margaret II, Queen of Denmark, Fidel Castro dressed in suit and tie rather than his accustomed military fatigues, to present himself as a dignified statesman rather than a feverish revolutionary. This soft-power strategy went hand in hand with economic incentives, as Europe and Canada were the countries that benefited most from the opening of the Cuban economy to international tourism and joint-venture possibilities.

Cuba also was able to reap benefits from its past Third World internationalism. In the United Nations, Cuba could rely almost fully on the non-OECD countries to consistently vote for condemnation of the U. S. embargo when Cuba year after year brought the issue before the General Assembly. Also, Cuba's long-standing engagement in Africa yielded returns in terms of African solidarity with Cuba in its moment of threat and crisis. Just one year after his release from prison, Nelson Mandela paid gratitude in a highly symbolic visit to Fidel Castro in 1991. This was not authoritarian cooperation. Mandela had embarked post-apartheid South Africa on a course of pluralist

democracy and national reconciliation. His visit to Castro reflected that Cuban engagement was not linked so much to a precise ideological prescription as to the overarching concepts of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, which Nelson Mandela and the ANC doubtlessly embraced.

Thus, the efforts of the United States to isolate Cuba politically did not find sufficient allies in Latin America, the capitalist West, or the Third World. This was not due to authoritarian camaraderie, but to Cuba's pragmatic improvements in its relations with Western and Latin American governments as well as to its ability to mobilize sympathy as a result of its accumulated soft power and the legacy of its Third World internationalism.

Moreover, even relations with the United States became more ambivalent. On the one hand, Washington tightened its economic embargo against the island through the Torricelli Law in 1992 and the Helms-Burton Law in 1996. On the other hand, Havana triggered a counter-current of financial transactions from the United States to the island when it legalized the U. S. dollar in 1993, at the height of Cuba's economic crisis. This measure started an ever-increasing stream of remittances from Cuban émigrés to their family members on the island. Even though the U. S.—Cuban community was the essential lobby for a hardline anti-Castro Cuba policy from Washington, remittances from U. S. Cubans became key to Cuba's economic survival. This is a remarkable case of cooperation not with an ally, but with the enemy—by driving a wedge between individual behavior and government policy.²⁷

Moreover, the Torricelli Act not only tightened the embargo legislation but also—in its so-called “Track Two”—opened telecommunications between the two countries.²⁸ Importantly, too, U. S.—Cuban cooperation was formalized in the accords that were reached to end the migration crisis in 1994, when thousands of Cuban “rafters” took to the sea to reach U. S. shores. The result was a negotiated scheme of joint migration management, including returning Cuban migrants picked up at sea by the U. S. Coast Guard to Cuban authorities.²⁹

Constructing New Alliances: The Years of the ALBA Euphoria

In the wake of the 1989 political watershed year, the Cuban government followed a policy of retreat from internationalism, in line with what IR realists

²⁷ This international cooperation with the enemy had a precedent in the so-called Mariel Boatlift, when the Castro government called on Cuban emigrants to come by boat to the island and take on board all those—family members and others—who wanted to leave the island. See Alex Larzelere, *The 1980 Cuban Boatlift* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1988).

²⁸ Bert Hoffmann, *The Politics of the Internet in Third World Development: Challenges in Contrasting Regimes with Case Studies of Costa Rica and Cuba* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 203 and following.

²⁹ See Kirk and Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism*.

would predict for a situation of existential threat for a socialist regime whose historical enemy had just become the only remaining superpower. This retreat did not reflect a change of heart but instead was the result of dire circumstances. To secure its survival, the regime was careful not to harm Cuban credibility as a supporter of radical causes. The military intervention in Angola was not ended abruptly but with negotiations that secured the MPLA government in power, and medical camps for Central American guerrilla groups were maintained, even after the guerrillas had entered negotiations to end the civil war. Thus, Cuban internationalism was put on hold, but not buried.

When in the late 1990s Cuba had passed the worst moments of economic crisis and political threat, a new radical project emerged in oil-rich Venezuela under the leadership of Hugo Chávez. Fidel Castro went all in to construct a new strategic alliance.

Although Chávez, a military man, had participated in a failed coup attempt earlier, he came to power through democratic elections; political scientists thus would not see his government, at least in its early years, as fitting the classification of authoritarian. But the democratic vs. authoritarian divide and the corresponding yardsticks to measure it are concerns of external observers, not of their subjects of attention. Early on, the leadership in Havana saw in Chávez's "Bolivarian Revolution" the potential for a fellow revolutionary project. Cuba's embrace of the Venezuelan project by itself became a driving force for its radicalization: as Venezuelan relations with Havana became closer, U. S. Venezuela policy became more hostile and domestic politics more polarized. It was a constructivist approach to political alliance-building. Ideological definition did not follow until later: Hugo Chávez would not proclaim his "socialism of the 21st century" until 2005, six years after having become Venezuela's president.

Since then, the Venezuelan regime has become much more authoritarian. Still, it has not become an institutionalized single-party system like Cuba's. But regime type distinction did not matter to Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez in the launch of a strategic alliance between their countries, including a publicly celebrated relationship between father and elected son. This went hand in hand with massive material flows. A large-scale barter agreement secured a generous Venezuelan oil supply for Cuba in exchange for Cuban medical staff that was sent to Venezuela. Venezuela became Cuba's number one trading partner and did so on highly favorable terms.

With Venezuela's financial resources and Fidel Castro's sense of mission, the constructivist project reached for a new internationalism. In 2004, Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez founded ALBA.³⁰ Originally, Venezuela and

³⁰ Later changed into Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América [Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America]. For the diffusion of Hugo Chávez's "Bolivarianism," see Carlos de la Torre, "Hugo Chávez and the Diffusion of Bolivarianism," *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (2017): 1271-1288.

Cuba were its only members, but the name signaled an ambitious regional scheme that openly challenged U. S. hegemony in the hemisphere.³¹ While ALBA's self-definition was "anti-neoliberal," ideologically it was a broad church. Under former Sandinista Comandante Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua became a member of "anti-neoliberal" ALBA, while staying in "neoliberal" CAFTA, the U. S.-inspired Central American Free Trade Area. Over time, Bolivia, Honduras, Ecuador, and six small Caribbean island states joined ALBA, particularly the latter drawn by the highly preferential prices for oil shipments offered by Venezuela. Here, too, joining ALBA was a political statement, as it defied U. S. policy. So, rather than owing to regime type or ideology, the like-mindedness of the ALBA project was constructivist in nature: "If Washington doesn't want you to join ALBA and you do it anyway, you are on the right side. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy: all who join pass the test."

In these years of euphoria in which Latin America seemed on a continental drift to the left, relations with Venezuela and the ALBA countries overshadowed all of Cuba's foreign relations. Western Europe and Canada remained important to tourism and as commercial partners but they were not the priority of Havana's foreign policy. Relations with Latin America became more polarized as the continent-wide projection of a radical left, as embodied in the Cuba-Venezuela-dominated ALBA scheme, came to be viewed as a challenge and even a threat by other governments of the region.

China, however, gradually became more important—although not to the extent many expected. Even though communist parties held power in both countries, Cuba's Cold War alliance with the Soviet Union had estranged the Chinese and Cuban regimes profoundly. For reasons beyond this, China also was unwilling to step into the Soviet role. Beijing promoted its foreign trade through state-sponsored credit lines and other measures, but it nowhere engaged in a wholesale arrangement of subsidized commerce through arbitrarily fixed "just prices," as the Soviet Union did.³² Moreover, after 1989, Cuba did not embark on a Chinese-style course of economic reform. Fidel Castro paid a nine-day visit to China in 1995, but reportedly was irritated by the Chinese leadership's embrace of capitalist consumption patterns. Consequently, China's socialist market model did not become a positive reference in official Cuban discussions regarding the course the island should take.

³¹ The name ALBA still bears witness that it initially was designed to counter U. S.-dominated plans for a Free Trade Area of the Americas, FTAA, or ALCA by its Spanish acronym.

³² Adrian H. Hearn, "Cuba and China: Lessons and Opportunities for the United States," Cuban Research Institute, Florida International University (2009), <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/commissioned-reports/cuba-china-hearn.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2018), and Jiang Shixue, "The Chinese Foreign Policy Perspective," in *China's Expansion into the Western Hemisphere: Implications for Latin America and the United States*, ed. Riorden Roett and Guadalupe Paz (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 27-43.

Chinese direct investment on the island remained remarkably low. Trade with China grew, as everywhere, but not by more. However, in security-related sectors, the Chinese played a privileged role. The Chinese and the Cuban military held high-level meetings, arranged personnel exchanges, and conducted joint training.³³ Also, telecommunications and computer networks were a highly sensitive field in which Cuba not only relied on Chinese equipment but also on Chinese administrative know-how. A series of high-level visits by Cuban officials to the People's Republic of China preceded Cuba's creation of a Ministry of Informatics and Communications (MIC) in 2000 to oversee Internet regulation and monitoring on the island. The MIC's first minister, González Planas, openly confirmed the model role Peking had played:

We oriented ourselves somewhat by the experiences of China, the other country in which the state plays the role it has here [in Cuba], particularly in the regulation of these matters. Two years ago the Chinese created a new ministry, and they transmitted us their experiences and their perspectives on the concentration of these forces.³⁴

Sino-Cuban relations continue to emphasize the countries' shared political regime identity. The party-to-party level is an important part of bilateral affairs. Especially in security-related sectors, there is a high degree of trust that the United States will not be able to get its hands (or software) into Cuban affairs if the technology and know-how are Chinese. Yet, while this is in tune with realist expectations, more important are Cuba's outreach policies to Latin America that follow a constructivist approach: the leitmotif is not just to adapt to the realities of a mostly hostile world, but also to launch initiatives that aim to actively transform this environment by means of Cuba's own actions.

After Fidel: Raúl Castro's Return to Realism

In 2006, Fidel Castro, the undisputed leader of the Cuban Revolution for almost half a century, fell ill. At the age of seventy-nine, he had to hand over the reins of state to his brother and deputy in all positions, army general Raúl Castro. The succession process was staged gradually. Moreover, Castro's legacy was divided into a domestic and an international dimension: while Raúl Castro became his brother's heir in all functions on the island, in an act

³³ Caitlin Campbell, "China's Expanding and Evolving Engagement with the Caribbean," *U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Report* (2014), p. 8, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Staff%20Report_China-Caribbean%20Relations.p (accessed April 13, 2018).

³⁴ See Larzelere, *The 1980 Cuban Boatlift*, 212.

of transnational charismatic leadership succession, Fidel Castro symbolically passed the banner of revolutionary internationalism to Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez.³⁵

The anointment of Chávez as Fidel's heir on the global stage allowed Raúl Castro a retreat from Cuba's international role without loss of face. Domestically, Raúl embarked the country on economic reform, which was flanked by a foreign policy of moderation. As IR realism would expect for an open Caribbean island economy, the leitmotif of Raúl Castro's foreign policy became the diversification of international relations. The alliance with Venezuela, to be sure, remained a prime concern, as the underlying barter arrangement was vital to the Cuban economy. But Raúl Castro never embraced Chávez's "Bolivarian Revolution" with the same euphoria of his brother. He did not visit Caracas until late 2008, and then only as a stop-over en route to a regional integration summit in Brazil.³⁶ Under Raúl, the alliance with Venezuela was not part of a constructivist policy but instead something he had inherited from his brother's tenure which had contributed major economic and political benefits to the island—and which any realist assessment would advise to continue.

In its relations to the Latin American countries, Havana now sought to overcome ideological polarization and seek as broad cooperation as possible. As a result, over time, the ALBA integration scheme lost prominence in Havana's public discourse. Instead, emphasis shifted toward the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), created in 2011. While its inaugural summit took place in Caracas and Chávez had played a prominent role in its creation, CELAC is a much broader organization than ALBA. It includes all sovereign countries of the region, no matter their ideological orientation—but, in contrast to the Organization of American States (OAS), not the United States or Canada. Moreover, CELAC seeks to balance between left- and right-leaning governments in the alternation of its pro tempore presidency.

Hence, when Raúl Castro became CELAC's pro tempore president in 2013, a strong message was sent to Washington regarding the extent of Latin American support for the full reintegration of Cuba into the region. It also signaled Havana's turn toward a "good neighbor" policy with Latin American and Caribbean nations, underscoring that Cuba's priority was an institution shared by all in the region in preference to the ideologically divisive ALBA agenda. Reality never fully lives up to the ideal, however, so in Raúl Castro's overall realist approach to foreign policy, his strong embrace of CELAC was in line with Cuba's more constructivist approach under his brother's tenure.

³⁵ Bert Hoffmann, "Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change: Lessons from Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession," *International Political Science Review* 30, no. 3 (2009): 229-248, 241-242.

³⁶ "Raúl Castro Makes First Official Visit to Venezuela," *Associated Press* (December 13, 2008), <http://www.ctvnews.ca/raul-castro-makes-first-official-visit-to-venezuela-1.351381> (accessed April 13, 2018).

Two other major foreign policy initiatives of the Raúl Castro government underscored Cuba's reputation as a "good citizen" in international affairs: its role as mediator in the Colombian peace negotiations held in Havana, and its high-profile engagement in the fight against the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. In both cases, Cuba capitalized on its internationalist projection of the past. In the Colombian conflict, Havana's long-standing engagement with Latin America's insurgency groups made it a trustworthy interlocutor for the FARC rebels, at the same time Havana's end to exporting revolutionary initiatives had become so credible that the Colombian government was willing to accept the country's broker role. In West Africa's Ebola crisis, Cuba's medical internationalism came into the global spotlight. On this occasion, Cuba was completely free of any ideologically motivated considerations of anti-imperialist solidarity and worked under the auspices of the World Health Organization, which paid for Havana's involvement. Cuba proved highly competent by responding more quickly and efficiently than any other country in this humanitarian crisis, gaining recognition from a universal audience.

The economic transformation initiated by Raúl Castro, even if slow and timid, seemed to steer the country in the direction of Chinese reform communism. References to the Chinese and Vietnamese economic models became markedly more positive in domestic discourse.³⁷ Nevertheless, Chinese economic engagement with Cuba, though important, remained without spectacular overtones of privileged authoritarian cooperation. The single most important investment project, the new deep-sea port of Mariel west of Havana, was built as a Cuban-Brazilian joint-venture, with a Singaporean company chosen to operate it. The second biggest deal, the so-called "Mais Medicos" program of exporting medical services, was surpassed only by the Cuba–Venezuelan arrangements signed with Brazil. The most spectacular hotel constructions and the overhaul and expansion of Havana airport were contracted with a French company. Nickel, Cuba's main mining export, remained essentially under the scope of a joint-venture with Canadian Sherritt. This agenda reflected economic diversification at work.

However, dealing with a fellow socialist country rather than with Western companies remained crucial in security-related sectors requiring trust, such as telecommunications equipment and digital infrastructure. Here, Cuba

³⁷ See, for example, *Temas, Cultura–Ideología–Sociedad*, no. 66 "Otros socialisms" [Other socialisms], Havana (April–June 2011), and Raúl Castro, "Discurso pronunciado por el General de Ejército Raúl Castro Ruz, Presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros, en la clausura del Sexto Período Ordinario de Sesiones de la Séptima Legislatura de la Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular, en el Palacio de Convenciones, el 18 de diciembre de 2010, "Año 52 de la Revolución" [Speech delivered by Army General Raúl Castro Ruz, President of the Councils of State and of Ministers, in the closing session of the Sixth Ordinary Period of Sessions of the National Assembly of People's Power, in the Convention Palace, December 18, 2010, "Year 52 of the Revolution"] (2010), <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/rauldiscursos/2010/esp/r181210e.html> (accessed April 12, 2018).

continued to rely almost entirely on Chinese partners. Socialist cooperation also was displayed on the diplomatic level. Cuba received preferential treatment from the Beijing government, including high-level visits to Cuba by President Hu Jintao in 2008 and Prime Minister Li Keqiang in 2016. Raúl Castro visited China in 2012.

Also, in military matters, Cuba kept its distance from Western country providers. Repeated high-level visits by Russian presidents Putin and Medvedev to Havana and by Raúl Castro to Moscow underscored ties with Russia as Cuba's key arms supplier. Russia became engaged in Cuban oil exploration, and, in 2017, when Venezuela failed in its oil shipments to Cuba, Russia stepped in as a supplier. Even more reminiscent of Cuban—Soviet Cold War camaraderie were declarations by Russian defense authorities to review reopening the Lourdes intelligence base in Cuba, closed in 2000, thus signaling a potential reestablishment of a Russian military base under the nose of the United States.³⁸

Cultivating ties to Venezuela, China, and Russia did not contradict Raúl's strategy of foreign policy moderation toward the West. The result was visible improvements in Cuba's relations with individual European countries and the European Union (EU) as a whole. In 2016, the EU and Cuba eventually signed a framework agreement on cooperation and political dialogue, which replaced the "common position," in place since 1996, which was criticized by Havana as violating its sovereignty.

The most spectacular result of Cuba's shift to a moderate foreign policy was, of course, rapprochement with the United States, which became public in the December 17, 2014 announcement of the restoration of diplomatic ties. Cuba proved to be a reliable negotiator and the process went ahead surprisingly smoothly, including flag-raising ceremonies at the respective embassies and, eventually, Obama's historic visit to Havana in March 2016. Although less in the spot-light, this rapprochement included a number of confidence-building measures, including cooperation over migration control, drug traffic interdiction, and post-earthquake relief in Haiti.

From a realist perspective, restoring relations with the United States seems an economic imperative for an island nation just ninety miles off the Florida coast—all the more so, as it became foreseeable that Cuba's grand benefactor, Venezuela, was entering into an economic crisis that over the long or short haul would lead to cutbacks in its generosity toward Havana. While change in Washington was indispensable to bringing this U. S.—Cuban rapprochement about, it also took a change of heart on the part of the Havana government to achieve it. Ideologically, the confrontation with the United States had been

³⁸ David Filipov and Andrew Roth, "Russia Has Its Permanent Air Base in Syria: Now It's Looking at Cuba and Vietnam," *Washington Post* (October 7, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/07/russia-has-its-permanent-airbase-in-syria-now-its-looking-at-cubandvietnam/?utm_term=.e36edf0c17e4 (accessed April 13, 2018).

a key stabilizing factor for the Cuban regime for many years. So, even if the Cuban side did not formally make “concessions” to the United States in the negotiations, Raúl Castro incurred considerable political costs in allowing the opening of a new chapter in U. S.—Cuban relations.³⁹ In turn, even if much of the U. S. embargo legislation remained in place, this step immediately changed Cuba’s short- and long-term development prospects. Visitors from the United States flocked into Havana by the hundreds of thousands, making tourism and related activities Cuba’s only large growth sector in the midst of a recessive economy.

Raúl Castro sought to secure (or regain) regime legitimacy through economic reform. His early announcement that he “[had] been discreet and intends to stay that way” held true also for his role in international affairs. Thus, the shift toward a moderate foreign policy was part and parcel of a move toward a bureaucratic model of reform socialism, in which an overstretched foreign policy engagement would be at odds with the overriding priority of achieving legitimation through tangible material improvements for the population.⁴⁰

Yet, this strategy has had limited success. The ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States has cast doubts to what degree U. S. policy will respect the rapprochement achieved by his successor in the White House. Also, on the Cuban side, Raúl Castro seems to have been unable to keep his promises. Few production sectors have taken off. Agricultural output still is insufficient, income in the state sector is extremely low, and in the wake of the Venezuelan crisis, all kinds of shortages have reappeared. The economic reform process has all but stalled and announced projects such as constitutional reform and a more critical role for the press apparently have been shelved for the time being.

Raúl Castro declared that he would leave the country’s presidency in early 2018 (he intends to remain chairman of Cuba’s Communist Party). It is an open question to what extent his successor will continue his foreign policy mix, which combines authoritarian cooperation in some sectors with an overall realist approach of diversified relations—or whether we will see a quest for even closer ties with Cuba’s ideologically closest partners, namely Venezuela, China, and Russia.

³⁹ See Eric Hershberg and William M. LeoGrande, *A New Chapter in US–Cuba Relations: Social, Political and Economic Implications* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). If symbols matter in politics, the restoration of the Capitolio building in Havana has been a remarkable gesture. Built in 1929 as a replica of Washington’s Capitol, the building had been regarded as an iconic representation of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary “pseudo-republic” under U. S. tutelage. Under Raúl’s tenure, it not only was being renovated as a historical monument but also was designated to become, once again, the seat of the Cuban legislature.

⁴⁰ Bert Hoffmann, “Bureaucratic Socialism in Reform Mode: The Changing Politics of Cuba’s Post-Fidel Era,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1730-1744.

As to Fidel Castro, after stepping down from executive power in 2006, he retained a (limited) public presence through opinion pieces, the so-called “Reflexiones,” in the Communist Party newspaper.⁴¹ In these texts, notions of IR realism all but disappeared. Regime identity and Marxist ideology were present, but not dominant. Instead, all emphasis was on the constructive side of international politics: Third World solidarity and global humanitarian or ecological issues. A key theme also was Latin American identity and unity against U. S. dominance. At the end of Fidel’s life, regional identity mattered greatly. Tellingly, upon his death, Cuba’s state TV showed again and again the music video “Cabalgando con Fidel” (Riding Horses with Fidel), a song which became the informal mourning hymn for the revolutionary leader.⁴² The video showed those emblematic moments of Fidel’s life for which the state wanted him to be remembered. There were no images of Marx and Lenin, no brotherly visits to Moscow, and the words “socialism” or “communism” did not appear even once. Instead, the video featured footage from the guerrilla war and the revolutionary triumph, illustrations of social achievements, and prominently, Fidel’s role as international statesman. The latter, however, only in the function of Cuban Third World internationalism—at a speech at the United Nations or in a warm embrace with Nelson Mandela—and as doyen of Latin America’s left-wing leaders: in conversation with Salvador Allende, Pepe Mujica, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Evo Morales, and, in the close of the video, shoulder to shoulder in military salute with Hugo Chávez.

Conclusions

Recent scholarship has focused on the international cooperation of authoritarian regimes as a key factor to explain their resilience in the face of domestic and international pressures to democratize. The analysis of the case of socialist Cuba has tested this assumption of the centrality of authoritarian solidarity for regime survival. It is a particularly strong case, as Cuba’s experience with an authoritarian regime has lasted for almost sixty years, and, moreover, under the very nose of the United States, while subject to its promotion of democracy in its different forms, from military aggression to support of Cuba’s civil society.

The empirical study of the Cuban case has taken us through different historical phases. It has shown that cooperation based on shared regime identities, as in the alliance with the Soviet Union, indeed was crucial for regime survival during the Cold War. However, this is not the whole story.

⁴¹ For a collection of his op-ed pieces (“Reflexiones”) published since 2006 by the Communist Party newspaper *Granma*, see the newspaper website, <http://www.granma.cu/reflexiones-fidel>.

⁴² Marcel Kunzmann, *Die Rolle religiöser Symbole im politischen Prozess Kubas* [The role of religious symbols in Cuba’s political process] (Jena, Germany: Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, 2017), 36 and following. The video can be viewed on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfQAaABSLIA> (accessed on April 13, 2018).

Even at the height of bipolar Cold War politics, Cuba cultivated a broader set of international relations, most notably in the form of a Third World internationalism that relied on solidarity against the imperialism of the United States, but not necessarily on authoritarian camaraderie. To speak in the terms of the competing approaches in International Relations theory, the realist approach of aligning with the Soviet Union when faced with U. S. hostility coexisted with the constructivist thrust to push for Third World liberation, and by means of this, to create a more favorable international environment for the Cuban revolution itself.

After the collapse of Cuba's socialist overseas allies in 1989, survival became possible only because socialist Cuba maintained relations with a diversified range of partners, with the strength of bilateral relations not being a function of regime likeness. Again, realist and constructivist approaches combined. While the government in Havana adjusted to an integration into the capitalist world market and a world system that had become unipolar, it continued to dispense great energy in a constructivist effort to mobilize worldwide support for Cuba against pressures and sanctions of the United States. Again, Third World solidarity and Latin American regional identity became key factors in Cuba's foreign policy mix.

In the late 1990s, constructivist policies gained particular prominence when Fidel Castro succeeded in building an alliance with Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. Shared anti-imperialist and Latin American identity was at the root of this cooperation, not authoritarian regime solidarity. At the beginning of the alliance with Cuba, Venezuela certainly was a pluriparty democracy and only over time took on a more and more authoritarian character. Even then, Venezuela did not adopt a single-party system like Cuba's.

Cuba eventually also showed how much leadership matters. When Fidel Castro had to hand over the reins of power to his brother Raúl in 2006, this went hand in hand with a significant shift in foreign policy. Constructivist approaches ceded to international politics much more in line with the tenets of realism. Authoritarian regime solidarity has its place in specific sectors, such as security and technology cooperation with China. But again, regime survival and "democracy prevention" hinge on a diversified strategy of cooperation with countries of all different regime types—including democracies.

If we unbundle the international cooperation survival package of socialist Cuba, we find that "authoritarian solidarity" is an element of it. Yet, the key for the regime's long-term resilience is not this one element but the mix of the package.