

Havana, Moscow and Washington; a triangular relationship at a time of change?

Abstract

Since the inception of 'systematic' Russian interest in Cuba, which commenced with the Russian Revolution in November 1917, the bilateral relationship between Havana and Moscow has been part of a triangular formation due to the constant impact of the United States on it. Utilizing two contrasting paradigms in International Relations this article will examine the impact of the United States on the relationship between Havana and Moscow in three distinct periods; from the time of the Russian Revolution until the Cuban Revolution, from January 1959 until December 1991 and the post-Soviet period from 1992 until the present before analyzing the effects which the historic change in Cuban-U.S. relations since December 2014 may have for Cuban-Russian relations. It will conclude whether a triangle is still the most appropriate analogy for contemporary Cuban-Russian relations.

The Russian Revolution in November 1917 sparked 'systematic' interest in Cuba with subsequently the bilateral relationship being able to be divided into three chronological periods. These are from the time of the Russian Revolution until the Cuban Revolution, from January 1959 until December 1991 and the post-Soviet period from 1992 until the present. Each of these distinct periods has its own nuances and idiosyncrasies, but a number of commonalities exist between them. Chief amongst these is the role of the United States and particularly Washington's

relationship with Havana, as this has constantly impacted on Cuba's relationship with Moscow over the last century.¹

The result is that Cuban-Russian relations since November 1917 have constituted part of a triangular formation. However, since the unexpected announcement of 17 December 2014, historic change is occurring to Cuban-U.S. relations with diplomatic relations being restored in July 2015 and President Barrack Obama visiting Cuba in March 2016, and this article will examine what impact this has had, and is likely to have, on Havana's relationship with Moscow which presently is at its most robust politically since the end of Cuban-Soviet relations in December 1991. This is evidenced by Dimitry Medvedev having visited Cuba twice since February 2008 and Raúl Castro travelling to Moscow three times in the same period. Moreover, in July 2014 the Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Havana. Additionally, while Cuban-U.S. relations in the post-1992 era has attracted much academic focus (Morley and McGillon 2002; LeoGrande 2005; Brenner 2006; Castro 2006; Morales and Prevost 2008, 99-150) Cuban-Russian relations in the same period has become the almost the 'forgotten' relationship of international relations as focus has moved elsewhere (Sánchez Nieto 2007; Bain 2008; Bain 2010). Moreover, the concept of triangular relations and particularly the "strategic triangle" between the United States, Soviet Union and China has received considerable academic attention (Mao 2002; Kotkin 2009; Burakov 2013; Soliz de Stange 2015), but Cuban-Russian relations, which constitutes a triangle of unequal sides with Cuba being considerably less powerful than Russia and the United States, has not previously been examined over such an extended period of time in this manner. This article will fill both these lacunas and also conclude whether the

¹ In his work on asymmetry Womack has described Cuban-U.S. relations since 1959 as both the exemplar of a hostile asymmetric relationship and also when a hyperpower can simply ignore global opinion regarding a certain issue, the economic embargo against Cuba (Womack 2014, 143).

analogy of a triangle for Moscow's relationship with Havana is now outdated due to the improvement in U.S.-Cuban relations since December 2014.

Two contrasting paradigms in International Relations, realism and constructivism, will be used throughout which may appear unorthodox due to their apparent incompatibility (Wendt 1992; Onuf and Klink 1989). However, their selection results from realism's prominence during the Cold War but failure to predict its end and constructivism's subsequent emergence. This selection is appropriate due to the continuation of Cold War tension in Cuban-U.S. relations after 1991 and improvement since December 2014. This will permit the three eras to be analyzed using two divergent paradigms which will allow both the conclusion of the continuing appropriateness of the analogy of a triangle for Cuban-Russian relations to be made and also if the use of two distinct paradigms results in different conclusions being drawn. If they do not, what significance does this have for the study of the interaction of states in general?

This will be achieved by examining the three periods of the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Havana since November 1917, with specific focus being given to the role of the United States. Additionally two possible future scenarios in Havana's relationship with Washington will be postulated and the impact that they could have on Cuban-Russian relations will be examined before a final conclusion is provided. The article will begin with an examination of the analytical framework that will be used throughout. In order to maintain an impartial position a variety of primary and secondary sources including government documents, speeches, official statistics from both countries and third-party organisations and media reports will be used.

Theories of Cuban and Russian Foreign Policies

In the period from Cuban independence in 1898 to 1959 the United States dominated Cuba. On this Pérez has written,

The restrictions imposed upon the conduct of foreign relations, specifically the denial of treaty authority and debt restrictions, as well as the prohibition against the cession of national territory, were designed to minimize the possibility of Cuban international entanglements (Pérez, 2003, 143).

This may have been written about the Platt Amendment of 1901, but it is also applicable to Cuban-Soviet relations in the period from 1917 to 1959 because at this time Washington dominated Cuba's foreign policy with this being key for Havana's relationship with Moscow.

However, Cuban foreign policy changed drastically after January 1959. In *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World* Erisman has detailed five concepts that have underpinned revolutionary Cuba's foreign policy. During the Cold War many believed that the ideas of a revolutionary crusade, the belief that the Cuban government wished to spark other revolutions around the world, and the superclient/surrogate thesis, which posits that Havana merely acted on the orders of the Kremlin, were paramount in Cuban foreign policy. However, Erisman states that Cuban foreign policy was much more complex and refined to be dominated by just one of these concepts. Additionally, the importance of both has receded with the end of the Cold War (Erisman 2000, 3 & 33-36).

This is repeated with the importance of Fidelista personalismo, the distinct Cuban version of the Great Man Theory,² since Raúl Castro replaced Fidel Castro as the President of Cuba in August 2006. For more than 50 years Fidel Castro dominated Cuban politics, but even prior to 2006 and the downturn in his health, Erisman has written that Fidel Castro had to act within the constraints of the Cuban political system and could not do as he pleased. From the 1970s onwards the revolution has become increasingly institutionalized (Erisman 2000, 30-33; Montaner 1989).

Since the time of the Spanish conquest Cuba has been dominated by outside powers. Firstly Spain and then from Cuban independence until January 1959 the United States, with the thought existing that after the Cuban Revolution dependence on the U.S. was merely replaced by dependence on the Soviet Union. This has led Erisman to write about the prominence of dependency in Cuban history, but after 1959 Erisman has stated what appeared was counter dependency due to repeated Cuban attempts to reduce dependency on the Soviet Union. This resulted chiefly from the prominence of nationalism within the Revolution (Erisman 2000, 43-47).

Additionally, realism has been prominent in both revolutionary Cuba's foreign policy and the Kremlin's, which will be examined. Realism is based on the principles that sovereign states are the most important actors in international relations, the international system is inherently anarchic and subsequently antagonistic, states are unitary innate rational actors who focus on their own fixed self-interests and that due to states' primary goal being their survival they seek to maximize their power. On this Morgenthau has written, "...international politics, like all politics,

² The Great Man Theory postulates that at times a country's political system has become dominated by one person with the examples often provided being Nazi Germany with Adolf Hitler and the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin's leadership.

is a struggle for power” (Morgenthau 1955, 25). This takes a variety of forms including political control and economic dominance of one country over another. Therefore, realism is materialist in nature, focuses on the distribution of material power within a self-help system with the nature of the international system determining states’ actions.

The roots of realism are traceable to the writings of Thucydides on the Pelponnesian War, but over time it has evolved with a number of different forms emerging (Carr 2001; Morgenthau 1955). In *Theory of International Politics* Waltz has detailed the principles of defensive realism which posits that due to the inherently anarchic nature of the international system, states perceive all other states as potential threats and therefore security is the most important aspect for states. The outcome is that states are security maximizers rather than power maximizers, or as Waltz has written “...the ultimate concern of states is not power, rather security” (Waltz 1979, 4).

Regarding the effect of anarchy on states Waltz has written that states,

...are compelled to ask not “Will both of us gain?” but “Who will gain more?” If an expected gain is to be divided, say, in the ratio of two to one, one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to damage or destroy the other.

Even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation as long as each fears the other will use its increased capabilities (Waltz 1979, 105).

This is a key conundrum and often leads to the prevalence of zero sum thinking, with defensive realists believing that the answer is regularly the formation of alliances in an attempt to create a balance of power. Additionally defensive realists believe that states will acquire only enough power to safeguard their security with the outcome being the preservation of the status quo within the international system.

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* Mearsheimer elucidates the principles of offensive realism, which is based on a different understanding of the power dynamics in the anarchical international system. State security remains key, but the main difference between offensive and defensive realism is the method to achieve this with Mearsheimer writing “offensive realism parts company with defensive realism over the question of how much power states want” (Mearsheimer 2001, 21). Self-help remains the principle action but in the pursuit of security, states attempt to maximize their power at the expense of other states. Taken to its extreme is a state’s desire to have hegemonic power. (Mearsheimer 2001, 2).

Realism, or more specifically realist pragmatism, has been paramount in the actions of the Cuban ruling elite since January 1959 because at the forefront of the decision making process has been the survival of the Revolution (Erisman 2000, 25-26). More specifically this demonstrates the ideas of defensive realism, and in conjunction with counter dependency and nationalism, has impacted considerably on Cuba’s relationship with the Kremlin since the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Russia’s relationship with the outside world since the czarist period has been dominated by a number of key issues. White has written of the importance of the wish for warm-water harbours and the question of Russia’s role in the world (White 1991, 179-180). Additionally, Caldwell and Tsygankov believe that the Kremlin’s perception of its national security and foreign policy has been underpinned by an inferiority complex due to perceived backwardness and feelings of vulnerability along its borders (Tsygankov 2006, 6; Caldwell 2007, 280-283).

During the Soviet era Marxist-Leninist ideology dictated both Soviet society and also its foreign policy, but due to the reasons outlined above, realism was also of paramount importance

to Moscow's foreign policy. Grigor Suny has written that this has been the case since November 1917 (Grigor Suny 2007, 57). This was central to Soviet interest in the Cuban Revolution, and retains importance in the twenty-first century with the emergence of the "Putin Doctrine" in Russian foreign policy, which will be detailed.

As stated, constructivism evolved due to the failure of realism to predict the end of the Cold War (Wendt 1992; Walt 1998; Snyder 2004). Constructivism also believes that states are the most influential actors in international relations, but unlike realism states do not have inherent national interests and their behavior is not determined by the structure of international politics. Simply the anarchic state of the international system fails to explain if states are friendly or hostile towards one another. As Wendt has famously written "anarchy is what you make of it" (Wendt 1992, 395). Contrary to realism "Constructivists see the facts of international politics as not reflective of an objective, material reality but an intersubjective, or social, reality (Barkin 2003, 326). Moreover, Wendt has stated

A fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. States act differently towards enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not. Anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which is which. U.S. military power has different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their similar "structural" positions, just as British missiles have a different significance for the United States than do Soviet missiles (Wendt 1992, 396-397).

Therefore, it is not the international system per se which determines how states act, but rather how states perceive the international system and other states within it. This perception is

socially constructed with states acting on the basis of identities and interests. Subsequently culture, history, the interaction of states and the importance of ideas are all influential (Walt 1998, 40-41; Snyder 2004, 600). Constructivism therefore posits that the end of the Cold War occurred because "...Mikhail Gorbachev revolutionized Soviet foreign policy because he embraced new ideas such as 'common security'" (Walt 1998, 41), with consequently the constructed tension between the Soviet Union and United States receding.

A number of authors believe that constructivism was not only important for Moscow's foreign policy in the final years of the Soviet Union, but even from the earliest czarist era. Grigor Suny, who as detailed has written of the importance of realism in Russian foreign policy, has argued that a constructivist interpretation can also be used (Grigor Suny 2007, 35-76. DeBardelebena 2012). Tsygankov theorizes that a common theme in Russian foreign policy since Peter the Great has been the creation of a Russian national identity with regards Western Europe and therefore constructivism has been significant within it (Tsygankov 2006, 4-8).

November 1917 to January 1959

The political and economic domination of Cuba by the United States in the early twentieth century, on which Farber has written "The situation essentially represented de facto if not fully de jure colonialism" (Farber 2006, 71), was the adjuvant for Soviet interest in Cuba. Politically this was evident with the aforementioned Platt Amendment with the reciprocity agreements of 1903 and 1934 demonstrating Washington's economic 'influence' (Thomas 1971, 469; LaFeber 1989, 72). Writing about the economic situation Pérez has stated

Low wages and weak labor organisations, persisting legacies of the colonial system, offered additional inducements to North American investment. These were not preferred conditions for foreign investors – they were requisite ones, and as such they formed part of the economic environment which the United States was committed to creating and maintaining. It was not sufficient to have preferential access to local markets and local resources. It was necessary also as a corollary condition to depress wages, prevent strikes, and discourage labour organizing (Pérez 2003, 160).

The result was the perception of Cuba as a ‘hot bed’ of labour activity due to the subsequent labour radicalism and strikes that materialized. Carr has described the August 1933 coup as “...the most substantial revolutionary opportunity seen in Latin America before the 1950s” (Carr 1998, 247-248). The possibility of revolutionary success in Cuba appeared to be greater than elsewhere in Latin America with this occurring due to unforeseen consequences of U.S. domination of Cuba. This perception increased in 1942 when Juan Marinello and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez were appointed to Fulgencio Batista’s cabinet, becoming the first Communist Party members in Latin America to be government ministers. (Sweig 2002, 126)

In the 1920s the Third International, or Comintern, showed interest in Cuba demonstrated both at the Comintern’s Sixth Congress in 1928 when Cuba became a candidate member of the Central Bureau of the organisation and also by documents housed in the Comintern archive. In early 1928 the Comintern sent a number of letters to the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) detailing the tactics it should follow.³

³ Adibekov et al 1997, 140-146. Letter from Secretariat of the Communist International to PCC, 5 January 1928, 1. Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI) RGASPI Folio 495 Opus 105, 10.

The result was that any revolutionary success in Cuba could have negative consequences for the United States due to the level of U.S. investment in Cuba, the interlinked nature of the two economies and subsequent Cuban economic dependence on the U.S. Moscow could utilise this to counter anti-Soviet U.S. policy elsewhere in the world, which included attempts to destroy the Bolshevik Revolution in its infancy, the non-recognition of the Soviet Union until 1933 and the eventual onset of the Cold War in the mid to late 1940s. Therefore defensive realism was key for the interest which the Soviet Union took in Cuba in this period, in accordance with Grigor Suny's aforementioned citation of the prevalence of realist thinking in the Soviet leadership from November 1917.

However, anti-Soviet U.S. policy was also significant in Moscow and Washington having very different interpretations of the international system, with this being exacerbated by the two countries contrasting political ideologies and the Bolsheviks desire to create a radically different international political order via the Comintern. This has connotations with Wendt's previous cited quote on why countries become enemies, and therefore a constructivist argument can be used to explain the animosity between Moscow and Washington in this period. Additionally, this is in accordance with Grigor Suny, DeBardelebena and Tsygankov's assertions of the significance of constructivism in Russian foreign policy, with, as stated, Tsygankov theorizing that this has been the case since czarist times.

Moreover, this desire for a radically different international order and dislike of U.S. policies was shared with a number of people in Cuba, which as stated had manifested itself in labor radicalism on the island. This explains both their interest in the Soviet Union and the Comintern's in Cuba. Subsequently a constructivist argument can be made for this Soviet interest in Cuba.

These two radically different interpretations can also explain the opening of the Institute of Cuban-Soviet Cultural Exchange in Havana in the summer of 1945, and its publication of the monthly journal *Cuba y la URSS* until the spring of 1952. The Soviet Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) was crucial for both the institute and the material published in this journal (Stern 1999, 101). This journal and the activities of the institute would appeal to radical thinking Cubans, who perceived the international order similarly to the Kremlin's with consequently a constructivist interpretation being able to be utilized.

However, due to the political aspect of VOKS detailed by Stern above, a different but realist argument can also be made because any gains made by this institute would have the effect of increasing Soviet political influence in Cuba which Moscow could potentially utilize to counter anti-Soviet global U.S. policy. More specifically this would imply the significance of defensive realism.

Diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Cuba existed between 10 October 1942 and early April 1952 (El Mundo 11 October 1942, 1). The political role of the United States was crucial, demonstrated by the fact that Maxim Litvinov, the former Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, was both the first Soviet charge d'affaires to Cuba, while crucially remaining the Soviet ambassador in Washington. Moreover, he presented his credentials as Soviet charge d'affaires to Cuba not in Havana, but rather at the Cuban embassy in Washington (Bohemia October 25 1942, 31).

The shadow of the United States was also important in the break in diplomatic relations. Moscow severed relations due to the treatment of Soviet diplomats entering Cuba (Pravda 5 April 1952, 3), but the coup of March 1952 which had returned Batista to power was key. In

April 1952 Batista would still have been cementing his authority as Cuban President and due to the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. detailed above, Washington's backing was crucial for this. In the Cold War setting of the 1950s strong actions against the Soviet Union were the perfect illustration to Washington of the new Cuban President's anti-Soviet, and thus pro-U.S. policies with this helping to provide Batista with the U.S. backing which was crucial for his power base on the island.

A constructivist argument can be made for Soviet interest in Cuba in this period due to ideational beliefs and a common perception of the international system between Soviet officials and radical thinking Cubans. However, realism, or more specifically defensive realism, can provide a contrasting explanation. Constructivism and realism may be divergent paradigms, but what was crucial for both was the nature of Cuban-U.S. relations in this period because without them the Kremlin would not have taken interest in Cuba.

January 1959 to December 1991

Many of the same reasons outlined above which were important for stirring Soviet interest in Cuba before 1959, in combination with the timing of the Cuban Revolution at the height of the Cold War, were also of fundamental importance for the relationship which developed between Moscow and Havana after January 1959. The victory of the Cuban Revolution was a seismic shock to both Cuban-U.S. relations, as the new government in Havana wished to fundamentally change its relationship with Washington, and also the western hemisphere in general. Moreover, as the Cuban Revolution became ever more radical, Cuban-U.S. relations deteriorated; conversely only increasing Soviet interest in it. In addition, the

victory of the Cuban Revolution also coincided with the Kremlin taking a greater interest in the Developing World (Light 1988, 99-124). Furthermore, it countered Chinese accusations of revisionism and Cuban-Soviet relations were aided by the close personal affinity that quickly blossomed between Fidel Castro and Nikhita Khrushchev (Bain 2008, 23).

However, it was the Cold War setting in which these events were played out and specifically the ideological stand-off between the Soviet Union and the United States that was key for Soviet interest in the Cuban Revolution. Due to Cuba's geographical location and its shared history with the United States that has been detailed, a revolution of the nature of the Cuban one could not have taken place in a more advantageous location for the Kremlin. The Soviet Union could therefore utilize its relationship with Cuba to increase its power vis-a-vis the United States. Consequently, offensive realism appeared important, heightened by the idea that Cuba was acting as a beachhead for further Soviet penetration into Latin America (Morley 1987, 135-162; Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005, 33-58). However, defensive realism was paramount because Moscow could use the burgeoning relationship with Cuba to counter U.S. aggression against the Soviet Union elsewhere in the world, mirroring the argument in the previous section of this article.

The Cuban government were also drawn to the Soviet Union with both the Soviet economic and political models being appealing for their desire to create a new society on the island (Bain 2007, 20-21). However, it was the new government's wish to radically alter its relationship with Washington that was of fundamental importance. This was in no small part due to the prominence of Cuban nationalism within the Revolution which partially resulted from the nature of Cuban-U.S. relations from the time of Cuban independence. Regarding this Fidel Castro would later comment, "We would not in any event have ended up as close friends. The

U.S. had dominated us too long. The Cuban Revolution was determined to end that domination” (Smith 1987, 144.). This situation was further complicated by U.S. aggression towards Cuba, most infamously demonstrated in April 1961 with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.

Defensive realism was evident in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs invasion with Castro’s announcement of December 1961 that he, and thus the Cuban Revolution, were Marxist-Leninist. It is perceived that this was done in an attempt to gain security guarantees from Moscow, essential due to U.S. aggression towards Cuba (Shearman 1987, 10-11).

However a constructivist argument can also be made because as Wendt stated in his earlier cited quote, U.S. military strength was perceived very differently in Cuba than in Canada despite their similar “structural” positions. This resulted chiefly from the Cuban ruling elite’s constructed history of Cuban-U.S. relations which underpinned their desire to fundamentally change Havana’s relationship with Washington. This was exacerbated by U.S. hostility towards the Cuban Revolution, with, as detailed, this hostility being repeated towards the Soviet Union. When this is combined with their shared ideology after Castro’s December 1961 proclamation, the Cuban and Soviet governments perceived the international system in a similar fashion due to ideational beliefs. Therefore, constructivism provides an argument for Cuban-Soviet relations, which would endure for the next 30 years.

Over time other pressures would impact on the bilateral relationship. This included Moscow being unable to cut its ties with Havana due to the effects of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the financial implications for the Kremlin if the relationship was severed due to its colossal economic investment in Cuba, with this being wasted if the Cuban Revolution failed. This

investment was both monetary and also in the form of Soviet specialists working in Cuba. (*Sevodnya* 13 Jan 1995, 3. Lavrentyev 1985).

Moreover, Cuban-Soviet trade increased dramatically in this period totaling almost 10 billion pesos by the mid-1980s (*Anuario Estadístico de Cuba* 1990). Bilateral trade was dominated by Soviet exports to Cuba with Azicri describing the Soviet Union as “the lifeline of the economy” (Azicri 2000: 21). Trade with the Soviet Union provided economic security for the Cuban Revolution in the face of the U.S. economic embargo. The level of both Cuban-Soviet trade and Soviet investment in the Cuban Revolution would not only have been wasted if the Revolution failed, but it also made Cuba’s relationship with the Soviet Union very different from those which Moscow had with the rest of Latin America and the other socialist states. Cuba appeared to be the ‘first among equals’ in the socialist world. Moreover, it would also create a legacy that would continue to impact on the relationship in the post-Soviet era.

In addition, as afore-stated, Cuban counter dependency would also impact considerably on the bilateral relationship as throughout the period from the early 1960s until 1991 Havana would continuously try and reduce its dependency on the Soviet Union, most notably in the “secret speech” which Castro gave to the politburo of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in January 1968 (Blight & Brenner, 2002 33-76).

However, the effect of both Havana and Moscow’s relationships with the United States detailed above would remain central to Cuban-Soviet relations throughout the period until 1991 with Cuba remaining important for propaganda reasons in the early 1980s with the onset of the second Cold War. This only receded when the bilateral relationship came to a sudden end with the disintegration of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991.

As with the earlier period, realism was important for the relationship. Due to Soviet assertiveness, offensive realism would appear to have resonance, but conversely it was defensive realism that was fundamental for Soviet interest in Cuba and Cuban interest in the Soviet Union. Once again the United States was central to this. The Kremlin could use its relationship with Cuba to counter anti-Soviet U.S. policy on a global scale while the Soviet Union provided security guarantees for the Cuban Revolution in the face of U.S. aggression. However, another result of U.S. hostility towards both Cuba and the Soviet Union, and their shared Marxist-Leninist ideology, was that Havana and Moscow had similar constructed conceptions of the international system and the United States role within it. Subsequently constructivism provides an alternative argument for Cuban-Soviet relations. Over time other pressures impacted on the bilateral relationship, but in this period the triangular nature of Cuban-Soviet relations due to the effect of the United States on it remained very firmly in place.

Post 1992

The United States would continue to cast a long shadow over the relationship that developed between Moscow and Havana from the ashes of Cuban-Soviet relations in the early to mid-1990s with Russian foreign policy undergoing significant change in these years. In the early to mid-1990s Moscow's foreign policy became much more western looking when compared to the Soviet era. Significantly, Boris Yeltsin's government's repeated Gorbachev's willingness to embrace new ideas and concepts which, as detailed, was central to the end of the Cold War. Yeltsin's willingness to do this impacted on Cuban-Russian relations, most noticeably in the removal of Marxist-Leninism from the relationship. Constructivism therefore continued to affect

the relationship. Additionally, it was hoped that this change in foreign policy would result in aid and assistance from the United States in the Russian economic transition. It appeared that the Liberal Westernizers had won the debate which had raged regarding Russian foreign policy (Light, 1996, 33-100; Malcolm & Pravda 1996, 537-552; Kubicek 1999-2000, 547-550), with this also having consequences for Moscow's relationship with Havana. On this Professor Eugenio Larin, Director of Latin American Studies at the Institute of Cold War History of the Russian Academy of Sciences has written, "In order to improve political ties Washington demanded of B.H. Yeltsin that he must cut ties with Cuba. This course of action dominated the 1990s" (Larin 2007, 164). Simply, this prevented cordial relations between Russia and Cuba. The Cold War may have ended, but the triangular nature of Cuban-Russian relations remained intact.

However, from the mid-1990s further change took place in Russian foreign policy, evidenced in December 1995 when Yevgeny Primakov became Russian Foreign Minister. Primakov believed much more in "spheres of influence" than his predecessor Andrei Kozyrev who had been closely associated with the pro-U.S. foreign policy of the early to mid-1990s.

A resurgence in nationalism within Russian society was key for this alteration. This occurred for a number of reasons with many Russians believing that the Kremlin's western looking foreign policy had failed, and they blamed the West and organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for the economic problems which continued to engulf the country (Kanet 2011, 204-206). Furthermore, Russian nationalism had been gravely offended by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to the east and also over the treatment that their fellow Serbs in the former Yugoslavia had received from this organisation. Regarding NATO bombing of Belgrade in March 1999 Yeltsin has called this "undisguised

aggression” (Rossiiskaya gazeta 26 March 1999, 2) and he also commented that, “...the Kosovo crisis increased the anti-Western sentiment in society” (Yeltsin 2000, 271). This Russian perception of NATO action and expansion to the east has connotations with Wendt's aforementioned quote of the way in which U.S. military power is perceived in Canada when compared to Cuba. Moreover, this also resulted in Russia and Cuba having a similar perspicacity of the international system and the role of the United States within it, the Cuban perception is detailed below. A constructivist argument can therefore be used to explain Cuban-Russian relations.

Additionally, this change in Moscow's foreign policy resulted in a Russian desire for a return to prominence in international relations, having been peripheral for a number of years. Moreover, Moscow also wished a more multipolar world than the one which had materialised in the 1990s. In the twenty-first century this wish has continued with crucially Putin strengthening relations with many former Soviet allies. The outcome is that many believe a “Putin Doctrine” has emerged in Russian foreign policy (Aron 2013). The “Putin Doctrine” wants Russia to return to being a great power, wishes a multipolar world, is expansionist by nature but is ultimately underpinned by defensive realism due to its assertiveness being an attempt to garner support for the Russian government (Aron 2013, 2; Shevtsova 2015, 3).

An improved relationship with Havana was an important part of this process and illustrated to Washington that Moscow once again had a global influence. It appeared as if the geostrategic importance of Cuba for the Kremlin was increasing. This is not to suggest it returned to the level of the Cold War, but Moscow did wish to “tickle the Americans' underbelly” with closer relations with Cuba achieving this aim (Sosnovsky, 1996, 5). Again, this returns to the triangular nature of Moscow's relations with Havana.

In the early 1990s Cuba faced the realities of a new world order without its socialist trading partners while continuing to face hostility emanating from the U.S. Consequently Cuban foreign policy underwent significant change. Regarding this, Kirk has written, “The greatest single task in terms of foreign policy facing the Cuban government in the early 1990s, however, was how to keep the traditional (self-declared) enemy at bay” (Kirk, 2006, 334). Erisman has written that this was achieved by the creation of greater economic and political space that resulted from a diversification of Cuban foreign policy (Erisman 2006, 3-5). Furthermore, Feinsilver has written

...that Cuba’s foreign policy initiatives have been geared toward ensuring Cuba’s security in an adverse geopolitical situation through support of progressive governments and the creation of a Third World constituency, to gain not just diplomatic support in international organisations but also economic or trade benefits (Feinsilver, 1993, 13).

Domínguez has written that Cuba employed a four part strategy to achieve this; attempts to balance the U.S were made due to a neo-realist perspective, the possibility of economic dependence appearing was negated by a diversification of economic policy, cooperation with Washington was desired with regards common security issues as was a wish for a “constituency abroad” particularly in the global South (Domínguez, 2008, 203). The outcome is that all the changes listed above have been underpinned by the principles of defensive realism and realist pragmatism as they have helped the Revolution endure this highly difficult period with the continuing aggression emanating from Washington at this time being central.

Feinsilver’s previously cited quote is important for the upturn in Cuban-Russian relations which took place from the mid-1990s onwards. Russia may not be part of the Developing World,

but the upturn in Havana's relationship with Moscow was not contrary to this process. Crucially Russia was able to provide backing for the Cuban government in various UN forums. Since 1995 Moscow has again voted with Cuba at the Conventions on Human Rights held in Geneva. On 26 July 1996 the Kremlin was critical of both the UN resolution and also the actions of the exile "Brothers to the Rescue" group at the UN meeting in New York City to discuss the shooting down of the two planes belonging to this exile organisation by the Cuban airforce in February 1996 (United Nations 1996).

Additionally, Russia also condemned the Helms Burton Act which was passed into law in the aftermath of this incident which was not just extraterritorial in general, but also contained a section which focused exclusively on Russia's continued use in the 1990s of the Lourdes listening post on the outskirts of Havana. Regarding this law a Russian Foreign Ministry declaration stated,

"We confirm our intention to develop and broaden mutually beneficial cooperation with Cuba as well as sectors of mutual interest, particularly in the commercial and economic sphere" (Granma International 17 April 1996, 13).

This was of paramount importance for Cuba. Russian criticism of the U.S. embargo against Cuba continues even after December 2014 and the improvement in Cuban-U.S. relations (Lavrov September 2015). The situation which has emerged is also in accordance with Erisman's beliefs that Cuban foreign policy was diversified in attempts to create greater economic and political space. Moreover, this also demonstrates Domínguez's ideas that since 1992 Cuba wished to both balance the United States on the global arena and also acquire a "constituency abroad". Once

again the United States continued to impact on bilateral Cuban-Russian relations. In short, the triangular nature of Cuban-Russian relations remained in place.

A legacy from the 1959 to 1991 period, which included the fact that it was both cheaper and easier for Cuba to buy Russian oil, Russia Cuban sugar and that Cuba required spare parts for the Soviet era machinery which continued to be used on the island at this time was key for Russia being Cuba's chief trading partner in 1996 (Anuario Estadístico 2000, VI-5-VI-7). Simply the colossal Soviet investment in the Cuban economy was being wasted and a Russian desire to address this was key for the trade which took place (Glasov, Kara-Murza and Batchikov 2007: 111; Bain 2008, 83-106). Russia is no longer Cuba's chief trading partner and in the twenty-first century bilateral trade is at a low level, but the political will for this to increase exists in both countries. This was demonstrated in February 2013 when Medvedev was in Cuba and he stated. "Regrettably, trade between Russia and Cuba is not high as it should be... There are good investment plans, and investment is developing despite its small volume. I am sure it will grow and our cooperation will expand to many new areas" (Medvedev 2013). Moreover, in July 2014 an agreement on the Cuban Soviet era debt was agreed as was a memorandum of mutual understanding between Cuba's Ministry of Industries and Russia's Ministry of Industry and Commerce. (Granma 12 July 2014, 5).

Cuba's motives for an increase in trade with Russia returns to the ideas of defensive realism, realist pragmatism and the Cuban Revolutionary elite's desire to avoid forms of dependency appearing as bilateral trade with Russia could temper a possible Cuban economic reliance on Venezuela. Cuban-Venezuelan trade constitutes almost 50% of Cuba's global trade turnover (Anuario Estadístico 2013, 8.4). With uncertainty surrounding Havana's relationship

with Caracas due to the internal Venezuelan political situation this may also prove somewhat judicious.

The political aspect of the relationship remains vital with both Havana and Moscow not only having a shared political outlook on various global issues, but also backing each other in their respective disputes with Washington. As detailed, Moscow continues to criticize the U.S. embargo against Cuba with in September 2015 this even reaching the floor of the United Nations (Lavrov September 2015). In 2008 Cuba backed Russia in the UN regarding the situation in Georgia with Havana describing Georgia as the “aggressor” (Castro 10 August 2008). Moreover, Cuba has also given very public backing to the Kremlin over the Crimean situation in early 2014, evidenced on 27 March 2014 when Cuba was one of 11 countries to vote against the UN resolution condemning the Russian referendum held in the Crimea (www.un.org 2014). Furthermore, during his speech to the 7th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in April 2016 Raúl Castro criticized the expansion of NATO to the edge of Russia’s borders (Castro 2016).

As with the two previous areas, a constructivist argument can be made for understanding Cuban-Russian relations in the post-1992 period, resulting from ideational beliefs and a shared perception of the international system and the United States preeminence within it. However, a realist argument can also be made. Continued aggression emanating from the United States towards Cuba resulted in defensive realism and the bilateral relationship with Russia being paramount for Cuba. Furthermore, the relationship retained significance for Russia after the changes in Russian foreign policy that took place in the mid-1990s that eventually heralded the “Putin doctrine,” which is underpinned by defensive realism. A legacy from the 1959 to 1991 era of the relationship was also crucial for it in the post 1992 period. However, even in the early

1990s when Cuban-Russian relations had endured a downturn, the Kremlin's desire for closer relations with the U.S. had been an integral part of this. Prior to December 2014 the triangular formation of Cuban-Russian relations due to the impact of the United States had remained in place in the post-Cold War era. The aim of this article is to examine what impact the historic change in U.S.-Cuban relations since December 2014 has had for Cuban-Russian relations and the triangular formation of the relationship.

Scenario 1 – Elements of Antagonism Remain

The momentous change in Cuban-U.S. relations has occurred in part due to Obama appearing to embrace new ideas regarding the Cuban Revolution; in his speech on 17 December 2014 Obama called for the contested history of U.S.-Cuban relations to be cast aside, with Washington also perceiving Cuba as less of a security threat (White House 17 December 2014). This has similarities to the afore cited quote on the end of the Cold War and Gorbachev's role in it. Constructivism continues to impact Cuban-U.S. relations. However, despite this historic change the first scenario posited is that a complete normalization in relations takes time and elements of antagonism remain. This includes compensation for land and property expropriated in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution remaining unpaid, the difficulties in ending the U.S economic embargo⁴ and the return of the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay to Cuba. Simply 50 years of a contested history will not easily be resolved. This is something which both Obama

⁴ On 27 October 2015 the United States voted against the UN resolution calling for the U.S. embargo against Cuba to be ended (UN 27 October 2015). Some had hoped that the US may abstain in this vote as a way to try and speed the end of the embargo.

and Raúl Castro acknowledged during Obama's trip to Cuba in March 2016 (White House 21 March 2016).

With these areas of contestation remaining, changes in U.S. Cuba policy since December 2014 could be perceived in a similar manner to elements of the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 and its Track II diplomacy, which increased links between the two peoples, but ultimately was designed to cause the demise of the Cuban Revolution (Domínguez 2012, 36-38). Even in his landmark 17 December 2014 speech Obama spoke of change within Cuba when he said "But I am convinced that through a policy of engagement, we can more effectively stand up for our values and help the Cuban people help themselves as they move into the twenty-first century" (White House 17 December 2014). Additionally while in Cuba Obama spoke of the importance of people-to-people ties (White House 21 March 2016). Significantly in April 2016 Raúl Castro spoke of change in U.S. Cuban policy since December 2014 and that ultimately "...the goals remain the same, only the means are being modified" (Castro 2016). The Russian perception of U.S. motives for the normalization of relations with Cuba is Washington's desire to repair its 'broken' relationship with the rest of Latin America due to its Cuba policies. Pointedly, comparisons to Ronald Reagan's attempts to engage with the Soviet Union in the early 1980s have also been made. (Pagliery 4 July 2015) Therefore this scenario would suggest that Cuban-Russian relations would remain similar to those of their present form as Russia will continue to provide support for Cuban in its relationship with the United States.

However, even if Washington's motives in the second decade of the twenty-first century are not so Machiavellian should forms of antagonism remain in the relationship with Havana Cuban-Russian relations will not undergo significant change, evidenced by Moscow continuing to criticize the U.S. embargo against Cuba. Moreover U.S.-Russian relations remain strained

primarily due to the situation in the Ukraine and their differing positions on the Syrian conflict. Cuban-Russian relations will therefore remain politically mutually beneficial for both countries as had been the case in the post-Cold War period, especially with their respective relations with Washington. The result is that the arguments made in the previous section of this article that although radically different in nature, both a constructivist and realist argument continue to be applicable for Cuba-Russian relations in this first scenario with the United States remaining key.

Scenario 2 – A Complete Normalization of Relations

The second scenario postulated is that U.S.-Cuban relations completely normalize and all areas of antagonism disappear. As argued throughout this article the role of the United States has been a constant factor in the relationship between Moscow and Havana since November 1917, but if this situation materialized this key element in Cuban-Russian relations would no longer impinge the relationship. This would suggest that Cuban-Russian relations would resemble any other relationship between a large EuropeAsian power and a Caribbean island. However, this will not materialise due to the history of relations between Moscow and Havana over the last 100 years, and particularly from 1959 to 1991. As previously argued, a colossal legacy from this era has continued to impact the relationship in the post-Soviet era with it remaining in place in the twenty-first century. A number of Cubans speak Russian and there is also a number of people on the island of mixed Russian and Cuban heritage (Loss 2013). Furthermore, both the Russian and Cuban governments have made increasing reference to the longevity of the relationship most noticeably in January 2009 when Raúl Castro was in Moscow. During this trip he visited the permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War to Jorge and Aldo Vivo and

Enrique Vilar who fought for the Red Army during World War 2 (El Ruso Cubano 2009). The result is that the constructed history of the relationship retains significance and therefore also ideational beliefs due to their continuous importance throughout the long history of the relationship which the two governments are celebrating. As asserted in the previous sections of this article this has led to a constructivist interpretation of the relationship with consequently constructivism theorizing that Cuba and Russia are likely to remain friends within the international system. Furthermore, Cuban-Russian relations will always be different from Russia relations with other Latin American countries due to their shared history of the 1959 to 1991 period.

Additionally, it would be contrary to both the idea that since the 1990s the Cuban government have wished greater political space and also their traditional desire to avoid forms of dependency appearing, as argued throughout this article both are ultimately underpinned by defensive realism, if the importance of Cuban-Russian relations for the Cuban government suddenly receded as its relationship with Washington improved. Again, the outcome is that Cuban-Russian relations will remain similar to their present form for the foreseeable future and not what may be expected despite the key role of the United States receding in significance.

The two scenarios postulated are radically different in nature, but crucially the outcome of both is similar; Cuban-Russian relations remain important for both countries and the relationship does not return to that which may be expected to exist between a large EuropeAsian power and a Caribbean island. This materialises whether a constructivist or realist analysis, although intrinsically different, is used. Moreover, the importance of the impact of the United States on the relationship may recede, but it will not completely disappear. Additionally, the history of relations between Moscow and Havana, and the subsequent legacy, will continue to

impact on the relationship for the foreseeable future. The outcome is that the analogy of a triangle may no longer be the most appropriate due to the improvement in U.S.-Cuban relations with the question remaining of what is the most appropriate analogy due to the continuing role of the United States on Cuban-Russian relations.

Conclusion

Over the last century a number of pressures have affected the relationship between Havana and Moscow, but the United States and its relationship with Cuba has been central to the interest that Moscow and Havana have taken in each other and the relationship that developed, and continues to exist, between the two countries. Crucially, this has permitted two intrinsically different analyses to be conducted; constructivist and realist. However, both analyses allow similar conclusions to be drawn although they have been formulated by different means. Consequently, Cuban-Russian relations would suggest that to fully understand a bilateral relationship, focus should be given to the possible similar conclusions of constructivism and realism rather than their inherent differences. This has resonance for the study of bilateral relationships in general. Moreover, it also appears to be in accordance with the idea of “realist constructivism” elucidated by Barkin (Barkin 2003).

However, as Cuban-U.S. relations normalize, Cuban-Russian relations will not return to those which might be expected to exist between a large EuropeAsian power and a Caribbean island even as this key element in the relationship recedes in significance. This is for the simple reason of the longevity of the relationship between Havana and Moscow with ironically the United States having been central to both its creation and continuing existence in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Moreover, due to the shared history and geographical proximity of Cuba and the United States, the U.S. will always have some impact on Cuban-

Russian relations. However, as Cuban-U.S. relations normalize, the rigidity of a triangle may no longer be the most appropriate analogy. Instead Cuban-Russian relations, which will remain important for both countries for the foreseeable future, may now form part of a circular relationship due to the continuing impact of the United States on it.

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