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Mervyn J. Bain 

ABSTRACT

This article examines Moscow-Havana relations from the Russian Revolution in November 1917 to the present to inform debates on (1) continuities from history impacting contemporary Russian foreign policy; (2) the assumption that before the Cuban Revolution of 1959 Moscow suffered from ‘geographical fatalism’ concerning Latin America; (3) contemporary Moscow-Havana relations; and (4) asymmetrical triangles in international relations. A rigorous historical qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources is used to examine the periods November 1917–January 1959, 1959–1991, and 1992 onwards. Both realism and constructivism are utilised throughout. Acting as a bridge between historical research and the study of international relations this article posits that in each period Moscow and Havana’s individual relationships with Washington were key to Moscow-Havana relations. Continuities from history for the contemporary relationship are to both the November 1917–January 1959 era and the 1959–1991 period. Consequently, since 1917 an asymmetrical triangle comprising Moscow, Havana, and Washington has principally existed. Aiding its originality this article postulates that a ‘stable marriage’ with the most powerful member of an asymmetrical triangle (Washington) being the ‘pariah’ can become the norm. This finding has resonance for global politics and the behaviour of regional super-powers within their respective region.

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Introduction

Throughout Russian/Soviet history much academic attention has focused on the importance of the past in Moscow’s engagement with the world and the existence of commonalities between different historical eras.¹ Further focus has been given to the deterioration in relations with the West and the possibility of a new cold war.² Moreover, on 24 February 2022 concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine US President Joe Biden said of his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, ‘He wants to, in fact, reestablish the former Soviet Union. That’s what this is about.’³ Moscow’s contemporary relationship with Havana, at its most robust politically since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, is no different. Currently, scrutiny is being given to the legacy of the period of the bilateral relationship between the emergence of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union when relations were at their strongest.⁴ This article answers the question of what the underpinning rationale for Moscow’s attention in

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Havana, and Havana's interest in Moscow was and is. The bilateral relationship is examined not from January 1959 but rather from the Russian Revolution in November 1917 until the present. Three distinct periods are analysed (November 1917–January 1959, January 1959–December 1991, and January 1992 to the present) with focus being given to diplomatic relations, bilateral trade, and cultural links.

This article's originality derives from its supposition that Moscow's attention in Cuba commenced from soon after November 1917 rather than January 1959. Therefore, contrary to previous scholarship, it is posited that Moscow did not suffer from 'geographical fatalism' before 1959 due to US dominance of Latin America.⁵ Key for this initial attention and subsequent mutual interest in all three periods detailed above was Moscow and Havana's individual relationships with Washington. Highlighting the constancy of the past impacting contemporary Russian-Cuban relations. It is also theorized that (1) since November 1917 Moscow and Havana have principally been part of an asymmetric triangular relationship consisting in terms of descending power: Washington, Moscow, and Havana; (2) the triangle has predominantly displayed a 'stable marriage' with Washington being the 'pariah'; and (3) a 'stable marriage' can become the norm even when the 'pariah' is the most powerful member of the triangle and not considerably weaker than the 'pivot' as previously argued.⁶

This article acting as a bridge between historical research and the study of international relations informs four distinct literatures. Firstly, the general literature on the importance of history to contemporary Russian foreign policy as it illuminates the historical underpinnings of current Moscow-Havana relations with the rationale for engagement having a consistency since the time of the Russian Revolution. Secondly, the idea that before the Cuban Revolution Moscow suffered from 'geographical fatalism' concerning Latin America, thirdly, the literature on contemporary Moscow-Havana relations, and fourthly, the debate concerning asymmetrical triangular relationships. It is posited that the US as the global hyperpower has/can simply ignore the Soviet Union/Russia and Cuba, and Washington has no incentive to try and reconfigure the asymmetrical triangle. Important for understanding other asymmetrical triangles in international relations.

A rigorous historical qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources is used with both realism and constructivism utilised throughout. The selection of these theories, the sources used, methods utilised and the literature on asymmetric triangles are detailed in the next section of this article. The second section summarises Havana-Moscow relations from the time of the Russian Revolution in November 1917 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The third section concentrates on the bilateral relationship from 1992 onwards due to this article's examination of both continuities from history impacting contemporary Russian foreign policy and current Moscow-Havana relations. Each of the three distinct periods of the bilateral relationship detailed above are analysed using the analytical frameworks specified in the opening section of the article. The second section will also include a concise summary of the not insignificant attention which the Third International, or Comintern, paid in pre-1959 Cuba. The Bolsheviks had created the Comintern in March 1919 to herald revolutions elsewhere in the world.⁷ The fourth segment, the discussion, articulates the permanency of an asymmetrical triangle with the most powerful country being the 'pariah.'

Materials and methods

This article uses a variety of different sources to conduct a rigorous qualitative historical analysis of bilateral Moscow-Havana relations. These sources include from the Cuban National Archive, the José Martí National Library, and previously unseen documents in the archive of the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba (MINREX) in Havana.⁸ Documents from the book *Rossiiia-Kuba, 1902–2002, dokumenty i materialy*, published jointly by the Russian and Cuban Foreign Ministries, are also utilised. Documents from the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA)

Collections at the Tamiment Library at New York University are used due to the importance of the CPUSA in 1920s and 1930s Cuba. Additionally, sources from the Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI), the National State Library of Russia, and the Russian National Historical Library, are utilised. Speeches, official statistics from both countries, third-party organisations and media reports, and appropriate secondary sources are also used.

Two divergent paradigms in International Relations, realism, or more specifically defensive realism, and constructivism are used throughout. Realism's appropriateness results from it being the primary theory within International Relations with realist thinking dominating geopolitics during the Cold War. Furthermore, Walt has articulated its continued resonance in the post-Cold War world.⁹ Realism, and specifically defensive realism remains key for both the emergence of a 'Putin doctrine' within Moscow's foreign policy in the twenty-first century and understanding revolutionary Cuban foreign policy.¹⁰

Constructivism has been selected due to the attention which it awards to countries' indigenous histories and sensitivities with Tsygankov having written that, '...both realism and liberalism are ethnocentric in the sense that they view Russia's foreign policy through similar Western cultural lenses and do not pay sufficient attention to Russia's indigenous history and system of perceptions.'¹¹ Although written about Russian foreign policy, Tsygankov's statement also has relatability to Cuba and its foreign policy. Thorun has similarly used both realism and constructivism to examine Russian foreign policy with the appropriateness of this section being highlighted below by also examining these theories impact on Cuban foreign policy.¹²

Commonalities from different historical eras have been significant in forming principal opinions within the Russian/Soviet ruling elite, and their subsequent perception of the international system; fundamental to a constructivist analysis of Russian/Soviet foreign policy. A similar process for the formation of principal opinions among ruling elites and their perception of the international system is repeated for the Cuban revolutionary government, evidenced when Wendt wrote

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. US 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.¹³

It is the perception that states have of the international system and the actions of other states within it that determines state behaviour rather than the international system per se. This results because 'Constructivists see the facts of international politics as not reflective of an objective, material reality but an intersubjective, or social reality.'¹⁴ Consequently, culture, history, the interaction of states, and the importance of ideas are all significant.¹⁵

Key for the Cuban perception of the US detailed in Wendt's quote above were US attempts to destroy the Cuban revolutionary experiment from its inception, most infamously with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. US aggression exacerbated the Cuban ruling elite's constructed perception of Cuban-US relations resulting from Washington's economic and political domination of the island from the time of Cuban independence from Spain in December 1898 until the emergence of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959. On which Farber has written, 'The situation essentially represented de facto if not fully de jure colonialism.'¹⁶ The Platt Amendment symbolised US control of Cuba with poor living and working conditions and low pay facing many Cubans at this time.¹⁷

Contrariwise, and despite the significance of Marxist-Leninism, Grigor Suny has written, '... Lenin, Stalin, and their successors saw the world through a realist lens, calculating how to preserve their power and the system they ruled, how to weaken their opponents, and how to win friends and influence people around the world.'¹⁸ Central to realism is the idea that the

international system is anarchic with states' principal goal being their own survival. The result is that states seek to maximise their power.¹⁹

Different forms of realism exist with the principles of defensive realism being specified by Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*; states are security maximisers rather than power maximisers as states perceive all other states as a threat. On this Waltz has written '...the ultimate concern of states is not power, rather security.'²⁰ Defensive realism supposes that states will only seek sufficient power to safeguard their security, with the preservation of the status quo within the international system being the outcome.

Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* has detailed the principles of offensive realism. State security continues to be states' principal focus, but '...offensive realism parts company with defensive realism over the question of how much power states want.'²¹ Offensive realism theorizes that states strive to maximise their power in relation to other states. The most extreme example is a state's desire to have hegemonic power.²²

Offensive realism would appear central to the 'Putin doctrine' that has become evident in twenty-first century Russian foreign policy due to its apparent assertiveness. The 'Putin doctrine' wishes Russia's return to great power status, desires a multipolar world, and importantly is designed to garner support for the Russian government. Consequently, defensive realism underpins the 'Putin doctrine' despite its assertiveness.²³

Various themes have been apparent in Cuban foreign policy since January 1959, including the ideas of a revolutionary crusade, the superclient/surrogate thesis during the years from 1959 to 1991 due to some believing Moscow 'directed' Havana's foreign policy, *fidel personalismo* resulting from Fidel Castro's seeming personal control of the Cuban political system and realist pragmatism.²⁴ Realist pragmatism explains several alterations in policy because the ultimate rationale has always been the survival of the revolution. In short, defensive realism.

As noted above, it is posited that an asymmetrical triangle consisting of Washington, Moscow, and Havana has principally existed from soon after the Russian Revolution with Washington being the most powerful member of the triangle. The Soviet Union/Russia may have the largest landmass and during the Cold War a level of military equality between Moscow and Washington existed, but in terms of population size, economics measured with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and technology (since November 1917 Moscow has regularly imported superior Western technology)²⁵ the US has been the preeminent power throughout the period of this study. Cuba has a far smaller landmass and population than either the Soviet Union/Russia or the US. Cuba's GDP is also smaller and in 2020 the annual trade turnover of the US was 3675.6 billion US dollars, Russia's was 574.2 billion US dollars and Cuba global turnover was 3.2 billion US dollars.²⁶ Outwith the periods of the relationship examined in the next section, an asymmetrical triangle did not exist between November 1917 and January 1959. However, when the triangle materialized in this period it highlighted the importance of Moscow and Havana's individual relationships with Washington for the attention that Moscow, Havana, and sections of Cuban society awarded to each other between the Russia and Cuban Revolutions.

An increasing international literature on asymmetric triangles in international relations is developing. The basis of this literature can be traced to the work of Dittmer that charts the changing relationship between the US, Soviet Union, and China during the Cold War.²⁷ For a triangular situation to arise Dittmer has noted that each country in the triangle must acknowledge the autonomy of the other members.²⁸ On the possible different triangular formations that can exist, Dittmer has written, 'Three possible systemic patterns of exchange relationships are conceivable: the *'ménage à trois'*, consisting of symmetrical amities among all three players; the 'romantic triangle', consisting of amity between one 'pivot' player and two 'wing' players, but enmity between each of the later; and the 'stable marriage', consisting of amity between two of the players and enmity between each and the third.'²⁹

Due to several indicators such as varying landmass, military strength, volume of natural resources and economic power the interaction of states is often between states of unequal size.

Combining the triangular formation outlined by Dittmer above and Womack's work on asymmetry in international relations,³⁰ Womack has argued that what is often commonplace within geopolitics are triple asymmetric triangles.³¹ Womack advances Dittmer's work as he firstly details that a fourth triangular formation is possible and secondly, Womack argues that the position that each country assumes in the triangle is key when he examines the triangle of the US, China, and Taiwan.³²

Womack's fourth possible triangular configuration is the 'unit veto' when all three countries show hostility towards each other, and each side of the triangle consists of a foe.³³ The 'unit veto' is the polar opposite of the '*ménage à trois*' when each side of the triangle comprises a friend. In augmenting Dittmer's work Womack has detailed that the 'stable marriage,' noted in the above quote, consists of two 'partners' and a 'pariah' third country that the two 'partners' display hostility towards.³⁴

Both Dittmer and Womack have outlined that the '*ménage à trois*' configuration is the optimal formation as it provides incentives for all three members to achieve this outcome.³⁵ The 'stable marriage' has been described as '...is of least cumulative benefit to the three players and yet perhaps the most durable.'³⁶ On his work on the US, China, and Taiwan Womack has detailed that a 'stable marriage' appeared due to the mutual friendship between the US and Taiwan with China being the 'pariah.' Specifically, Womack has written, 'But the marriage triangle is stable only if the outcast – Beijing in this case remains extremely weak compared to the pivot.'³⁷ The pivot is the most powerful member of the triangular relationship that the other two countries gravitate around, which in the case of Womack's study is the US. Womack's assertion appears to be key for the proposed triangle of Moscow, Havana, and Washington which is the focus of this article.

Also of apparent significance is that friendship between two countries can be driven by animosity towards the third member of the triangle. Dittmer outlines this in his work on the US, Soviet Union, and China with a 'romantic triangle' materializing in the 1970s, the result of, '...the two positive sides of the triangle seemed to be premised on a negative relationship between the Soviet Union and the PRC.'³⁸

Asia, and in particular the increasing power and influence of China, has been much of the focus of the international debate on asymmetric triangles in international relations. This has expanded beyond the work of Dittmer and Womack and includes the literature of Ashley, Griffith, Goldstein and Freeman, Ilpyong, Segal, and Woo.³⁹ Other work has examined the impact of Chinese's growing influence in Latin America and the impact this has with the United States.⁴⁰ Soliz de Stange uses techniques from Physics to understand behaviour within the triangles that China and the US have created with Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela.⁴¹ Moreover, Long has used both Dittmer and Womack's work to scrutinise asymmetrical regionalism with an examination of the interactions of the US, Brazil, and Latin America.⁴² Outwith Asia and Latin America Mihai has examined energy asymmetry in the Caspian region and the impact this may have for European energy security.⁴³

As noted, the focus of the above literature is predominantly on China's increasing influence within international relations with this also explaining why its attention is from the 1970s onwards. The asymmetrical triangle which this article posits (Moscow, Havana, and Washington) is not only different in its focus but also its period of study in much longer as it examines the triangle over a 100-year period. This permits this article to explore the history of this specific triangle to inform several contemporary debates including both asymmetric triangles in international relations and the role of continuities from the past in contemporary Russian foreign policy.

After the Russian Revolution Washington did not recognise the Soviet government until November 1933 and since January 1959 has continuously attempted to remove the Cuban revolutionary government from power. This would appear to be contrary to Dittmer's assertion that for a triangular relationship to exist all sides of a triangle must recognise the others autonomy. However, the use of the triangular framework remains appropriate in this study as all three countries are sovereign states that are members of various international organisations such as the

United Nations (UN). Consequently, it is posited that since November 1917 Moscow and Havana have principally been part of an asymmetric triangular relationship consisting in terms of descending power: Washington, Moscow, and Havana (exceptions to this exist in the November 1917–January 1959, examined below). This was the case even during the bipolarity of the Cold War era from the late 1940s until the late 1980s due to the greater scale of the US economy when compared to the Soviet Union. Consistently throughout this period, US GDP per capita was over three times higher than Soviet GDP per capita.⁴⁴

November 1917–December 1991

As noted, two different eras in Moscow–Havana relations existed from the time of the Russian Revolution in November 1917 until December 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These two periods were November 1917–January 1959 and the advent of the Cuban Revolution and from January 1959 to December 1991. Although the two eras were distinct from each other there were also commonalities between the two eras for the attention paid by each country to the other (in the first period for the interest awarded in the Soviet Union by progressive elements of Cuban society).

Firstly, Moscow and Havana's individual relationships with Washington (the nature of Cuban–US relations from Cuban independence until January 1959 were detailed in the previous section) were key to Moscow–Havana relations. In short, an asymmetrical triangular relationship (outwith the examples provided below for the November 1917–January 1959 period an asymmetrical triangle did not exist). Secondly, this triangular relationship permitted both the Soviet Union, progressive parts of Cuban society before January 1959, and the Cuban revolutionary government afterwards to resist US policies towards the Soviet Union and Cuba, respectively. Therefore, defensive realism underpinned both Soviet interest in Cuba and Cuban interest in the Soviet Union, despite the apparent assertiveness of Moscow's engagement with Cuba. Additionally, relations with Cuba also affirmed Moscow's policies towards the Developing World and permitted Moscow to challenge US hegemony not just in Cuba, but also Latin America in general.⁴⁵ Therefore, Cuba had considerable geostrategic importance for Moscow. Thirdly, Moscow, progressive elements of Cuban society before January 1959, and the Cuban revolutionary government after 1959 perceived each other as friendly but the US as antagonistic (for Cuba post-1959 evident in Wendt's previously cited quote). Central to a constructivist argument for Moscow–Havana relations. Fourthly, that apart from the years of the World War 2 alliance between the Soviet Union and US (during this alliance the relationship displayed a *'ménage à trois'* as all sides showed friendship towards one other) that a 'stable marriage' existed between Moscow, Havana, and Washington with Washington being the 'pariah' despite being the most powerful member of the asymmetrical triangular relationship (please note the point above about the November 1917–January 1959 era).

Consequently, Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s attracted the attention of the Comintern with the organisation sending agents to the Island and directives to the Cuban Communist Party (PCC).⁴⁶ This Comintern interest aligned with Moscow's policies towards the Developing World in general, with Moscow having more interest in the impact of the effects of political unrest in the Developing World country for the metropolitan countries rather than in the Developing World country itself.⁴⁷ Still applicable for Cuba due to the nature of Cuban–US relations with subsequently the revolutionary opportunity appearing greater in Cuba when compared to other Latin America countries.

Members of the PCC and progressive sections of Cuban society were drawn to the ideas of the Comintern and Soviet Union in general as they sought alternatives to the US dominated model of control of Cuba. Evident with PCC interest in the Comintern because from 1919 onwards reports from the PCC were sent to the Comintern. This included in 1926 Julio Antonio Mella, one of the founders of the PCC, sending a report to this organisation.⁴⁸ Further illustrating the

interest that progressive sections of Cuban society took in the Soviet Union and socialist ideas in general was that while at the University of Havana, Raúl Castro joined the Socialist Youth, which was affiliated with the PSP, and in the summer of 1953 he travelled to Eastern Europe for the Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS) held in Bucharest. During his return trip from Eastern Europe Raúl Castro met the KGB officer Nikolai Leonov who was traveling to Mexico. Not only did Raúl Castro and Leonov spend time with each other during this voyage, but they also formed a life-long friendship that would impact Moscow-Havana relations after January 1959.⁴⁹

Moreover, in the years between the Russian and Cuban Revolutions the PCC was not continuously outlawed as it helped provide legitimacy for the Cuban political system and in the early 1940s formed an alliance with Fulgencio Batista's government. In 1942 the PCC members Juan Marinello and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez even became Ministers within Batista's government.⁵⁰ Bilateral diplomatic relations also existed for a 10-year period from April 1942 until March 1952. Several Latin American countries created diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union after the World War 2 alliance between Moscow and Washington, with Moscow-Havana relations being part of this process. Diplomatic relations were severed in April 1952 on Batista's return to the Cuban Presidency.⁵¹

While bilateral diplomatic relations existed the Institute of Cuban-Soviet Cultural Exchange functioned in Havana. This institute ran Russian language classes, staged exhibitions and meetings which showcased Soviet achievements, and published the monthly journal *Cuba y la URSS*. Cuban cultural activities also took place in the Soviet Union. This included in 1952 the famed Cuban musician Enrique González Manti performing in Moscow (his invitation papers were signed by Vyacheslav Molotov, Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs).⁵² Moreover, the Soviet Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) provided materials for this institute, evidencing the importance that Moscow attached to relations with Cuba and the belief that sections of Cuban society were ripe for political penetration.⁵³

Additionally, sporadic bilateral trade took place between the Soviet Union and Cuba before the Cuban Revolution. Cuba being one of the world's largest producers of sugar and either poor Soviet agriculture production or upheaval in international trade which questioned Soviet food security underpinned this periodic bilateral trade. For example, bilateral trade took place during the World War 2 alliance between the Soviet Union and United States.⁵⁴ Subsequently, this level of Soviet focus on Cuba summarised above challenges the previous held assumption that before the Cuban Revolution Moscow suffered from 'geographical fatalism' towards Latin America.⁵⁵

The deterioration in Moscow-Havana relations after diplomatic relations were severed in March 1952 was so acute that Nikita Khrushchev has famously written that the Soviet leadership were unsure of what type of revolution had taken place with the emergence of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959.⁵⁶ However, the relationship between Moscow and Havana after 1959 quickly blossomed.

For the Kremlin, in addition to the reasons detailed at the start of this section for Soviet interest in Cuba between November 1917 and January 1959, bilateral Moscow-Havana relations also silenced Chinese accusations of Soviet revisionism. Furthermore, burgeoning Havana-Moscow relations in the late 1950s/early 1960s were aided by the close personal affinity that developed between Castro and Nikita Khrushchev.⁵⁷

Relations with Moscow provided the new revolutionary government in Havana with both political and economic security guarantees as they fundamentally altered the Island's relationship with the United States.⁵⁸ The nationalisation of US owned property in Cuba demonstrated this change in Cuban-US relations, with Fidel Castro commenting, 'We would not in any event have ended up as close friends. The US had dominated us for too long. The Cuban Revolution was determined to end that domination.'⁵⁹ Moreover, the Soviet economic and political models appealed to the Cuban revolutionary elite as they endeavoured to create a new society in Cuba.

After December 1961 and Fidel Castro proclaiming himself and the Cuban Revolution Marxist-Leninist the bilateral relationship existed between two socialist countries. Discrepancies in

the correct path to socialism may have existed in the late 1960s, but several of the pressures and issues that had drawn Moscow and Havana together in the aftermath of January 1959 (noted above) would remain key for the bilateral relationship for over 30 years. During this era, trade would increase exponentially reaching almost 10 billion pesos in the mid-1980s.⁶⁰ Sporting and cultural exchanges would abound in this period despite the accusation that they had been 'engineered' for political purposes.⁶¹ Moreover, from the mid-1970s the Soviet Union and Cuba would become jointly involved in Africa.⁶² The relationship would be adversely affected by knock-on effects of the Soviet reform processes instigated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s.⁶³ However, it was only with the implosion of the Soviet Union in December 1991 that close Moscow-Havana relations came to close.

Post 1992 relations

In the early to mid-1990s Boris Yeltsin's government completely rejected Marxist-Leninism concerning both domestic and foreign policy. With regards to foreign policy, Moscow pivoted towards the West with the Liberal Westernizers within the Russian government coming to pre-eminence.⁶⁴ Concerning this pivot to the West Lo has stated, 'During the Yeltsin period, America represented the single greatest external influence on Russian foreign policy.'⁶⁵ This alteration to Russian foreign policy impacted Moscow-Havana relations. On which Larin has written, 'To improve political ties Washington demanded of B.H. Yeltsin that he must cut ties with Cuba. This course of action dominated the 1990s.'⁶⁶ Simply, this negated the continuation of close Moscow-Havana relations with the two countries now having different interpretations of the international system. Moreover, neither perceived the other as friendly as had previously been the case.

The downturn in the bilateral relations was perfectly illustrated by Moscow's voting behaviour at the UN. In 1992 Russia abstained in the vote condemning the Cuban Democracy Act, or Torricelli Bill, that intensified the US economic embargo against Cuba. Additionally, in 1992 Russia voted with the US, and against Cuba, at the UN Human Rights Convention in Geneva. Moscow voting in this way had not occurred in the January 1959–December 1991 period of the relationship, but it was repeated in 1993 and 1994.⁶⁷ Moreover, bilateral trade also decreased dramatically in the early to mid-1990s when compared to years from the 1960s to 1991. In 1992 Moscow-Havana trade was 825,977 million pesos, before falling to 533,131 million pesos in 1993 and just 322,882 million pesos in 1994.⁶⁸ This decrease in bilateral trade had a catastrophic effect on the Cuban economy with Raúl Castro commenting that it was as if a 'nuclear bomb' had exploded.⁶⁹

However, in the mid-1990s Russian foreign policy underwent further change, ending Russia's pivot to the West. A resurgence in Russian nationalism, in part due to a Russian perception that the West had not provided sufficient support in the Russian economic transition, was fundamental to the change in Moscow's foreign policy.⁷⁰ Consequently, Moscow-Havana relations improved with, as detailed, contemporary Russian-Cuban relations remaining robust.

The recommencement of visits by the two countries ruling elites to the other country evidenced the upturn in bilateral relations. The absence of such visits since the dissolution of the Soviet Union had graphically illustrated the downturn in Moscow-Havana relations. In June 1996 the new Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov travelled to Cuba, and during Primakov's visit Fidel Castro stated, 'Recently, relations have been improving little by little. There have been good moments, there have been critical moments and now there's an upswing.'⁷¹ In March 1998 Roberto Robaina (Cuban Foreign Minister) reciprocated this trip and in September 1999 Igor Ivanov (the then Russian Foreign Minister) travelled to Cuba. Moreover, in December 2000 during the infancy of his first Presidency Putin visited Cuba.⁷²

However, the one exception to improved Moscow-Havana relations since the mid-1990s was Russia's decision in October 2001 to close the Soviet era SIGINT intelligence listening post at Lourdes on the outskirts of Havana.⁷³ The implications for the triangular relationship are more fully examined below.

The cordial nature of the relationship continued as the 2000s progressed with in 2008 the Our Lady of Kazan Russian being opened in Havana Vieja, visited in November 2008 by Dmitry Medvedev (then Russian President). Moreover, in January 2009 Raúl Castro (by 2009 President of Cuba) travelled to Moscow for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Raúl Castro would return to Russia on a regular basis throughout the rest of his Presidency.⁷⁴ In the spring of 2010, Russia was the 'guest of honour' at the annual Havana book fair, which Sergei Lavrov (Russian Foreign Minister) visited while in Cuba. Moreover, Putin returned to Cuba in July 2014 when an agreement to resolve Cuba's debt incurred during the 1960 to 1991 era was concluded. Ten percent of the debt was paid by Russian investment in the Cuban economy with the remainder of the debt being written-off by Moscow.⁷⁵

In the twenty-first century, it would appear that offensive realism is central to Moscow's attention in Cuba due its apparent expansionist nature. However, it is the defensive realist underpinnings of the 'Putin doctrine' and realist pragmatism within the Cuban government that are key. Evident politically because the contemporary bilateral relationship remains mutually beneficial, specifically concerning Moscow and Havana's individual relationships with Washington. Russian-US relations, and with the West in general, have worsened, exacerbated by Russia's February 2022 invasion of the Ukraine. Tension continues in Havana-Washington relations. Moscow and Havana provide support for each other in various international fora. The importance of the relationship for both countries is apparent with both Moscow and Havana classifying it as a 'strategic partnership'.⁷⁶

Russia's continuing support for Cuba was apparent in May 2021 when Moscow described Washington placing Cuba on a list of countries perceived as not collaborating in the war against terrorism as 'absurd and unjustified'.⁷⁷ In July 2021 in the aftermath of spontaneous protests in Cuba, Russia condemned both Washington's response to Cuba since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and its Cuba policy in general.⁷⁸ Moreover, in November 2022 Moscow once again supported the UN resolution calling for the end of the US embargo against the island.⁷⁹

Havana reciprocates this support. Evident at the UN with issues over Russian involvement in the war in Georgia in 2008, Syria and in 2014 concerning the annexation of the Crimea. Cuba has abstained in the UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the October 2022 annexation of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, and in February 2023 on the first anniversary of the invasion when the UN General Assembly called on Russia to leave the Ukraine.⁸⁰ In short, the bilateral relationship permits both Moscow and Havana to counter US policies towards Russia and Cuba. In sum, the defensive realist underpinnings of the 'Putin doctrine' and realist pragmatism within Cuban foreign policy. Therefore, as in the two eras of the bilateral relationship within the November 1917–December 1991 period summarized above defensive realism remains central to Moscow-Havana relations.

Again, similarly to these two earlier periods of the relationship detailed previously (in the November 1917–January 1959 progressive elements of Cuban society) Moscow and Havana have a shared perception of the international system and Washington's role within it. Both Russia and Cuba perceive the US as hostile, but each other as friendly. Therefore, providing a constructivist understanding of contemporary Moscow-Havana relations. This shared perception is intensified by firstly collective memory of the relationship's past with both governments making increased reference to the pre-1959 relationship. This increased reference to the pre-1959 relations were apparent during Raúl Castro's aforementioned January 2009 trip to Russia. While in Moscow Raúl Castro visited the permanent exhibition in the Museum of the Great Fatherland War of the three Cubans (Aldo and Jorge Vivó and Enrique Vilar) who fought for the Red Army during World War 2.⁸¹ Additionally in October 2019 while in Cuba Dmitry Medvedev (then

Russian Prime Minister) visited the Tomb of the Unknown Mambi (Cuban Independence fighter), and said,

In 1896 three Russian volunteers – Pyotr Streltsov, Yevstafy Konstantonovich, and Nikolai Melentyev – joined General Antonio Maceo's group that fought against the Spanish army in Western Cuba. Their heroism and their support was a vivid example of Russians being always ready to come to the aid of Cubans to defend common values together. In memory of Russian volunteers, we now present the Russian flag to Cuba to be installed at the Mausoleum dedicated to the unknown fighters for Cuba's independence.⁸²

Furthermore, in November 2022 Putin and the Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel unveiled a statue of Fidel Castro in Moscow's Sokol district.⁸³ Secondly, the economic sanctions that both Russia and Cuba face (both detailed below). In October 2022 the shared perception of the international system and similar ideational beliefs were apparent during a meeting between Dmitry Chernyshenko and Ricardo Cabrisas (Deputy Prime Ministers of Russia and Cuba) when Chernyshenko stated, 'We will continue working together to shape a polycentric international order based on respect for generally-accepted principles and rules of international law.'⁸⁴

Defensive realism is also evident within bilateral trade, despite trade being at a much-reduced level when compared to the 1959–1991 era of the relationship. In 2021 bilateral trade was 633,358 million US dollars. Russian-Cuban trade has been at a consistency low level for several years, since the year 2000 only exceeding 500 million US dollars in 2019 and 2021, but in 2021 Russia was Cuba's fourth most important trading partner.⁸⁵ Trade with Russia remains key for Cuba as the government in Havana strives to maintain economic security, particularly due to the downturn in trade with Caracas the result of the deteriorating Venezuelan internal situation and the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy and tourism. Significantly in June 2023 Manuel Marrero (Prime Minister of Cuba) visited Russia during which an agreement was reached for Russia to begin supplying Cuba with oil, helping mitigate the decrease in oil supplies from Venezuela.⁸⁶ Important because since January 1959 energy security has been a persistent issue for Cuba.

Russian-Cuban trade is likely to increase in significance for both countries as they attempt to circumvent the economic sanctions which they each face. Simply both countries need partners to trade with as they endeavour to sustain economic security for their respective populations. In March 2022 Chernyshenko and Cabrisas discussed the possibility for bilateral transactions to be conducted in Russian roubles, helping facilitate trade due to the difficulties of conducting trade in US dollars resulting from the economic sanctions which Russia faces.⁸⁷ In May 2023 Chernyshenko returned to Cuba and during a meeting with Diaz-Canel, said, 'We pay special attention to the development of commercial ties and bringing them up to the level of political dialogue between our countries.'⁸⁸ Chernyshenko's statement characterises the political will in both countries for bilateral trade to increase which has been the focus of many of the growing number of elite level visits that occurred throughout 2022 and 2023. Additionally, during his June 2023 trip to Russia Marrero met the Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. At this meeting, Mishustin spoke of bilateral trade when he stated, 'Despite the unfavorable external environment, bilateral trade neared 60 billion rubles, or more than 20 billion Cuban pesos, last year. The positive dynamic was retained this year, with trade growing nine times in January–April compared to the same period in 2022. I have no doubt that it will keep growing.'⁸⁹

The same rationale of attempting to circumvent sanctions, underpinned by defensive realism, is key for agreements signed by Moscow and Havana. These agreements also evidence the multifaceted nature of the bilateral relationship. Eight such agreements were signed during Medvedev's October 2019 trip to Cuba. These agreements focused on multiple aspects of the relationship including infrastructure and oil.⁹⁰ In May 2022 an agreement between the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Control and the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture was agreed for the certificates required for the Russian export of meat, dairy and fish products, canned food, and processed meat products to Cuba.⁹¹ Furthermore, in May 2023 Boris Titov

(President of the Cuba-Russia Business Council and adviser to the Russian Presidency for entrepreneurs' rights) visited Cuba during which it was agreed that Russian companies trading with Cuba would not have to pay import tariffs, could repatriate their profits while they received the legal right to use land in Cuba for 30-year terms.⁹² Russian companies being permitted to use land in Cuba in this manner is historic due to the prominence of state-owned land and property in revolutionary Cuba. It was also announced that *via* a joint venture with Corporación CIMEX S.A., a Cuban state-owned company involved in the import and export of goods, an individual sales house for the sale of Russian goods in Cuba would be created.⁹³

It is also apparent that both countries plan to broaden the relationship due to the variety of topics discussed for possible future bilateral agreements. Evident in October 2020 while Cabrisas was in Russia. During this visit, he met Ksenia Yudaeva (first vice governor of the Central Bank of Russia), Alexander Novak (Russian Energy Yudaeva), and Mikhail Murashko (Russian Health Minister).⁹⁴ The wish to expand the relationship was further apparent during Marrero's June 2023 visit to Russia. On this 11-day trip Marrero was accompanied by several Cuban government ministers who covered a wide variety of different portfolios. Cabrisas (Deputy Prime Minister of Cuba), Gerardo Peñalver (First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs), Joaquín Alonso Vázquez (Minister-President of the Central Bank of Cuba), José Ángel Portal (Minister of Public Health), Juan Carlos García (Minister of Tourism), Liván Arronte (Minister of Energy and Mines), and Adel Onofre Yzquierdo (Minister of Transportation) all travelled with Marrero to Russia.⁹⁵ Additionally, in the summer of 2023, Víctor Koronelli (Russian Ambassador to Cuba) spoke of further expanding the relationship with the supply of Russian cars, renewal of Cuba's railway network and sugar industries, and the modernization of Cuba's largest oil refinery all being discussed.⁹⁶

Moreover, in the spring of 2022, a pilot scheme allowing the use of Russian MIR cash cards in Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) in Cuba began. This pilot scheme aids economic transactions due to the sanctions that both countries face that necessitated the talks that focused on bilateral trade being in Russian roubles, as noted above. The pilot scheme also benefits the number of Russian tourists who now vacation in Cuba.⁹⁷ In 2021, 146,151 Russians visited Cuba. As the global tourist industry recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic this made Russia the most important source of tourists for Cuba.⁹⁸

Contemporary bilateral cultural links have also intensified. 14 November 2019 marked the start of a Cuban film week in Russia and also in November 2019 the St. Petersburg ballet performed in Havana's Gran Teatro de la Habana 'Alicia Alonso'.⁹⁹ At the end of November 2019, the Academy of Arts in Moscow hosted an exhibition of Cuban art to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Havana.¹⁰⁰ Cultural links were adversely affected by the global pandemic, but as with tourism, these links are returning.

As with the two periods of the bilateral relationship within the November 1917–December 1991 era both defensive realism and constructivism provide explanations for the robust nature of contemporary Russian-Cuban relations. For both elucidations Moscow and Havana's individual strained relationships with Washington remain central. The 'stable marriage' within the asymmetrical triangle persists, the friendship between two countries with the third, the US, being the 'pariah.' The only exception to this configuration of the triangle was in the early 1990s when amity between Moscow and Washington materialised, enmity was apparent between both and Cuba. Cuba became the 'pariah.' This change in the formation of the triangle and the triangle in general are more fully examined below.

Discussion: the permanence of a 'stable marriage'

A multifaceted relationship between Moscow and Havana has existed in all three eras of the relationship since November 1917. Each period has had its own idiosyncrasies. However, the commonality through this prolonged period has been Moscow and Havana's individual relationships

with Washington. Firstly, this permits a defensive realist understanding of bilateral Moscow-Havana relations; secondly, a constructivist interpretation; and thirdly, the existence principally of an asymmetric triangle (from November 1917 to January 1959 an asymmetrical triangle did not exist outwith the periods examined in the second section of this article). The configuration of this triangle has predominantly been a 'stable marriage,' friendship between Moscow and Havana with Washington the 'pariah.' The only deviations from this formation of the asymmetric triangle have been: (1) during World War 2 when a '*ménage à trois*' materialised due to the evil of Nazi Germany and; (2) in the early 1990s when Cuba held the 'pariah' position in a 'stable marriage,' the result of Moscow's pivot to the West.

The stability of the 'stable marriage' with Washington being the 'pariah' is given further credence when some form of rapprochement took place between two members of the triangle. For example, in the 1970s a period of détente in Soviet-US relations occurred. However, this did not result in Cuba becoming the 'pariah.' Moscow-Havana relations remained robust, with as noted above in the mid-1970s Moscow and Havana became jointly involved in Africa,¹⁰¹ and no enmity materialised between them that altered the triangle's formation. Moreover, as detailed above, Moscow closed the Lourdes listening post in October 2001. Havana disapproved of this decision which Washington had sought since the end of the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union. Again, this 'one-off' scenario did not result in an alteration to the 'stable marriage.' Historic change occurred in Havana-Washington relations under the Presidencies of Raúl Castro and Barack Obama with Cuban-US diplomatic relations being restored. This period of rapprochement may have been short lived (ended under Donald Trump's Presidency), but again it did not result in a change to the 'pariah' in the triangular formation. Why was this the case?

Simply since 1917 a sustained period when the US has not been the 'pariah' for a reconfiguration of the asymmetric triangle to take place has not materialised. Significantly, since January 1959 except for the Raúl Castro/Obama period noted above, inertia has characterised Washington's Cuba policy. This inertia results from Washington's Cuba policy being both a foreign policy and domestic issue. The outcome of the influence of the Cuban-American exile community in Miami. In short, the US has never attempted to materially improve US-Cuban relations, or its relationship with Moscow, over a prolonged period of time which could have resulted in Russia or Cuba becoming the 'pariah' within the triangle, or even a '*ménage à trois*' developing. In sum, the relationship has developed its own dynamics which show no sign of change.

The paralysis in US Cuba policy with Washington simply ignoring the UN General Assembly vote condemning its economic sanctions against Cuba (2022 marked the 30th successive time that the UN General Assembly had voted in such a manner) is key to understanding why an asymmetrical triangle displaying a 'stable marriage' with the most powerful country as the 'pariah' can persist. If one member of the triangle is multiple times more powerful than the other members, in this case, the US as the global hyperpower which can disregard world opinion, there is no incentive for it to attempt to reconfigure the triangle. Simply it can prosper without either of the other two members of the asymmetrical triangle. This is the case even if the friendship between the other two countries is partly driven by mutual hostility towards the 'pariah.' This finding from the asymmetrical triangle of Moscow, Havana, and Washington is contrary to Womack's assertion that the 'stable marriage' only becomes the norm if the 'pariah' is much weaker than the 'pivot' country.¹⁰²

The US is the only power that can act in such a manner on the global stage, and the triangle that has been the focus of this study has its own specifics (i.e. the inertia in Washington's Cuba policy reducing the likelihood that Washington would engage Havana to reconfigure the triangle). However, the findings that a 'stable marriage' with the most powerful country as the 'pariah' has resonance for international relations on a regional level with each region having a regional superpower. For example, in Asia China, in Africa South Africa and in Latin America Brazil. Therefore, this article's conclusions help understand the behaviours of Beijing, Pretoria, and Brasilia within their respective regions and opens new areas for further research in other global locations that have asymmetrical triangular relations displaying a 'stable marriage' as the norm.

Conclusions

This article has used a rigorous historical qualitative analysis of a variety of different sources, including documents from the archives of the Comintern in Moscow and MINREX in Havana to examine Moscow-Havana relations from the time of the Russian Revolution in November 1917 to the present. Three distinct periods of the bilateral relationship were analysed: November 1917–January 1959, 1959–1991, and from 1992 onwards. Each era has its own idiosyncrasies (i.e. in the era between the Russian and Cuban Revolutions outwith the periods examined in the second section of this article an asymmetrical triangle did not exist), but in each period Moscow and Havana's individual relationships with Washington were crucial for Moscow-Havana relations. Both a defensive realist and constructivist interpretation form this conclusion. Thus, this article has answered the question of what the underpinning rationale for Moscow's attention in Havana, and Havana's interest in Moscow was and is. Concerning defensive realism both Moscow and Havana used/continue to utilise the bilateral relationship to resist the US within their respective relationships with Washington. The significance of defensive realism for Moscow-Havana relations illustrates the defensive realist underpinnings of the 'Putin doctrine' evident in twenty-first century Russian foreign policy and realist pragmatism within revolutionary Cuban foreign policy.¹⁰³ For constructivism, Moscow and Havana perceive each other as friendly, but Washington as hostile. Moreover, similar ideational beliefs exist in Moscow and Havana.

Subsequently, this article acting as a bridge between historical research and the study of international relations informs four disparate academic literatures. Firstly, the interdisciplinary international debate focused on the importance of the past in Moscow's contemporary engagement with the world as it illuminates the historical underpinnings of current Moscow-Havana relations with the rationale for engagement having consistency since the time of the Russian Revolution.¹⁰⁴ The consistency is this article's supposition that Moscow and Havana's individual relationships with Washington are fundamental for understanding all three eras of Moscow-Havana relations. Significantly, the continuousness of the past for contemporary Moscow-Havana relations are not just to the January 1959–December 1991 era of the relationship, but also to the period between the emergence of the Russian and Cuban Revolutions.

This conclusion therefore posits that before January 1959 and the advent of the Cuban Revolution, Moscow did not suffer from 'geographical fatalism' concerning Latin America (the second literature in which this article progresses)¹⁰⁵ due to the not insignificant attention that Moscow awarded Cuba. This focus included Comintern activity in Cuba and bilateral diplomatic relations existing for a 10-year period from October 1942. Subsequently, this article advances its third debate, the legacies of the past affecting contemporary Moscow-Havana relations, because these legacies are to both the November 1917–January 1959 era and the years from 1959 to 1991. Previous literature had not noted the significance of the earlier period.¹⁰⁶

The originality of the findings of this article are further apparent in the fourth academic debate that it progresses; the literature on asymmetrical triangles in international relations.¹⁰⁷ Examining a longer time period than previous studies of asymmetrical triangles it is theorised that a 'stable marriage' in an asymmetrical triangle with the most powerful country being the 'pariah' can become the norm. Previously not considered possible because a 'stable marriage' could only become the norm if the 'pariah' was considerably weaker than the 'pivot'.¹⁰⁸

These conclusions are formed from the supposition that since November 1917 Moscow and Havana have principally been part of an asymmetric triangular relationship with Washington, with the US being the most powerful country in the triangle in terms of economics and technology throughout the period of this study (please note the point above about the November 1917–January 1959 era). Within this extended period of study, the US has predominantly been the 'pariah' within a 'stable marriage' (the only exceptions being during World War 2 when a 'ménage à trois' emerged with all sides showing friendship to each other and in the early 1990s when Havana became the 'pariah' in a 'stable marriage' due to Moscow's pivot to the West).

Simply the US is so powerful that it can ignore the opinion of the other members of the triangle and there is no incentive for Washington to improve relations with either of the other two countries to reconfigure the triangle. Washington can flourish without either Moscow or Havana. Furthermore, even when a level of détente has existed between two countries in the triangle, i.e. during a reduction in superpower tension in the 1970s or the improvement in Cuban-US relations under the Presidencies of Raúl Castro and Barack Obama (an exception to US Cuba policy which since the early 1960s has been characterised by inertia, the result of Washington's Cuba policy being both a foreign and domestic issue due the power of the Cuba-American exile community), the period of détente has been insufficient for the triangle to be reconfigured.

These conclusions from the specifics of the asymmetrical triangle of Moscow, Havana, and Washington help increase understanding of asymmetrical triangular relations in other global locations that display a 'stable marriage' as the norm. Specifically concerning regional superpowers that can act within their own region in a similar manner to the way the US has acted in the asymmetrical triangle of Moscow-Havana-Washington which has been the focus of this study. Consequently, this article has informed four different academic literatures with its findings being of relevance to a wide and varied audience with interest beyond Moscow-Havana relations, including in contemporary Russian foreign policy in general, Moscow's attention in Latin America before the Cuban Revolution and asymmetrical triangles in international relations. This audience includes academics, practitioners, and government officials.

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