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Cuba and the Cold War, 1959–1980

PIERO GLEIJESES

Cuba's role in the world since 1959 is without precedent. No other Third World country has projected its military power beyond its immediate neighborhood. Brazil sent a small troop to the Dominican Republic in 1965 as the United States' junior partner; Argentina's generals briefly helped Anastasio Somoza's defeated cohorts in 1980–81 as they sought to regain a foothold in Nicaragua; Vietnam's soldiers never ventured beyond Indochina; China's military activities outside Asia have been limited to the supply of weapons and the dispatch of a few hundred instructors to Africa. During the Cold War, extra-continental military interventions were the preserve of the two superpowers, a few West European countries, and Cuba. Moreover, West European military interventions in the thirty years between the rise of Fidel Castro and the end of the Cold War pale in size and daring compared to those of Cuba. The dispatch of 36,000 Cuban soldiers to Angola between November 1975 and April 1976 stunned the world; in early 1978, 12,000 Cuban soldiers went to Ethiopia; by 1988, there were 55,000 Cuban soldiers in Angola. Even the Soviet Union sent far fewer troops beyond its immediate neighborhood than did Cuba. In this regard, Cuba is second only to the United States.

This chapter focuses on those regions of the world where Cuba's actions had an important, tangible impact – Latin America and Africa. It analyzes Havana's motivations and the extent to which its policy was a function of Soviet demands. It assesses Cuba's relations with the United States and discusses how Cuba affected the course of the Cold War.[1]

1 This chapter is drawn from my research in the archives of Cuba, the United States, Britain, Belgium, Germany (including the former German Democratic Republic), and South Africa.

Origins

President Dwight Eisenhower did not hesitate to recognize the government established by Fidel Castro. On January 7, 1959, six days after Fulgencio Batista had fled Cuba, the White House extended the hand of friendship to the victorious guerrillas. Within a year, however, Eisenhower had decided that Castro must go. It was not Castro's record on political democracy that bothered the Americans. US presidents, including Eisenhower, had maintained good relations with the worst dictators of the hemisphere – as long as they accepted US hegemony. Castro, however, would not bow to the United States. "He is clearly a strong personality and a born leader of great personal courage and conviction," a US official noted in April 1959.[2] "He is inspired by a messianic sense of mission to aid his people," a National Intelligence Estimate reported two months later.[3] Even though he did not have a clear blueprint of the Cuba he wanted to create, Castro dreamed of a sweeping revolution that would uproot his country's oppressive socioeconomic structure. He dreamed of a Cuba that would be free of the United States, which had dominated the island since 1898 when it had intervened in the Cuban–Spanish war, robbing the Cubans of the independence they were achieving on the battlefield. (Washington forced the Cubans to accept the Platt amendment, which granted the United States the right to intervene militarily and maintain naval bases on Cuban soil; today the Platt amendment lives on, at Guantanamo.)

In 1959, Castro had no assurances whatsoever that the Soviet Union would befriend Cuba, a fragile outpost in the American backyard. He might have accepted a modus vivendi with Washington that promised Cuba complete independence in domestic policy, while setting some limits on its foreign policy. The Eisenhower administration, however, insisted that Cuba remain firmly within the US sphere of influence. By early 1960, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was working on what would become the Bay of Pigs invasion. In April 1961, three months after John Kennedy's inauguration, some 1,300 CIA-trained Cuban exiles stormed a Cuban beach, only to surrender en masse three days later.

2 "Unofficial Visit of Prime Minister Castro of Cuba to Washington – A Tentative Evaluation," enclosed in Herter to Eisenhower, April 23, 1959, US Department of State; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1991), vol. VI, 483 (hereafter, *FRUS*, with year and volume number).

3 Special National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), "The Situation in the Caribbean through 1959," June 30, 1959, 3, National Security Archive, Washington, DC (hereafter, NSA).

Flush from victory at the Bay of Pigs, Castro tendered an olive branch to the United States. On August 17, 1961, Che Guevara told a close aide of Kennedy that Cuba wanted to explore a modus vivendi with the United States. Kennedy was not interested. A few months later, on the president's orders, the CIA launched Operation Mongoose, a program of paramilitary operations, economic warfare, and sabotage designed to visit what Kennedy's adviser, Arthur Schlesinger, has called the "terrors of the earth"[4] on Fidel Castro.

Castro enjoyed widespread support among the Cuban population, as the CIA acknowledged, but he understood that only strong Soviet backing could protect his fledgling revolution from the United States. The fate of the Guatemalan president, Jacobo Arbenz, overthrown by the CIA in 1954, was a bitter reminder of what befell errant presidents in the US sphere. In January 1959, the Soviet leaders knew very little about Castro except that he was not a Communist and his country was in the heart of the American empire. For several months, their only contact was through leaders of the Cuban Communist Party visiting Moscow to vouch for the revolutionary credentials of the new government. In October 1959, a KGB official arrived in Havana, establishing the first direct link between the Kremlin and the new Cuban leadership. Soon, the tempo accelerated: in March 1960 Moscow approved a Cuban request for weapons. That same month, a handful of Soviet officers arrived in Havana to help organize the Cuban armed forces. Diplomatic relations were established on May 8. Over the next year, the relationship grew close and ebullient as Soviet bloc arms and economic aid arrived. Castro was charismatic, he seemed steadfast, he worked well with the Cuban Communists, and he had humiliated the United States at the Bay of Pigs. The Soviet Union would transform the island into a socialist showcase in Latin America. The Soviets' enthusiasm was all the greater because they underestimated the economic cost of the friendship.

It was the missile crisis that brought the honeymoon to an abrupt end. Thirty years later, in 1992, Kennedy's defense secretary, Robert McNamara, finally understood why the Soviets and the Cubans had decided to place missiles in Cuba: "I want to state quite frankly with hindsight, if I had been a Cuban leader [in the summer of 1962], I think I might have expected a US invasion. … And I should say, as well, if I had been a Soviet leader at the time, I might have come to the same conclusion."[5] As McNamara admitted, Castro

4 Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Ballantine, 1979), 516.
5 Robert McNamara, in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh (eds.), *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: New Press, 1992), xi–xii.

had legitimate concerns for his country's security. Added to this was the Kremlin's desire to close the "missile gap," America's well-publicized overwhelming superiority in strategic weapons.

Kennedy learned that there were Soviet missiles in Cuba on October 16, 1962. On October 24, the US Navy quarantined the island. Four days later, when Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles, he did not consult Castro. The honeymoon was over. The Cubans confronted their vulnerability: if the United States attacked them (there had been, as McNamara pointed out, "no non-invasion guarantee"[6]), the Soviet Union would not protect them. As Castro told a high-level delegation from the German Democratic Republic in 1968, "The Soviet Union has given us weapons. We are and will be forever thankful … but if the imperialists attack Cuba, we can count only on ourselves."[7] The missile crisis was followed by a brief détente between the superpowers, but this did not extend to Cuba, where the paramilitary raids, the sabotage operations, and the efforts to cripple the economy continued. So, too, did the attempts to assassinate Castro. US officials were no longer confident that they could eliminate him, but they were determined to teach the Latin Americans that the price of following Cuba's example would be high. "Cuba was the key to all of Latin America," the director of the Central Intelligence Agency told Kennedy in 1962. "If Cuba succeeds, we can expect most of Latin America to fall."[8]

While Kennedy promoted subversion in Cuba, Castro promoted revolution in Latin America. Castro argued that "the virus of revolution is not carried in submarines or ships. It is wafted instead on the ethereal waves of ideas. … The power of Cuba is the power of its revolutionary ideas, the power of its example."[9] The CIA agreed. "The extensive influence of 'Castroism' is not a function of Cuba's power," it noted in mid-1961. "Castro's shadow looms large because social and economic conditions throughout Latin America invite opposition to ruling authority and encourage agitation for radical change."[10] Cuba, however, did not rely just on the power of its example. "By 1961–1962,

6 Robert McNamara, in James Blight, Bruce Allyn, and David Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 384.

7 "Aus der Aussprache mit Genossem Fidel Castro am 14. November 1968 während des Mittagessens im Gürtel von Havanna," DY30 IVA 2/20/205, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Berlin (hereafter, SAPMO).

8 McCone, memorandum of meeting with president, August 23, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, vol. X, 955.

9 Fidel Castro, *Revolución* (Havana), February 23, 1963, 4.

10 NIE, "Latin American Reactions to Developments in and with Respect to Cuba," July 18, 1961, 5, box 8/9, National Security Files (NSF), NIE, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter, LBJL).

Cuban support began taking many forms," a CIA study noted, "ranging from inspiration and training to such tangibles as financing and communications support as well as some military assistance." Most significant was military training. US intelligence estimated that between 1961 and 1964 "at least" 1,500 to 2,000 Latin Americans received "either guerrilla warfare training or political indoctrination in Cuba."[11]

By 1964, the guerrillas in Latin America had suffered a string of setbacks, and Cuban support for them had become a source of discord with the Soviet Union. The Cubans resented Moscow's growing antipathy for armed struggle in Latin America, and they complained about the shoddy equipment the Soviets sent them. The Soviets were alarmed that Cuba was a far greater economic burden than anticipated, and they were unhappy that Castro's support for guerrilla warfare in Latin America complicated their relations with the United States and Latin American governments. Most Latin American Communist parties, moreover, had come to resent Havana's encouragement of armed struggle.

Castro did not bend. At a meeting of Communist parties in Moscow in March 1965, Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother and the minister of defense, stressed that it was imperative "to organize a global movement of solidarity with the guerrillas in Venezuela, Colombia, and Guatemala who … are fighting heroically for the independence of their countries."[12]

Africa: the beginnings

Castro not only helped the insurgents in Latin America prepare a new revolutionary offensive. He also turned to Africa. Even before coming to power, the Cuban revolutionaries had seen similarities between the Algerian revolution against French rule and their own struggle against Batista and the United States. In December 1961, a Cuban ship unloaded weapons at Casablanca for the Algerian rebels. It returned to Havana with seventy-six wounded Algerian fighters and twenty orphans from refugee camps. In May 1963, after Algeria had gained its independence, a 55-person Cuban medical mission arrived in Algiers to establish a program of free health care for the Algerian people. "It was like a beggar offering his help, but we knew that the Algerian people needed it even more than we did, and that they deserved it," explained the

11 CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Cuban Subversive Activities in Latin America, 1959–1968," February 16, 1968, box 19, National Security File Country File (NSFCF), LBJL.

12 "Discurso pronunciado en la reunión consultiva de los Partidos Comunistas y Obreros que se celebra en Moscú," March 3, 1965, 3, Oficina Secreta 2do Sec CC PCC, Havana (hereafter, OS).

minister of public health.[13] In October 1963, when Algeria was threatened by Morocco, the Cubans rushed a force of 686 men with heavy weapons to the Algerians, jeopardizing a contract Morocco had just signed with Havana to buy 1 million tons of Cuban sugar for $184 million, a considerable amount of hard currency at a time when the United States was trying to cripple Cuba's economy.

Cuba's interest in sub-Saharan Africa quickened in late 1964. This was the moment of the great illusion when the Cubans, and many others, believed that revolution beckoned in Africa. Guerrillas were fighting the Portuguese in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. In Congo Brazzaville, a new government proclaimed its revolutionary sympathies. Above all, there was Zaire, where armed revolt threatened the corrupt pro-American regime that Eisenhower and Kennedy had laboriously put in place.[14] To save the Zairean regime, the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson raised an army of approximately 1,000 white mercenaries in a major covert operation that provoked a wave of revulsion even among African leaders friendly to the United States. In December 1964, Che Guevara went on a three-month trip to Africa. The following February, in Tanzania, he offered the Zairean rebels "about thirty instructors and all the weapons we could spare." They accepted "with delight." Che left with "the joy of having found people ready to fight to the finish. Our next task was to select a group of black Cubans – all volunteers – to join the struggle in Zaire."[15] From April to July 1965, approximately 120 Cubans, led by Che, entered Zaire. In August, 250 Cubans, under Jorge Risquet, arrived in neighboring Congo Brazzaville at the request of that country's government, which feared an attack by the CIA's mercenaries; the column would also, if possible, assist Che in Zaire.

But Central Africa was not ready for revolution. By the time the Cubans arrived in Zaire, the mercenaries had broken the resolve of the rebels, leaving Che no choice by November 1965 but to withdraw. In Congo Brazzaville, Risquet's column saved the host government from a military coup in June 1966 and trained the rebels of Agostinho Neto's Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) before withdrawing in December 1966.

The late 1960s were a period of deepening maturity in Cuba's relationship with Africa. No longer deluded that revolution was around the corner, the

13 José Ramón Machado Ventura, note to author, Havana, July 12, 1995.

14 I refer to the former French colony as Congo Brazzaville and the former Belgian colony as Zaire.

15 Che Guevara, "Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria (Congo)," [Dar-es-Salaam, c. December 1965], 13–14, private collection, Havana.

23. Fidel Castro (left), Raúl Castro, and Che Guevara (right) in October 1963, finalizing the plan to send Cuban troops to Algeria to protect it from Moroccan aggression.

Cubans were learning about the continent. In those years, the focus of Havana's attention in Africa was Guinea-Bissau, where rebels were fighting for independence from Portugal. At their request, in 1966 Cuban military instructors and doctors arrived in Guinea-Bissau, where they remained until the end of the war in 1974. This was the longest and most successful Cuban intervention in Africa before the dispatch of troops to Angola in 1975.

Relations with Moscow

Whereas Cuba's support for armed struggle in Latin America in the 1960s provoked the wrath of the United States and angered Moscow, Cuba's activities in Africa drew much less heat. There, Cuban and Soviet policies ran along parallel paths: they supported the same movements and governments. US officials knew that the Cubans were in Africa, but they were confident that a handful of Cubans could not be effective in distant, alien countries. Washington was focused, instead, on Cuban activities in Latin America where, in 1966–67, Cuba continued to fan the flame of armed struggle. By 1968, however, the guerrillas had been crushed in Bolivia, virtually wiped

out in Guatemala, and brutally punished in Colombia and Venezuela. These defeats, and Che's death, taught Havana that a few brave men could not ignite armed struggle in Latin America. "By 1970 Cuban assistance to guerrilla groups … had been cut back to very low levels," US officials concluded.[16]

This removed a major irritant in Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union, which had become increasingly strained. In the mid- and late 1960s, while US policymakers publicly lambasted Castro as a Soviet puppet, US intelligence analysts quietly pointed to Castro's resistance to Soviet advice and his open criticism of the Soviet Union. "He has no intention of subordinating himself to Soviet discipline and direction, and he has increasingly disagreed with Soviet concepts, strategies and theories," a 1968 study concluded, reflecting the consensus of the intelligence community.[17] Castro had no compunction about purging those who were most loyal to Moscow or about pursuing economic policies that ran counter to Soviet advice. Soviet officials "muttered about pouring funds down the Cuban rathole" and footed the bill, the State Department noted.[18] Castro criticized the Soviet Union as dogmatic and opportunistic, niggardly in its aid to Third World governments and liberation movements, and overeager to seek accommodation with the United States. He made no secret of his displeasure with the inadequacy of Moscow's support of North Vietnam, and in Latin America he actively pursued policies contrary to Moscow's wishes. "If they gave us any advice, we'd say that they were interfering in our internal affairs," Raúl Castro later remarked, "but we didn't hesitate to express our opinions about their internal affairs."[19]

To explain why the Soviets put up with "their recalcitrant Cuban ally," US intelligence reports noted that they were "inhibited by Castro's intractability."[20] The Soviets still saw advantages in their relations with Cuba, a 1967 study observed – as a symbol of Soviet ability to support even "remote allies" and for its "nuisance value vis-a-vis the US." Above all, they drew back from the political and psychological cost of a break: "How could the Soviets pull out of Cuba and look at the world or themselves in the morning? It would be a confession of monumental failure – the first and only Socialist enterprise in the

16 US Department of State (DOS), "Cuban Presence in Africa," December 28, 1977, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 4.
17 "National Policy Paper – Cuba: United States Policy," draft, July 15, 1968, 16, FOIA.
18 DOS, "Soviet Intentions toward Cuba," March 1965, box 33/37, NSFCF, LBJL.
19 Memorandum of conversation, Raúl Castro, Mengistu *et al.*, Addis Ababa, January 7, 1978, 61, OS.
20 Thomas Hughes to the Secretary of State, "Soviet Intentions toward Cuba," March 12, 1965, box 33/37, NSFCF, LBJL.

New World abandoned – and it would seriously damage Soviet prestige and be widely interpreted as a victory of sorts for the United States."[21]

By the early 1970s, however, Castro became less intractable. Reeling from the twin failures of his revolutionary offensive in Latin America and his economic policies at home, he softened toward the Kremlin. Cuban criticism of Soviet policies ceased, and Havana acknowledged Moscow's primacy within the socialist bloc. At the same time, Havana's abandonment of its revolutionary offensive in Latin America eased relations with the United States. By 1974, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger concluded that US policy toward Cuba had become counterproductive. West European and Latin American governments increasingly resented Washington's heavy-handed pressure to enlist them in its crusade against Cuba, and US public opinion, spearheaded by businesses interested in the growing Cuban market, now favored peaceful coexistence with the island. Kissinger proposed secret negotiations aimed at normalizing relations. In a secret meeting on July 9, 1975, Cuban and US representatives discussed steps that would lead to an improvement of relations and, eventually, full bilateral ties. Four months later, Cuban troops landed in Angola.

Angola

When the Portuguese dictatorship collapsed in April 1974, there were three rival independence movements in Angola: Neto's MPLA, Holden Roberto's National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), and Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Although Portugal and the three movements agreed that a transitional government would rule until independence on November 11, 1975, civil war erupted in the spring of 1975. In July, Pretoria and Washington began parallel covert operations in Angola, first by supplying weapons to both FNLA and UNITA, and then, in late August, by sending military instructors. South Africa and the United States were not pursuing identical ends in Angola, but both agreed that the MPLA had to be defeated. Pretoria wanted to shore up apartheid at home and eliminate any threat to its illegal rule over Namibia, sandwiched between South Africa and Angola. South African officials were well aware of the MPLA's implacable hostility to apartheid and of its commitment to assist

21 CIA, Board of National Estimates, "Bolsheviks and Heroes: The USSR and Cuba," November 21, 1967, FOIA.

the liberation movements of southern Africa. (By contrast, UNITA and FNLA had offered Pretoria their friendship.) Although US officials knew that an MPLA victory would not threaten US strategic or economic interests, Kissinger cast the struggle in stark Cold War terms: the freedom-loving FNLA and UNITA would crush the Soviet-backed MPLA. He believed that success in Angola would provide a cheap boost to the prestige of the United States and to his own prestige, pummeled by the fall of South Vietnam a few months earlier.

The first Cuban instructors for the MPLA arrived in Luanda at the end of August, but Soviet aid to the MPLA was very limited because Moscow distrusted Neto and did not want to jeopardize the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) negotiations with the United States. By September, Washington and Pretoria realized that the MPLA was winning the civil war, not because of Cuban aid (no Cubans were yet fighting in Angola) or superior weapons (the rival coalition had a slight edge, thanks to US and South African largesse), but because, as the CIA station chief in Luanda noted, the MPLA was "more effective, better educated, better trained, and better motivated."[22]

Washington urged Pretoria, which might have hesitated, to intervene. On October 14, South African troops invaded Angola, transforming the civil war into an international conflict.

As the South Africans raced toward Luanda, MPLA resistance crumbled. They would have seized the capital had not Castro decided on November 4, to respond to the MPLA's desperate appeals for troops. The Cuban forces, despite their initial inferiority in numbers and weapons, halted the South African onslaught. The official South African historian of the war writes, "The Cubans rarely surrendered and, quite simply, fought cheerfully until death."[23] As the South African operation unraveled and credible evidence surfaced in the Western press that Washington and Pretoria had been working together in Angola, the White House drew back. US officials claimed that they had nothing to do with the South Africans and condemned Pretoria's intervention in Angola. Betrayed by the United States, pilloried as aggressors throughout the world, and threatened by growing numbers of Cuban soldiers, the South Africans gave up. In March 1976, they withdrew from Angola. The US–South African gambit had failed.

22 Robert Hultslander (CIA station chief, Luanda, 1975), fax to author, December 22, 1998.
23 F. J. du Toit Spies, *Operasie Savannah. Angola 1975–1976* (Pretoria: S. A. Weermag, 1989), 108.

24. Four heads of state – Agostinho Neto of Angola, Fidel Castro of Cuba, Luís Cabral of Guinea-Bissau, and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea – at the grave of Amílcar Cabral, who led the independence movement of Guinea-Bissau. Guinea-Bissau and Guinea were the only two countries that sent troops to fight alongside the Cubans in Angola. Conakry, March 1976.

The administration of Gerald Ford responded to the debacle in Angola by unleashing a torrent of abuse against Havana, but Jimmy Carter, upon assuming the presidency in January 1977, changed course and announced that he would seek to normalize relations with Cuba. Relations improved, but Washington insisted that Havana withdraw its troops from Angola, and Havana would not budge. In December 1977, two US congressmen who favored rapprochement with Cuba had a lengthy meeting with Castro. They told him that "though President Carter was 'eager' to normalize relations, some willingness to deescalate Cuban involvement in Angola was needed." Castro gave no ground. Angola was threatened by South Africa and Zaire, he said. "The Cuban mission in Angola was the defense of the country." The congressman insisted: "President Carter simply wanted a statement of Cuba's intention to deescalate." Castro replied that "this could not be done unilaterally … The Angolan government had to decide this, since the Cubans were not there on their

own account. … If the restoration of relations [with the United States] was presented in the Angolan context, things would not advance."[24] This was the constant refrain: Cuba would not let the United States determine its policy in Africa. What this meant would soon be clear.

The Horn of Africa

In Ethiopia, less than two weeks after Carter's inauguration, the military junta that had overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 turned further to the left, quashing any lingering US hope of retaining influence there. In July 1977, the junta was rocked by Somalia's invasion of the Ogaden, a region in eastern Ethiopia inhabited by ethnic Somalis. The invasion had been encouraged by ambivalent signals from Washington. As the National Security Council (NSC) specialist on the Horn wrote in 1980, "The crucial decision [to invade] seems to have been taken only … when the Somalis concluded they had a good chance of securing American military aid."[25] The Somalis made swift progress, and in late August 1977 Secretary of State Cyrus Vance told the Chinese foreign minister, "I think they [the Somalis] will succeed … they … will be in control of the Ogaden."[26] Ethiopia's leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, turned to Cuba, which had begun sending military instructors and doctors in April. He asked for troops.

Castro's reply was negative. A secret Cuban military history notes, "it did not seem possible that a small country like Cuba could maintain two important military missions in Africa."[27] In an August 16 cable, Castro told the head of the Cuban military mission in Addis Ababa, "We absolutely cannot agree to send Cuban military forces to fight in Ethiopia. You must convince Mengistu of this reality. … Despite our sympathy for the Ethiopian revolution and our profound indignation at the cowardly and criminal aggression to which it has fallen victim, it is frankly impossible for Cuba to do more in the present

24 "Representatives Fred Richmond and Richard Nolan, Discussions with Cuban President Fidel Castro," enclosed in Richmond to Carter, December 16, 1977, box CO-20, White House Central File, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta (hereafter, JCL).

25 Paul Henze to Zbigniew Brzezinski, June 3, 1980, box 5, Horn, Staff Material, NSA, Brzezinski Collection, JCL.

26 Memorandum of conversation, Cyrus Vance, Huang Hua *et al.*, August 23, 1977, 14, FOIA.

27 Ministerio de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, "Las misiones internacionalistas desarrolladas por las FAR en defensa de la independencia y la soberanía de los pueblos," nd, 65, Centro de Información de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, Havana (hereafter, CIFAR).

circumstances. You cannot imagine how hard it is for us to constantly rebuff these requests."[28]

However, as the Ethiopians' military situation deteriorated, the Cubans reconsidered. On November 25, 1977, Castro decided to send troops to Ethiopia to help repel the attackers. Two days later, the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Leonid Brezhnev, wrote Castro a warm message expressing "our complete agreement with your policy. We are pleased that our assessment of events in Ethiopia coincides with yours, and we sincerely thank you for your timely decision to extend internationalist assistance to Socialist Ethiopia."[29] Over the next three months, 12,000 Cuban soldiers arrived in Ethiopia and helped defeat the Somalis.

The crisis in the Horn marked the end of the tentative rapprochement between Washington and Havana; Cuba's continuing presence in Angola and support for the liberation movements of Namibia and Zimbabwe haunted the Carter administration. Castro was blunt: Cuba would not modify its policy in Africa in response to US threats or blandishments. "We feel it is deeply immoral to use the blockade [the US embargo] as a means of pressuring Cuba," he told two Carter emissaries in December 1978. "There should be no mistake – we cannot be pressured, impressed, bribed, or bought … Perhaps because the U.S. is a great power, it feels it can do what it wants and what is good for it. It seems to be saying that there are two laws, two sets of rules and two kinds of logic, one for the U.S. and one for other countries. Perhaps it is idealistic of me, but I never accepted the universal prerogatives of the U.S. – I never accepted and never will accept the existence of a different law and different rules." And he concluded, "I hope history will bear witness to the shame of the United States which for twenty years has not allowed sales of medicines needed to save lives. … History will bear witness to your shame."[30]

US–Cuban relations deteriorated further in the remaining two years of the Carter administration. Through late 1978, US officials considered Cuba's policy in Africa "the most intractable obstacle to significant improvement in bilateral relations,"[31] but following the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in the summer of 1979, Central America moved to the eye of the storm. By the time Carter stepped down, relations with Cuba were no better than they had been

28 Fidel Castro to Arnaldo Ochoa, August 16, 1977, CIFAR.
29 Leonid Brezhnev to Fidel Castro, November 27, 1977, CIFAR.
30 Memorandum of conversation, Peter Tarnoff, Robert Pastor, and Fidel Castro, December 3–4, 1978, 5, 9–10, 25, Vertical File: Cuba, JCL. On May 15, 1964, the United States banned the export of medicines to Cuba.
31 DOS, "Cuban Presence in Africa," December 28, 1978, 19, FOIA.

in Ford's last year. They would worsen through the 1980s, as Havana and Washington clashed in southern Africa and Central America.

Castro's motivations

US intelligence analysts in the 1960s were determined to figure out what was motivating Cuban foreign policy. What is striking about their conclusions is how similar they are to the explanation that emerges from the Cuban documents themselves. Not once did US intelligence reports suggest that Cuba was acting in Latin America or Africa at the behest of the Soviet Union. Occasionally, they referred to Castro's ego – "his thirst for self-aggrandizement"[32] – as a motivating factor for his foreign-policy activism, but they consistently stressed that self-defense and revolutionary fervor were his main motivations. They acknowledged that Castro had repeatedly offered to explore a modus vivendi with the United States – in 1961, 1963, and 1964. With one fleeting and "very tenuous"[33] exception in October–November 1963, he had been rebuffed. The American response was instead to attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro, to launch paramilitary operations against Cuba, and to cripple the island's economy.

The Cuban leaders concluded that the best defense was offense – not by attacking the United States directly, which would be suicidal, but by assisting revolutionary forces in the Third World, thereby gaining friends and weakening US influence. When Che Guevara went to Africa in December 1964, Thomas Hughes, the director of the State Department's bureau of intelligence and research (INR), noted that this "three-month trip was part of an important new Cuban strategy." The strategy, he argued, was based on Cuba's belief that Africa was ready for revolution and that it was in Cuba's interest to spread revolution there: it would win Havana new friends and it would challenge US influence on the continent.[34] "It was almost a reflex," Che's second-in-command in Zaire remarked. "Cuba defends itself by attacking its aggressor. This was our philosophy. The Yankees were attacking us from every side, so we had to challenge them everywhere. We had to divide their forces, so that

32 George Denney to the Secretary of State, "Cuban Foreign Policy," September 15, 1967, 4, Pol 1 Cuba, Subject – Numeric Files: 1963–73, RG 59, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, NA).

33 McGeorge Bundy, quoted in Chase, "Meeting with the President, December 19, 1963," *FRUS, 1961–1963*, vol. XI, 907.

34 Thomas Hughes to the Secretary of State, "Che Guevara's African Venture," April 19, 1965, box 20, NSFCF, LBJL.

they wouldn't be able to descend on us, or any other country, with all their might."[35]

But to explain Cuban activism in the 1960s merely in terms of self-defense would be to distort reality – a mistake US intelligence analysts did not make. There was a second motive force, as the CIA and INR freely acknowledged: Castro's "sense of revolutionary mission."[36] Report after report stressed the same point: Castro was "a compulsive revolutionary,"[37] a man with a "fanatical devotion to his cause,"[38] who was "inspired by a messianic sense of mission."[39] He believed that he was "engaged in a great crusade."[40]

History, geography, culture, and language made Latin America the Cubans' natural habitat, the place closest to Castro's and his followers' hearts, the first place where they tried to spread revolution. But Latin America was also where their freedom of movement was most circumscribed. Castro was, as the CIA observed, "canny enough to keep his risks low" in the backyard of the United States.[41] This is why fewer than forty Cubans fought in Latin America in the 1960s and why Cuba was extremely cautious about sending weapons to Latin American rebels.

In Africa, Cuba incurred fewer risks. Whereas in Latin America Havana challenged legal governments, flouted international law, and faced the condemnation of the governments of the hemisphere, in Africa it confronted colonial powers or defended established states. Above all, in Africa there was much less risk of a head-on collision with the United States. US officials barely noted the Cubans in Africa, until Cuban troops landed in Angola in November 1975.

Moreover, the Cuban leaders were convinced that their country had a special empathy for the Third World beyond the confines of Latin America and a special role to play there. The Soviets and their East European allies were white and, by Third World standards, rich; the Chinese exhibited the hubris of a rising great power, and they were unable to adapt to African and Latin American culture. By contrast, Cuba was nonwhite, poor, threatened by a powerful enemy, and culturally Latin American and African. It was,

35 Interview with Víctor Dreke, Havana, July 11, 1994.
36 Denney to the Secretary of State, "Cuban Foreign Policy," 5.
37 Special NIE, "Cuba: Castro's Problems and Prospects over the Next Year or Two," June 27, 1968, 3, box 8/9, NSF, NIE, LBJL.
38 CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Cuban Subversive Policy and the Bolivian Guerrilla Episode," May 1968, 3, box 19, NSFCF, LBJL.
39 Special NIE, "The Situation in the Caribbean through 1959," June 30, 1959, 3, NSA.
40 NIE, "The Situation in Cuba," June 14, 1960, 9, NSA.
41 Special NIE, "Cuba: Castro's Problems and Prospects over the Next Year or Two," June 27, 1968, 3, NSF, NIE, box 8/9, LBJL.

therefore, a unique hybrid: a socialist country with a Third World sensibility. This mattered in a world that was dominated, as Castro rightly understood, by the "conflict between privileged and underprivileged, humanity against 'imperialism'"[42] and where the major fault line was not between socialist and capitalist states but between developed and underdeveloped countries.

These, then, were the dual motivations of Cuban activism in the 1960s: self-preservation and revolutionary idealism. When Realpolitik clashed with revolutionary duty, sometimes the former prevailed: the Mexican government did not join the US crusade against Cuba, and in return Cuba did not criticize Mexico's corrupt and repressive regime or support armed struggle against it. At other times revolutionary duty prevailed: in 1961, Cuba risked the wrath of the French president, Charles de Gaulle, by helping the Algerian rebels, and, in 1963, it went to the defense of the Algerian Republic, even though this jeopardized an important sugar contract with Morocco.

It is impossible to know what would have happened to Cuba's foreign-policy activism in the 1960s had the costs suddenly escalated, that is, had Kennedy or Johnson been willing to consider a modus vivendi with Castro if he abandoned his support for revolution abroad. INR director Hughes wrestled with this question in the spring of 1964:

> On the one hand they [Cuba's leaders] are still dedicated revolutionaries. … Many would rather be remembered as revolutionary martyrs than economic planners. Yet on the other hand these same men are aware that the current pressing problems demand amelioration that can only be brought by muting the call to revolution, by attempting to reach live and let live arrangements with the US, and by widening trade and diplomatic contacts with the free world. Tensions between the two paths, between peaceful coexistence and the call for violent revolution will continue to exist within the Cuban hierarchy, both within and between individuals, for the foreseeable future.[43]

In the 1960s, Cuba did not have to choose between Realpolitik and idealism because the United States consistently rebuffed its attempts to discuss a rapprochement. Realpolitik and idealism ran along parallel tracks as the main motivations of Cuba's foreign policy.

But does this hold true for the 1970s? More precisely, does it help explain the dispatch of Cuban troops to Angola in November 1975? Two difficulties are apparent. First, the argument of self-defense loses much of its power because,

42 "National Policy Paper – Cuba: United States Policy," draft, July 15, 1968, 15 (quoting Castro), FOIA.

43 Hughes to the Secretary of State, "Cuba in 1964," April 17, 1964, 10–11, FOIA.

by 1975, the United States had decided to seek accommodation with Cuba. Furthermore, whereas Castro's fierce independence from the Soviet Union in the 1960s was evident for all to see, by the early 1970s Cuban criticism of Soviet policies had ended. This may suggest that the Cubans intervened in Angola in response to Soviet demands.

This might seem plausible – until you study the documents. Havana's intervention in Angola was in fact a sterling example both of Cuban independence from the Soviet Union and of Cuban idealism. It is now beyond question that, as a Soviet official states in his memoirs, the Cubans sent their troops "on their own initiative and without consulting us."[44] The evidence is so compelling that even Kissinger, who habitually dismissed the Cubans as Soviet proxies, has reconsidered. "At the time we thought he [Castro] was operating as a Soviet surrogate," he writes in his memoirs. "We could not imagine that he would act so provocatively so far from home unless he was pressured by Moscow to repay the Soviet Union for its military and economic support. Evidence now available suggests that the opposite was the case."[45]

What motivated Castro's bold move in Angola? Not Cuba's narrow interests; not realpolitik. By deciding to send troops Castro challenged Brezhnev, who opposed the dispatch of Cuban soldiers to Angola. He faced a serious military risk: Pretoria, urged on by Washington, might have escalated, and the Cuban soldiers might have faced the full South African army without any guarantee of Soviet assistance; indeed, it took two months for Moscow to begin providing very needed logistical support to airlift Cuban troops to Angola. Furthermore, the dispatch of Cuban troops jeopardized relations with the West at a moment when they were markedly improving: the United States was probing a modus vivendi; the Organization of American States had just lifted the sanctions it had imposed in 1964; and West European governments were offering Havana low-interest loans and development aid. Realpolitik required Cuba to rebuff Luanda's appeals. Had he been a client of the Soviet Union, Castro would have held back.

Castro sent troops because he understood that the victory of the Pretoria–Washington axis would have meant the victory of apartheid, tightening the grip of white domination over the people of southern Africa. It was a defining moment. As Kissinger now says: Castro "was probably the most genuine revolutionary leader then in power."[46]

44 Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1995), 362.
45 Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 816.
46 Kissinger, *Years*, 785.

The contrast between the Soviet reaction to the dispatch of Cuban troops to Angola in November 1975 and to Ethiopia in November 1977 is stark: in Angola, Cuba acted without even informing the Soviet Union, whereas in Ethiopia there was close consultation; in Angola, for two harrowing months the Cubans operated without any logistical support from the Soviet Union, whereas in Ethiopia Moscow supported the airlift of Cuban troops from day one; in Angola, the Cubans planned military operations without any Soviet input, whereas in Ethiopia, Soviets and Cubans worked together to help the Ethiopians plan military operations. As Castro told Neto, "In Angola we took the initiative, we acted on our own … It was a decision full of risks. In Ethiopia, our actions were coordinated from the very beginning with the Soviets."[47]

That Havana and Moscow agreed about what policy to pursue in Ethiopia does not mean that the Cubans were subservient to the Soviets. Arguably, the key to explaining Cuban motivations is provided by National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who told Carter in March 1977, "Castro ended up more favorably impressed by the Ethiopians. He found the Somalis, who pressed their longstanding territorial demands on Ethiopia, more irredentist than socialist."[48] Indeed, Castro had been very impressed by the Ethiopian revolution, and by Mengistu, whom he had met in March 1977. He told East German leader Erich Honecker, "a real revolution is taking place in Ethiopia. In this former feudal empire the land has been given to the peasants … Mengistu strikes me as a quiet, honest and convinced revolutionary leader."[49] Hundreds of Cuban documents covering the critical period from late 1976 through the spring of 1978 make clear that Castro's feelings were shared by the three top Cuban officials in Addis Ababa: the ambassador, the head of the military mission, and the head of intelligence. With hindsight, we know that the Cubans' impression of what was happening in Ethiopia was wrong. But this was not clear in 1977: though the process was undeniably bloody, the Ethiopian junta had decreed a radical agrarian reform and had taken unprecedented steps to foster the cultural rights of the non-Amhara population.

While the evidence is not conclusive – this would require the minutes of conversations among Cuban leaders or between Cuban and Soviet leaders in the days preceding the decision – it strongly suggests that the Cubans

47 Memorandum of conversation, Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto, Havana, January 24, 1979, 23, Archivo del Consejo de Estado, Havana, Cuba.

48 Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, [March 1977], FOIA.

49 "Niederschrift über das Gespräch zwischen Genossen Erich Honecker und Genossen Fidel Castro am Sonntag, dem 3. April 1977, von 11.00 bis 13.30 Uhr und von 15.45 bis 18.00 Uhr, im Hause des ZK," April 3, 1977, 20–21, 23, DY30 JIV 2/201/1292, SAPMO.

intervened because they believed, as Cuban intelligence stated in March 1977, that "the social and economic measures adopted by the country's [Ethiopia's] leadership are the most progressive we have seen in any underdeveloped country since the triumph of the Cuban revolution."[50] The Cubans considered the Somali invasion "unjustified and criminal,"[51] and they correctly understood that it had been encouraged by Washington. They knew that Mogadishu had violated the most sacred principle of the Organization of African Unity – the respect for the borders inherited at the time of independence. Without this principle, there could be no peace in Africa. As the NSC specialist on the Horn told Brzezinski, "The Soviets and Cubans have legality and African sentiment on their side in Ethiopia – they are helping an African country defend its territorial integrity and countering aggression."[52]

In my years of research on Cuban foreign policy I have not discovered one instance in which Cuba intervened in another country at Moscow's behest. As an NSC interagency study concluded in August 1978, "Cuba is not involved in Africa solely or even primarily because of its relationship with the Soviet Union. Rather, Havana's African policy reflects its activist revolutionary ethos and its determination to expand its own political influence in the Third World at the expense of the West (read U.S.)."[53] Castro did not send troops to Ethiopia to do the Soviets' bidding, but Soviet military and logistical support allowed him to pursue the course he wanted to take. Cuban actions in Latin America and Africa in the 1960s – small-scale operations involving a limited number of people – were conducted without direct Soviet assistance, as was the dispatch of the first Cuban troops to Angola, but they would not have been possible without the military and economic aid that Moscow gave to the island. Cuba's ability to act independently was made possible by the existence of a friendly superpower on which it depended for its economic and military lifeline, a situation reminiscent of the fact that Israel's freedom of maneuver has been made possible by the support of the United States. Although Cuba and Israel have very different foreign policies, they have one thing in common: this economic and military dependence did not translate into being a client.

50 "Síntesis analítica sobre la revolución etiopica. Proposiciones" [early March 1977], CIFAR.

51 Fidel Castro to Neto, March 7, 1978, CIFAR.

52 Henze to Brzezinski, March 1, 1978, box 1, Horn, Staff Material, NSA, Brzezinski Collection, JCL.

53 "Response, Presidential Review Memorandum 36: Soviet–Cuban Presence in Africa," August 18, 1978, 15, NSA.

Cuba and the Cold War

This brings us to the interesting question: How did the existence of a Soviet ally in the very heart of the US empire affect the Cold War? Surprisingly, the impact was minor in the 1960s, with one major exception: in 1962, Kennedy's reckless policy of aggression against Cuba precipitated the decision to install missiles in the island and brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. But the tentative détente between Moscow and Washington that followed the missile crisis was not influenced by Cuban actions. Cuba's support for armed struggle in Latin America was only an irritant in relations between the two superpowers. It did, however, change US policy in the hemisphere. The fear of a second Cuba haunted US policymakers, particularly in the early 1960s; it was midwife to the Alliance for Progress and triggered Kennedy's decision to strengthen Latin America's two most repressive institutions – the military and the police.

It was in the 1970s that Cuban foreign policy did significantly influence – twice – relations between the superpowers. The Ford administration responded to the Cuban victory in Angola by placing the SALT II negotiations and détente in the deep freeze. Cuba, it claimed, was a Soviet proxy, and the Cuban intervention a gross violation of the rules of détente. Two years later, the Carter administration responded in a similar way to Cuba's intervention in Ethiopia. In Brzezinski's famous expression, "SALT lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden."[54]

Clearly, Cuba's actions in Angola and Ethiopia damaged détente. But what lay behind America's anger? If indeed the "rules" of détente were violated in Angola, the principal culprit was the United States, which had encouraged South Africa to invade. It was this invasion that persuaded Castro to send troops. In the Horn, US ambivalence encouraged the Somalis to invade Ethiopia, threatening the principle of the inviolability of the territorial integrity of African states. The Cuban troops upheld that principle. What died in the sands of the Ogaden was the delusion of a one-sided détente, in which the enemies of the United States did not have the right to send troops anywhere, whatever the provocation, whatever the violation of international law, whereas the friends of the United States did, as, for example, when the French and Belgians sent troops to Zaire in 1978 (aboard US planes) and the South Africans invaded Angola in 1975.

54 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 189.

What did the Soviets gain from their alliance with Cuba? Not much. Khrushchev's attempt to use Cuba to close the missile gap ended in abject failure. Soviet hopes that Cuba would be a springboard for further advances in Latin America backfired – Havana's support for armed struggle hindered Moscow's diplomatic efforts in Latin America in the 1960s. Angola and Ethiopia became a drain on scarce Soviet resources; true, they bought billions of dollars of Soviet weapons, but mostly on credit, and the debts were never paid. The major benefit that the Soviet Union derived from its alliance with Cuba – an obstreperous, proud, and difficult ally that did not shy from confrontation – was enhanced prestige in the Third World.

If we view the Cold War as a global struggle rather than merely a bipolar one, Cuban foreign policy had a profound impact. In this struggle, Castro's battalions included tens of thousands of Cuban doctors and other aid workers who labored in some of the poorest regions of the world, at no cost or at very little cost to the host country. And they included the tens of thousands of underprivileged youths from Latin America, Africa, and Asia who studied in Cuba, all expenses paid. This aid began in the 1960s, became massive in the late 1970s, and continues despite the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Cuba's support for armed struggle failed in Latin America, but not in Africa: Cuban troops helped restrain Morocco in 1963; they provided valuable aid to the MPLA in Congo Brazzaville in 1965–66; and they lent decisive assistance to the rebels of Guinea-Bissau in their quest for independence. Havana's most impressive success was to change the course of southern African history in defiance of Washington's best efforts to stop it. In 1975, Cuba prevented the establishment of a government in Luanda beholden to the apartheid regime. Cuba's victory unleashed a tidal wave that washed over southern Africa. "Black Africa is riding the crest of a wave generated by the Cuban success in Angola," noted the *World*, South Africa's major black newspaper. "Black Africa is tasting the heady wine of the possibility of realizing the dream of total liberation."[55]

The impact was more than psychological. Cuba's victory forced Kissinger to turn against the white minority regime in Rhodesia and spurred Carter to tirelessly work for majority rule there. It also marked the real beginning of Namibia's war of independence. For the next twelve years, Cuba assisted the Namibian rebels, and Cuban troops helped the Angolan army hold the line against bruising South African incursions into Angola. Finally, in 1988, Cuban diplomatic skill combined with its prowess on the battlefield were

55 *World* (Johannesburg), February 24, 1976, 4.

instrumental in forcing Pretoria to withdraw from Angola and to agree to the independence of Namibia.

This was Cuba's contribution to what Castro has called "the most beautiful cause,"[56] the struggle against apartheid. There is no other instance in modern history in which a small, underdeveloped country has changed the course of events in a distant region – humiliating one superpower and repeatedly defying the other. There is no other instance in which an underdeveloped country has embarked on a program of technical assistance of such scope and generosity. The Cold War framed three decades of Castro's revolutionary zeal, but Castro's vision was always larger than it. For Castro, the battle against imperialism – his life's *raison d'être* – is more than the struggle against the United States: it is the war against despair and oppression in the Third World.

56 Fidel Castro, in "Indicaciones concretas del Comandante en Jefe que guiarán la actuación de la delegación cubana a las conversaciones en Luanda y las negociaciones en Londres (23–4–88)," 5, CIFAR.