Russia and Cuba: “doomed” comrades?

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Abstract

In 1991 Vitaly Churkin, a Soviet Minister for Foreign Economic Cooperation, stated that economic links between Russia and Cuba were “doomed” to continue. This gave a very negative impression of the relationship, but quickly he appeared to be incorrect because by the end of 1992 little seemed to remain of the 30-year relationship. However, as the 1990s progressed, the relationship continued to function and then improve. Fundamental to this were the principles of the realist paradigm of International Relations, which has been vital since the relationship’s inception in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, in conjunction with a long-term legacy. The outcome is that Russia and Cuba are indeed “doomed” comrades.

In August 1991, Vitaly Churkin, a Soviet Minister of Foreign Economic Cooperation, stated in an interview that economic relations between Moscow and Havana were “doomed” to continue. He believed this was the result of the long-term network of connections that had appeared between the two countries during 30-years of their relationship (Moscow, 1991) and these relations have been fundamentally altered by the political and economic reforms that had swept through the Soviet Union in the mid- to late 1980s.

Very soon after making this statement it appeared that Churkin was wrong as by the end of 1992 diplomatic relations remained, but little else of the ‘special’ 30-year relationship. However, remarkably as the 1990s progressed it seemed that this sentiment still ‘rung true,’ because from the mid-1990s onwards the relationship between Moscow and Havana began to improve both politically and economically. In the twenty-first century this trend continued. The relationship’s present robust nature was illustrated in late 2008 and early 2009 when Dmitry Medvedev and Raúl Castro visited Havana and Moscow, respectively.

In 1992 experts had certainly not predicted, or expected, this upturn in the relationship. Traditionally Soviet–Cuban relations had been thought of as being underpinned by Marxism–Leninism and realism (Levesque, 1978; Marshall, 1987), with aspects of the traditional paradigms of Cuban foreign policy also being significant. (Erisman 2000, pp. 22–49) After the disintegration of the Soviet Union some of these receded in importance with the significance of Marxism–Leninism evaporating. However, others remained important in the relationship that developed after 1992. Moreover, Russian–Cuban relations rapidly became the almost ‘forgotten’ relationship of International Relations as scholarly attention moved elsewhere. The result has been that very little has been written on the relationship since 1992 (Miller, 2005; Sanchez and Alejandro, 2007; Katz, 2006; HapereskJ, 2010) This article will examine these theories and their continuing influence on the relationship, many of which fail to explain why more than diplomatic relations continued to function in the years from 1992 to 1995, highlighted by “sugar for oil” exchanges. Furthermore, these also fail to explain why in 1996 Russia was Cuba’s chief trading partner, and also the timing of the upturn in the relationship. (Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, 2000, pp. VI-5–VI-7).

This article will examine the importance of realism in relations between Moscow and Havana in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. It will argue that though realism has been a key constant throughout the prolonged 30-year period, but that it is a combination of realism and a legacy from the Soviet era that provide insight to these important questions. This is somewhat ironic due to the negative tone of Churkin’s quote, but the result is that for the foreseeable future Russia and Cuba are, indeed, “doomed” to remain comrades.
From boom to bust

During the Soviet era, Marxism–Leninism was crucial to Soviet–Cuban relations and formed part of the foundations of the relationship for 30 years. However, this was not what first attracted the Kremlin to the Cuban Revolution as Fidel Castro did not proclaim himself and thus the revolution to be Marxist–Leninist until December 1961. (Revolución, 2 December 1961, p. 1) Moreover, Aleksandr Alekseev, the first Soviet citizen granted a visa to travel to Cuba after the victory of the revolution, stated in an interview that the Soviet Union was unsure of what type of revolution had actually taken place. However, he did say that the anti-American nature of the new regime in Havana was important in stimulating Soviet interest in it. (Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 27) The close personal relationship that quickly developed between Nikhita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro was also significant for the burgeoning relationship; but the realist paradigm of International Relations was vital for the relationship’s inception.

Soviet foreign policy may have been underpinned by Marxist–Leninism, but realism was also significant within it, which was evident soon after the victory of the Russian Revolution. (Melograni, 1989) Realism is traceable to the writings of Thucydides (1998) on the Peloponnesian War with a variety of different strands evolving over time. However, a commonality does exist because at the core of realism is the principle that sovereign states are the key actors in the international system, but that this system is inherently anarchic. It is believed that states act to safeguard their own interests as their pre-eminent goal is their own survival. This often results in states attempting to maximise their own power with Hans Morgenthau having famously written, “...international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power.” (Morgenthau, 1955, p. 25) Within this struggle John Mearsheimer has suggested that states are constantly trying to maximise their power at the expense of other states. (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 14) Moreover, Kenneth Waltz in Theory of International Politics wrote “…self-help is necessarily the principle of action.” (Waltz 1979, p. 111) Realism became particularly popular during the Cold War as both the Soviet Union and United States competed with each other to maximise their power at the expense of the others in an attempt to safeguard their own security.

This was crucial for the increased Soviet interest in the Developing World after Joseph Stalin’s death in March 1953 (Light, 1988, pp. 99–124) Soviet rhetoric may again have focused on Marxism–Leninism, but in attempting to get newly independent countries to ally themselves with the Soviet Union the Kremlin was in reality trying to enhance its own influence and power. This also had the consequence of reducing U.S. power in the Developing World, thus further increasing Soviet power. In sum, this returns to both Morgenthau’s quote, but also Mearsheimer’s ideas on power.

This was also fundamental to the Kremlin’s interest in the Cuban Revolution. In addition, so were the island’s geographical location, its shared history with the United States and the timing of the victory of the Cuban Revolution, at the height of the Cold War. The survival of a pro-Soviet regime in Havana was a spectacular propaganda coup for the Kremlin. Furthermore, it also perfectly illustrated to Washington that the Soviet Union was a powerful global actor. Returning to Mearsheimer’s ideas, it also reduced U.S. power, thus further increasing Soviet power. It was realism, in conjunction with geopolitics, that was crucial to the inception of Soviet–Cuban relations as it was the island’s geostrategic significance that first drew Moscow towards the Cuban Revolution in the late 1950s and early 1960s. (Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 27).

In Cuba’s Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World, Michael Erisman has written of five paradigms that have dominated Cuban foreign policy since January 1959. These are: realism or realist pragmatism, a revolutionary crusade, the surrogate/super-client, Fidelista personalismo and dependency and counter dependency. All five have attracted scholarly attention at certain times throughout the revolutionary period (Erisman, 2000, pp. 22–49). In the 1960s, forms of Cuban dependency on the Soviet Union developed, ultimately providing the external policy context in which the relationship evolved. However, it was realist thinking in the Cuban leadership that was key for the island’s relationship with Moscow.

From its beginning, the Cuban Revolution faced aggression from Washington, which ultimate goal was the demise of the new regime in Havana. In the bipolar situation of the Cold War of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Cuban regime realigned itself with the Soviet Union in order to maximise its independence from the United States. This resulted in the island’s increasing dependence on the Kremlin’s protection and largess, but also its survival. This realist thinking was further evident in December 1961 in Castro’s proclamation that he and thus the Cuban Revolution were Marxist–Leninist. The timing of this announcement was also significant as it was made in the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Its purpose was to try and obtain increased security guarantees from Moscow, as the Cuban leader would have known that the Soviet leadership could not let a socialist regime in such a geostrategic location fail. (Shearman, 1987, p. 11)

The relationship with Moscow continued to be vital for the Cuban regime as it guaranteed its survival both in terms of security and also economics. This dependence also allowed Castro to pursue his grander ambitions of being a significant world figure and to fight global imperialism. Despite this increasing dependence on the Soviet Union, Castro still managed to maintain some level of independence from Moscow; this was most evident in the radicalism of the 1960s. Bain has argued that the first five-year trade agreement between Moscow and Havana, signed in January 1964, was vital for this radicalism as it guaranteed the island’s economic security for five years. (Bain, 2007, p. 23) This radicalism gave rise to the ideas of both Cuban foreign policy based on a revolutionary crusade and also Fidel personalismo. However, without the special relationship with the Soviet Union, this radicalism would not have been possible.

Cuba’s radical external and internal policies of the 1960s failed, as illustrated by the death of Ernesto “Che” Guevara in Bolivia in October 1967 and the failure of 1970 sugar harvest, respectively. Castro was forced to yield to the Kremlin. The outcome was the ‘Sovietization’ of the Cuban Revolution in the 1970s. (Mesa-Lago, 1974) However, even as this process took place, the Cuban leader was able to exert forms of leverage on the relationship. This became possible due to at least two
factors – the dispatch of Cuban military personnel to Africa in the mid-1970s and the increasing role which Cuba played in the Non-Aligned Movement. The latter culminated in Castro’s presidency over this organisation in 1979 (Dominguez, 1989); and due to the nature of Soviet–Cuban relations, Soviet influence in Africa and the Non-Aligned Movement also increased. The outcome was that the island had become the Soviet’s valuable super-client. Conversely, U.S. influence waned, propping up even greater increase of the Soviet power. Without the realignment of Cuba with the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it is highly unlikely that the Cuban Revolution would have acquired a global presence by the end of the 1970s.

This adherence to realist principles, and need for Soviet largess and protection, remained important in the early 1980s. Superpower relations deteriorated with the Cuban leadership believing that a U.S. invasion was still possible. These fears were only heightened after the events in Grenada in October 1983 (Shearman, 1987, pp. 65–66). In its turn, the Cuban Revolution remained important for the Kremlin. The island’s status as the Soviet Union’s super-client remained. Also its geostrategic significance had not receded, and even increased with the deterioration in Soviet–U.S. relations in the early 1980s.

This began to be questioned in the late 1980s due to the impact of the reforms implemented in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev. These reforms had numerous effects, many of which were unforeseen for Soviet–Cuban relations and the Cuban Revolution (Bain, 2007, pp. 41–91). In addition, they also fundamentally altered international relations and improved superpowers’ relations. The upshot of this was a reduction in the geostrategic importance of Cuba for the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, Soviet–Cuban relations came to an end only with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991. It became quickly apparent that though the diplomatic relations remained little else of the ‘special’ 30-year relationship did. Not only had the importance of Marxism–Leninism evaporated from the relationship between Moscow and Havana, but so did Cuban leverage within it. Fidel Castro was therefore no longer able to influence the relationship between Moscow and Havana as he had previously been able to. Moreover, in the early 1990s, the Kremlin had to come to terms with, in general, its loss of power in realist terms. Moscow was no longer the capital of a superpower with an expansive foreign policy. This too was crucial to the deterioration in the relationship between Moscow and Havana in the years immediately after the end of Soviet–Cuban relations; highlighting the continuing importance of the realist model within it.

In addition, realism continued its importance in the United States’–Cuba policy. The Cold War may have been confined to history, but Washington’s policies towards Cuba did not mirror this. (Dominguez, 1997, pp. 49–75) Washington attempted to speed the demise of the Cuban Revolution with legislation such as the Cuban Democracy Act, or Torricelli Bill. Furthermore, the U.S. administration also continued to try and bring pressure to bear on Moscow to sever its remaining ties with Havana. This was most noticeable in the Cuban Liberty and Solidarity Act, or the Helms-Burton Act, passed by the U.S Congress in September 1996 (US: Cuban Liberty, 1996). This act contained a section that specifically focused on the Russian use of the Lourdes listening post on the outskirts of Havana. However, it also led Professor Eugenio Larin, Director of Latin American Studies at the Institute of Cold War History of the Russian Academy of Sciences to write, “In order to improve political ties Washington demanded of B.N. Yeltsin that he must cut ties with Cuba. This course of action dominated the 1990s.” (Larin, 2007, p. 164) This was the perfect illustration of strong powers being able to ‘influence’ weaker ones, in accordance with the realism theory.

It appeared that Russia was indeed following this path, as its foreign policy changed drastically in the early 1990s. If this change was not a direct result of the U.S. pressure, it was hoped that its more pro-Western foreign policy would win it favour in Washington. The Kremlin believed that this may subsequently lead to the United States providing aid and assistance for Russia’s difficult economic transition. This was important for the change in foreign policy. Linked to this, and also significant, was the victory of the Liberal Westernizers in the ideological battle which had raged within Russia. (Light, 1994, pp. 33–100).

Politically the downturn in the relationship was evident in Russian voting behaviour at various United Nations (UN) forums. Significantly, Russia abstained in the vote in the UN on the Torricelli Bill. The Kreml also voted for the US backed resolution at the UN Human Rights Convention in Geneva that criticised Cuba’s human rights record (Izvestia, 12 March 1993, p. 3)
The economic impact at the end of Soviet–Cuban relations is illustrated by the downward trajectory of Graph 1. Bilateral trade in the years from 1992 to 1995 decreased dramatically in comparison to the Soviet era. It was less than one billion pesos throughout. The removal of Marxism–Leninism from the Russian–Cuban relationship and the change in Russian foreign policy in general were important for the fall in trade. Not less important was the fact that Russian companies were in no position to trade with Cuba as they struggled to survive the Russian economic transition. The effect of this for the Cuban Revolution was devastating, prompting Raúl Castro in 1993 to comment that it was “as if a nuclear bomb had exploded” (Castro, 1993, p. 22).

The continuation and improvement of the relations

The relationship between Moscow and Havana did unquestionably suffer a sudden and dramatic downturn in the immediate aftermath of the implosion of the Soviet Union. Despite this, even during the worst years of the relationship between Russia and Cuba, 1992 to 1995, more than mere diplomatic relations continued to function with a semblance of trade between the two countries being vital. A key component within this was “sugar for oil” swaps. An agreement involving 1.5 m tons of sugar being exchanged for 4 m tons of oil was signed as early as 1993. (Izvestia, 20 June 1992, p. 4; Sevodnya, 1993, p. 3)

Highly important for the continuation of trade was a legacy from the Soviet era. The existence of a legacy between former colonies and colonial powers is not uncommon. This is by no means to suggest that Cuba was part of a Soviet ‘empire’ in the traditional sense, but due to the length and nature of Soviet–Cuban relations it would have been surprising if some type of legacy had not existed. Churkin had alluded to this in August 1991 in negative tones. However, this legacy also includes the Kremlin’s decision in the 1990s to keep the listening post at Lourdes open, the Cuban debt to the Soviet Union, the continued use of Soviet machinery on the Caribbean island and Cuba having unique Russian language ability in Latin America. Last but not least should be mentioned educational exchange programmes and the existence of polovinas, children born on the island to Russian and Cuban parents.

It is this Soviet legacy in conjunction with the realist model that is crucial for understanding trade at this time. Both countries faced dire economic situations that necessitated both governments act to safeguard their own interests. If they had not, neither government may have survived. Thus, Waltz’s ideas of self-help manifested themselves clearly in Moscow and Havana where both utilised the legacy from the Soviet era for their own advantage. The outcome was that even after the end of Soviet–Cuban relations, Moscow and Havana appeared to be “doomed” to continue trading.

The gravity of the situation was made worse by the complexities of the international financial system making it difficult for both Russia and Cuba to acquire credits due to the seriousness of their economic situations. (Marquetti, 1997, p. 14) Moreover, the continuing U.S. embargo only further complicated the Cuban situation. The result was a dearth of alternative sources of these important commodities available to either. Furthermore, by not making these purchases on the open market the cost of expensive middlemen could also be avoided. On this, Yevgeny Bai, the Izvestia Cuban correspondent wrote, “Cuba sold the sugar that it had produced last year anyway…while we were forced to buy sugar on the world market through middlemen and at higher prices” (Bai, 1992). In sum, it was easier and cheaper for “sugar for oil” exchanges to take place rather than for both countries purchase them on the open market.

In specific relation to the Russian situation, the decimation of the country’s agricultural production due to the severity of the economic transition was also significant. In the Soviet era, Soviet sugar mills had been able to work on a 12-month cycle due to the import of Cuban sugar as the two countries’ sugar harvests are out of sync with each other. The end of Soviet–Cuban relations had put a sudden stop to this practice, making a bad agricultural situation in Russia even worse. This only made the “sugar for oil” swaps still more important for Russia.

In 1996 bilateral trade increased by 245% from the 1995 level to 616,084 million pesos. This made Russia Cuba’s largest trading partner, which had certainly not been expected or predicted by experts in 1992. (Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, 2000, VI–5–VI–7.) The realist model was once again prominent in this process because the Cuban economic situation was so dire that it necessitated the Castro regime implement limited market-type reforms in the 1990s. (Ley de la Inversion Extranjera, 1995) The island’s government may have had an ideological aversion to free-market economics, but by implementing these reforms they had most certainly acted out of self-help in order to try and safeguard their own survival. Simply, many did not expect the Cuban Revolution to survive the end of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Oppenheimer, 1992).

These economic reforms have had various results, but what they have done is to help the island’s economy recover from its low point of 1993 when total trade fell to just $3.2b (Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, 2000, VI–5–VI–7). This is despite Washington’s aforementioned various attempts to tighten the economic embargo against the island. In addition, these reforms have radically changed the composition of Cuba’s trading partners, as the island now trades on a truly global scale, while previously having been removed from the international stage for a number of decades. This occurred with great speed and by the middle of 1995 over nine different countries were involved in 212 joint ventures. Moreover, in the period from 1998 to 2001, a further 28 countries became involved in 190 joint enterprises. In comparison, in 1991 there had only been 11 joint ventures that did not involve socialist bloc countries (Pérez- López, 1997, pp. 33–34).

Another interesting phenomenon resulted from the Cuban economic reforms when the Russian pre-eminent place in the Cuban economy has been usurped. In the years 1995–1997, 260 joint projects were opened in Cuba with foreign investment but only two of these were with Russian money (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 14 November 1997, p. 2). Very quickly Russian companies wished to address this situation with Putin stating during his trip to the island in December 2000 that, ‘We lost a lot of positions which were a top priority for both countries’ (Newman, 2000).
The increase in Russian interest in the Cuban economy was aided by the country’s recovery from its own economic transition. However, it was not part of the globalisation process per se, because at this time Russian companies did not show a similar interest in the rest of Latin America. Instead, it was fuelled by a desire to try and address the loss of their pre-eminent position within the island’s economy. Moreover, Russia’s foreign competitors were utilising the huge Soviet investment to their own advantage. On this the journalist Nikolai Vlasov has written, “As last year’s experience has shown, the Canadian, Spanish and Mexican companies started immediately to fill the vacuum formed after the curtailment of Russian–Cuban investment cooperation. They become firmly established in the most promising branches, using with great benefit the industrial infrastructure created with our country’s assistance.” (Vlasov, 1992) The Cuban economic reforms, most certainly underpinned by realist thinking, had the unforeseen consequence of increasing Russian interest in the Cuban economy. Furthermore, this occurred while political bilateral relations remained strained. The outcome was that the two countries appeared to be engaged in a “doomed” relationship.

With all aspects outlined above, the economic aspect of the relationship, became fundamental to Russian–Cuban relations since 1992. It explains why in the early to mid-1990s the relationship did not revert to that which could be expected to exist between a large Europe–Asian power and a Caribbean island. Moreover, it was also crucial in the timing of the upturn in the relationship with this commencing before the change in Russian foreign policy which would also impact positively on it.

Russia may have been Cuba’s leading trading partner in 1996 but since then other countries have surpassed Russia in importance in the Cuban economy. Before the year 2000 Canada and Spain became key trading partners for the island with China and Venezuela replacing them at the start of the twenty-first century. Table 1 illustrates the extent to which Cuban trade with Canada and Spain has surpassed the levels of Russian–Cuban trade. The Caribbean island conducting increasingly large levels of trade with these countries could have been expected as Canada and Spain never broke ties with Revolutionary Cuba. In addition, Russian–Cuban trade in the last years of the twentieth century was adversely affected by the 1998 Russian economic crash.

The gap between the levels of Russian–Cuban trade and that which took place with Beijing and Caracas is even greater, illustrated in Table 2. Again, it is not surprising that Havana is conducting large levels of trade with these two countries due to the political affinity that exists between them. Furthermore, Cuban–Venezuelan trade is further bolstered by the existence of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).

Russian–Cuban trade has suffered; in 2003 it comprised a mere 3% of Cuba’s total trade (Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, 2008, pp. 8.4–8.6). In March 2003 Leonid Reyman (2003), Russian Minister of Communication and Information Technology, showed concern at this when he said, “We are worried about a slowdown in the bilateral trade and economic relations and we would like to reverse the process with the Cuban side” (Moscow, 2003). However, in the twenty-first century bilateral trade has diversified. This is not only significant in itself, but is also important as a result of the fall in the Cuban sugar harvest due to the significance of this commodity to bilateral trade in the early to mid-1990s. This diversification was evident during Putin’s December 2000 trip when an exchange deal was signed for 2001–2005 involving Cuban sugar, rum, medicines and medical equipment being exchanged for Russian oil, machinery and chemicals (Reuters, 2000).

Diversification has continued. In May 2005 a Cuban trade fair was held in the Russian capital attended by 132 companies from the Moscow area while in November 2006 there were a considerable number of Russian companies in attendance at the Havana international trade fair. This included Grupo GAZ, Salyut, RusiaAutomotriz, Zvezda S.A, Transchemexport S.R.L and Rosoboronexport amongst others. Moreover, Ricardo Alarcón, President of the Cuban National Assembly, spoke of Cuba’s desire for an increase in economic relations during a trip to Moscow in 2006 (ITAR-TASS, 2005; El Ruso Cubano, 2 November 2006a, b) This was illustrated by the Cuban purchase of three IL 96–300 and two Tu-204-100 passenger planes, but also one Tu-204CE cargo plane (RIA Novosti, 5 August 2008).

Kamaz, the truck maker, and the Norilsk Nickel Company have spoken of desire to increase company’s links with Cuba. Kamaz plans to produce trucks on the island and not just provide service facilities, while Norilsk Nickel hopes to have a joint agreement with Cubanique at Cuba’s Nicaro Mines. Furthermore, Gazprom wishes to conduct exploratory drilling for oil in Cuban waters in the Gulf of Mexico. Production and refining will commence if this proves profitable. If this comes to fruition it

### Table 1
Cuban Trade with Russia, Canada and Spain 1997–2000, (thousands of pesos).

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<th>1997</th>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>415,265</td>
<td>490,135</td>
<td>427,321</td>
<td>435,877</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>778,939</td>
<td>872,262</td>
<td>908,469</td>
<td>899,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>667,372</td>
<td>749,279</td>
<td>881,180</td>
<td>893,245</td>
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### Table 2
Cuban trade with Russia, China, Venezuela 2001–2009 (thousands of pesos).

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<th>2001</th>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>486,420</td>
<td>191,092</td>
<td>194,402</td>
<td>362,358</td>
<td>283,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>622,231</td>
<td>578,939</td>
<td>985,007</td>
<td>2,446,404</td>
<td>1,687,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>973,412</td>
<td>858,433</td>
<td>2,099,958</td>
<td>2,693,639</td>
<td>3,138,136</td>
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Anuario Estadístico de Cuba (2009, 8.4–8.6).
could completely ‘revolutionise’ the relationship, bring new dynamism to it and radically change the composition of bilateral trade (RIA Novosti, 20 November 2008; 21 November 2008; Reuters, 29 June 2010).

Though Russian–Cuban trade has diversified in the twenty-first century it has unquestionably fallen from its ‘highpoint’ of 1996. Nevertheless, this has not adversely affected the relationship in general because the upturn that commenced in the mid-1990s also had a political underpinning. And again realism played its own and specific role. As it has been important in the political downturn in the immediate aftermath of the implosion of Soviet–Cuban relations, it again can partly explain the political improvement in the relationship. This was the result of a changing Russian foreign policy that saw Moscow once again increasing its influence in global politics.

A general increase in Russian nationalism in the 1990s was important too. It was partly prompted by a dislike of the country’s treatment by the West in general, and the United States in particular. Moscow was also unhappy at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion to the east and its treatment of their fellow Serbs in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Yeltsin described the NATO bombing of Belgrade in March 1999 as “undisguised aggression” (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 1999, p. 2). In addition, he believed that “…the Kosovo crisis increased the anti-Western sentiment in society” (Yeltsin, 2000, p. 271). Furthermore, the Kremlin also disapproved of the perceived lack of assistance from the West which, it hoped, a more pro-Western foreign policy of the early 1990s would herald. On this, Dr Rodolfo Humpierre of Centro de Estudios Europeos (CEE) in Havana has said that all Russia actually received from the United States was “chewing gum, Coca Cola and McDonalds” (Humpierre, 2008). New trends in Russian foreign policy eventually lead to the appearance of what Grachev has described as a “Putin Doctrine.” This consisted of both a Soviet heritage and features from this era, and also nationalistic sentiments and anti-Western reflexes (Grachev, 2005, pp. 262–264).

The Kremlin’s relationship with Havana was very important in this as an improved relationship with the Caribbean island perfectly illustrated to Washington that Moscow was once again a significant global power. The upshot was an increase in the geostrategic importance of Cuba for the Kremlin. This is by no means to suggest that it has returned to the level of the Cold War era. However, the desire for Russia to once again be a global player in international relations was an important reason for the improvement in the relationship, and further increased the prominence of realism in it.

Also important for this change in Russian foreign policy was that as the 1990s progressed, feelings of nostalgia for a more glorious past increased in Russia. For many, part of this process was a change in the perception of the Cuban Revolution in comparison to late 1980s and early 1990s when it had been extremely negative. This has taken various forms but was evident in the Russian State Duma hearings on Russian–Cuban relations held in January 1995, the opening of a Russian Orthodox Church in Havana in late 2008 and also a 2006 Russian opinion poll that showed the respondents to be positive about Cuba, the Revolution and Fidel Castro’s historical legacy (Bain, 2007, pp. 73–91). The above factors further improved relations between Russia and Cuba, and their analysis explains why Moscow and Havana became politically closer in a number of different issues. This was most obvious in their shared dislike of the unipolar nature of international relations in the 1990s (Gornostayev, 2000; Trabajadores, 30 January 2009).

Cuban foreign policy also underwent change in the last decade of the twentieth century. The disappearance of the socialist bloc countries had necessitated the need for the Caribbean island to acquire political allies in the post-Soviet world especially as it continued to face a hostile United States that tried to herald its demise. Again, the principles of realism became prominent, as the very survival of the Revolution was at stake. The outcome was a diversification in the island’s foreign policy in order to achieve what Erisman has described as economic and political space (Erisman, 2006, pp. 3–5). Closer Russian–Cuban relations certainly did not go against this process, but these changes in foreign policy are important in explaining the improvement in the relationship.

These changes in Russian and Cuban foreign policies have impacted on the relationship still further. In the twenty-first century, Moscow has shown an increased interest in Latin America, which has subsequently promoted the importance of its relationship with Havana. Foremost it made sense for Moscow to begin this process with the country it knew the best in the region, Cuba. Moreover, unless the Kremlin had good relations with Havana, it could have led to awkward assumptions from other Latin American countries that Russia had abandoned a former close ally in the face of continuing U.S. aggression. This is significant because due to the changes made in its foreign policy in the 1990s, Cuba now enjoys cordial relations with the vast majority of the region. The importance of Cuba for Moscow was highlighted in the lead up to Medvedev’s visit to the island in late 2008 when he called Cuba, “…one of our key partners in Latin America” (RIA Novosti, 21 November 2008). The result was a further increase in the geostrategic importance of Cuba to Russia.

The political aspect of the relationship has not enjoyed a continuous upward trajectory since the mid-1990s as tensions appeared in January 2002 with the Russian decision to close the Lourdes listening post. It would seem that U.S. pressure had been significant in Putin’s decision, at least Cuba certainly believed this to be the case (Castro and Ramonet, 2007, p. 287). These tensions did not last long as political and economic reasons have dovetailed to produce the present robust nature of the relationship.

This was illustrated by Dimitry Medvedev and Raúl Castro visiting Havana and Moscow, respectively, in a three month period in late 2008 and early 2009. Moreover, such high-ranking visits in such a short period of time had not even take place during the Soviet era. During his trip to Moscow, Raúl Castro spoke of the negative impact of the global economic crisis on both countries and of corresponding “dynamism” and vitality of their relationship. Regarding the relationship in general he noted “…historic relations based on friendship and mutual respect, that was entering a new stage based on the excellent talks and exchanges which had taken place in Havana in November” (Trabajadores, 30 January 2009). Thus emphasizing not only
the importance attached to the contemporary relationship, but also their longstanding nature and the importance of the historical legacy in it.

In April 2009, Barack Obama introduced changes to both levels of remittances that Cuban Americans can send to their families still on the island and also the travel restrictions which they face. In January 2011 further travel restrictions for U.S. citizens were eased. (Thompson, 2011) It is highly likely that Cuban–U.S. relations will undergo more changes in the future. However, this will not herald an end to Russian–Cuban relations as a result of the foundations of the relationship which have evolved over the last 15 years, which are both political and economic. The result is that for the foreseeable future, Russian–Cuban relations are likely to continue in their current form.

Conclusions

Realism has constantly impacted on the relationship between Moscow and Havana since its inception in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Cuba’s relationship with Russia exhibited a mixture of at least two paradigms: dependence and realism. It is possible to presume that somewhat different forms of dependence on the Soviet Union may have resulted from this impact but the new Cuba’s government believed that this was a price worth paying to acquire maximum independence from the United States. At the same time the Castro regime was able to acquire forms of leverage within its relationship with Moscow. However, it continued to require Soviet largesse and protection throughout the 30-year duration of Soviet–Cuban relations.

In the immediate aftermath of the implosion of the Soviet Union, it appeared that relations between Moscow and Havana had reverted to that which could be expected to exist between a large Eurasian power and a Caribbean island. Diplomatic relations continued to function, but little else of the ‘special’ 30-year relationship remained. The disappearance of Marxist–Leninist underpinning and the impact of aspects of the realist paradigm of International Relations were both keys to this relationship.

With regards politics, realism continued to impinge on the relationship and can partly explain the upturn in relations that began in the mid–1990s. This was caused partially by a change in Russian foreign policy which saw Moscow attempt to reassert itself in the international arena. Correspondingly, this increased the geostrategic importance of the island for the Kremlin. This trend became even more pronounced in the twenty-first century due to Russian interest in Latin America. However, this does not fully explain the relationship as political reasons leave a number of important questions unanswered. These are: (1) why did more than diplomatic relations continued to function in the years 1992 to 1995? (2) Why was Russia Cuba’s chief trading partner in 1996? and (3) Why did the upturn in relations commence before the change in Russian foreign policy?

The economic aspect of the relationship that continued to function, although at a hugely reduced level, is a key for understanding the bilateral relationship in the post-Soviet era. Moreover, after 1992, it very quickly became apparent that the relationship was indeed “doomed” to continue as a result of a huge legacy from the Soviet era. Many ex-colonies repeat this process with their former colonial masters. This is not to suggest that Cuba was part of a Soviet ‘empire’ in the traditional sense, but the multifaceted Soviet legacy was vital to the relationship’s continuation from 1992 to 1995. It is this, in conjunction with the principles of realism, that provide the answers to the above questions. Both the Russian and Cuban governments faced dire economic situations in the early to mid-1990s and utilised this legacy to safeguard their positions and survival.

In addition, the Cuban economic reforms of the 1990s also impacted positively on the relationship. Realism was key to these reforms as they were designed to help the Revolution survive the loss of its socialist trading partners. However, an unforeseen consequence was to stimulate Russian interest in the Cuban economy due to the loss of their pre-eminent place in it. Again, this was only possible due to the existence of Soviet–Cuban relations with this process beginning before the change to Russian foreign policy commenced. In sum, realism and the Soviet legacy have been crucial in the post-Soviet era.

Thus, Churkin’s statement regarding relations between Moscow and Havana, made in August 1991 and extremely negative in tone, continues to ‘ring true’ today. This may not have occurred for the reasons that he thought, but Moscow and Havana do indeed remain “doomed” to be comrades for the foreseeable future.

References

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