Between
Compliance and Conflict
East Asia, Latin America, and the "New" Pax Americana

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CHAPTER 8
Cuba and the Pax Americana: U.S.–Cuban Relations Post-1990

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Introduction

Their world tumbled. In 1989, Cuban leaders watched the dominoes tumble in Eastern Europe as one after another of Europe’s communist regimes came to an end. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Cuban–Soviet relations had been deep and multifaceted, built not on the back of occupying Soviet military forces, as in Eastern Europe, but on a genuine partnership. Cuba was the Soviet Union’s best ally during the Cold War.

Cuba differed from the four surviving East Asian communist regimes: China, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. Unlike all four, and alone among all Soviet allies during the Cold War, Cuba deployed hundreds of thousands of troops far from the homeland to fight in four wars from the early 1960s to the late 1980s (one in North Africa, two in Angola, and one in East Africa). In contrast, East Asian communist governments fought wars only with neighboring countries. Cuba also deployed tens of thousands of military and civilian advisers, including teachers, health care personnel, sports coaches, and others through dozens of countries—a degree of voluntary globalization far beyond that practiced by the East Asian
communist governments, relative to the size of their respective populations. Castro's Cuba was also a sustained multilateralist. Unlike China, Vietnam, or Korea, Cuba belonged to the UN uninterrupted. Cuba was an active and influential member of the UN family of organizations to an extent that none of the East Asian communist governments — not even China — had been. Cuba served as president of the Nonaligned Movement for several years starting in 1979. Cuba sustained diplomatic relations with a large number of countries and trade relations with a significant number including most major U.S. allies. In these respects, Cuba is especially unlike North Korea and Laos, which have long operated at the far edge of the international system, practicing autarchy. Cuba has been the single most internationalist communist regime.

The legacies of Cuba's past international behavior and the sudden implosion of the world that Cuban leaders had known shaped its government's response to the new unchallenged U.S. primacy in military force, worldwide predominance in political power, dynamism in global economic reach, missionary zeal in propounding its ideological creed, and combating international terrorism. Unlike North Korea, Cuba would not hunker down in a metaphorical cave and shout threats at the world beyond its boundaries.

At home, Cuba adjusted sufficiently to ensure its authoritarian political regime's survival, though not to sustain its people's standard of living or even to recover lost past economic gains. (Analysis of the domestic adjustment strategy is beyond the scope of this chapter.) Internationally, it designed four strategies to cope with the United States:

1. It made a neorealist diagnosis of the post-1990 international system, designing a foreign policy in the expectation that other governments would balance U.S. power as it pertained to Cuba. It drew on its legacy of deterring the United States effectively. It built on its long experience as an activist multilateralist to enlist international support.

2. It designed an international strategy to diversify political risk in its international economic relations. Unlike in its past, it would avoid concentrating its international economic activity on one country.

3. It would actively seek instances of cooperation with the United States, especially over shared security interests, to address U.S. concerns and build some support against U.S. military action within U.S. military and coast guard services.

4. It would exercise "soft power," promoting internationally the attractive qualities of Cuban society in order to develop a constituency abroad, especially in the United States, friendly to Cuba and its people.

Security tensions did arise in U.S.-Cuban relations in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, but, on the whole, both governments managed bilateral relations professionally and even expanded certain areas of bilateral cooperation after September 11.

Internationally Induced Adjustments in Cuba

The end of the Soviet Union and communist Europe knocked down three pillars that had supported Cuba's political regime.

Military support. The Soviet Union had dissuaded the United States from invading Cuba. The Soviet Union had also transferred vast quantities of weapons to Cuba free of charge from the immediate aftermath of the 1962 missile crisis to the end of the 1980s and provided politico-military cover and substantial resources to enable Cuba to engage in a global foreign policy, even deploying hundreds of thousands of troops to African wars in the 1970s and 1980s. Cuba's political regime could not have survived in the 1960s without Soviet support, nor played such a major international role in the decades that followed.

Economic support. The Soviet Union paid a very high price for Cuba's sugar and sold Cuba petroleum at a discount. It provided huge loans at low interest rates to finance perpetual bilateral trade deficits, and it postponed indefinitely the collection of principal and interest on those loans. The USSR also provided development credits for specific projects as well as manifold opportunities for advanced training for Cuban military and civilian personnel. The best measure of the worth of this support is what happened to the Cuban economy once these subsidies stopped in 1990. From 1989 to 1993, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita fell 37 percent. Imports dropped 75 percent, while exports plunged 79 percent. Ideological support. "Condemn me; it does not matter. History will absolve me." Thus Fidel Castro argued in the peroration of his edited trial-defense speech following his attack on the Cuban army barracks at Moncada on July 26, 1953 — his first major statement to the people of Cuba. Castro believes that he has a
historic mission and that he has been on the forefront of the march of history. "In America and in the world, it is known that the revolution will be victorious," said the text he crafted in 1962 as the topic sentence for the so-called Second Declaration of Havana. This faith in the ever-growing strength of communist regimes was enshrined in Cuba's 1976 Constitution (Preamble and Article 12, paragraph 1), drafted at the apogee of the regime's consolidation. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist world in Europe shattered this ideological vision and the Cuban leadership's confidence that the future was theirs.

Worse still, the United States emerged militarily unchallenged in the international system. For President Fidel Castro, the United States is more than a simple adversary. As he told the second congress of the Cuban Communist Party in December 1980: Across the centuries, "the United States has been the sworn enemy of our nation... Imperialism has never stopped attacking our Cuban national spirit, putting it to the test." The need for Cuba to confront the United States, moreover, was also a personal challenge for him. As he wrote on June 5, 1958, still a rebel in the mountains, to his long-time close associate Celia Sánchez, "the Americans will pay very dearly for what they are doing." After the victory that he expected in the revolutionary war, "a much longer and bigger war will begin for me: the war that I will make against them."  

The international change at the start of the 1990s produced cumulative losses for Cuba's leaders. Cuba was newly vulnerable to U.S. and other pressures. The defense of Cuba would have to rely more on nonmilitary means. Market-oriented economic policies would no longer be resisted but welcomed to generate the resources to rescue the regime. And the search was on for new means of ideological and political legitimation. The Cuban government responded through its own version of structural adjustment. The leaders felt compelled to change. Cuba had been too dependent on an international system that no longer existed.

Military adjustment. Cuba's global military deployments ended nearly instantaneously as the Cold War wound down in Europe, ending Soviet backing for Cuba. In September 1989, Cuba completed the repatriation of its troops from Ethiopia. In March 1990, all Cuban military personnel in Nicaragua were brought home. In May 1991, the last Cuban troops were repatriated from Angola. Also in 1990 and 1991, Cuba brought back its troops and military advisers from other countries. By fall 1992, Cuba had suspended its military backing for revolutionary movements in other lands. Also in 1992, the last Russian ground troops departed; they had been stationed in Cuba since the 1962 missile crisis. In 2002, Russia shut down its electronic intelligence center at Lourdes, Cuba. From 1989 to 1996, the military and internal security budget in nominal pesos fell 74 percent. Cuba also lost the off-budget free weapons transfers from the Soviet Union. For those same years, the military budget's share of the total budget dropped from 9.1 to 3.9 percent, bearing a greater burden of adjustment than the civilian economy.

Economic adjustment. The budget deficit fell from 33 percent of GDP in 1993 to 7.4 percent in 1994 and 3.5 percent in 2000. Sugar had been Cuba's long-time prime foreign exchange earner. In 2000, revenues from sugar amounted to $453 million, while international tourism revenues were worth $1.8 billion. Revenues from international tourism had become the main source of foreign exchange. The second most important source of foreign exchange was international transfers, valued at $482 million in 2000—nearly all of it remittances from Cuban Americans. In 2002, the government shut down 45 percent of Cuba's sugar mills; their inefficiency was hopeless. Cuba was en route to becoming just one more Caribbean archipelago dependent on sunshine and its diaspora for its welfare.

Political adjustment. Cuba's downsizing of its armed forces was also a political adjustment, highlighting civilian supremacy. Cuba's economic strategy realignment implied another political adjustment. Despite grumbling from many long-time cadres, the government adopted policies to welcome direct foreign investment and establish cordial relations with the Cuban diaspora to generate remittances. Generational replacement was a third political adjustment. Cuba's most important leaders belong to the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Cuba. From 1965 through 1980, no member had been dropped from the Political Bureau. Yet after the 1991 Fourth Party Congress, two-thirds of the Political Bureau members were new. At the conclusion of the 1997 Party Congress, only six of the twenty-four Political Bureau members had belonged to this entity prior to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The median birth year of the 1997 Political Bureau was 1943.

Ideological adjustment. The Fourth and Fifth Party Congresses and the new 1992 Constitution justified the economic policy realignment to save the Cuban nation from doom. The new Constitution and new laws provided a measure of property rights to foster international investment. References to the Soviet Union and the international socialist community were purged from the Constitution. The state would no longer be atheist, though it would remain secular. Religious believers were welcome in the communist party. Fidel Castro's personal leadership role was emphasized in ways not observed since the 1960s. These ideological adjustments
could not prevent a substantial erosion of support for the political regime, however.

Cuba's adjustment enabled Castro's authoritarian regime to survive. It promoted enough globalization and domestic political change to build the basis for a new, albeit much less strong, political order. It ceased to challenge the United States militarily while remaining capable of inflicting damage on an invasion of the homeland. Its government would not join the ranks of those in Panama, Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, or the former Yugoslavia, all of which came to be occupied by the U.S. military after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Cuba's domestic adjustments were also limited. Cuba has not yet returned to the GDP level it had in 1985. The standard of living of its people has deteriorated greatly. And there has been no democratic transition. This last fact has been at the core of U.S.-Cuban contention since 1990.

A Multilateralist Cold Warrior

Fidel Castro's regime did not survive for so many decades by being reclusive or defensive. The Cuban government designed an effective international strategy for the post-1990 period. This was not a master plan born in an instant of political creativity. Rather, it resulted from a proactive approach to problem solving. Some pre-1990 legacies mattered. One diplomatic legacy was engagement in the international system and in financial multilateral institutions, especially the UN system. Multilateralism is a weapon of the weak. (Cuba did not belong to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or the Inter-American Development Bank.) Another legacy was well-established diplomatic and trade relations with many countries. The Cuban government also held two key foreign policy assumptions:

1. The political regime's survival was the fundamental goal. Economic or social performance would be secondary to that goal. Relations with others would be sacrificed if they conflicted with the primacy of survival.
2. The U.S. government could be trusted to blunder in its relations with Cuba. At some point its actions would alienate U.S. allies, lead them to oppose U.S. policies toward Cuba, and reactivate the waning flames of Cuban nationalism.

The key characteristics of the political regime that the leadership endeavored to preserve were the preeminent roles of President Fidel Castro and Vice President Raúl Castro; a "hard shell" conception of sovereignty to ward off external influence over the political regime, especially respect for human rights; a single-party political system with state ownership and operation of all mass media; the communist party's leading role, namely, across all sectors of human endeavor its right to veto all key administrative and managerial appointments, set the main lines of policy, and demand deference to centralist principles; and high priority to provide educational and health-care services to the entire population.

The government's most effective strategy was to act upon the second proposition listed above. This is an essential building block of the neorealist school of international relations. From 1990 to the start of the Second Iraq War in 2003, the extent of such international balancing behavior to contain the power of the United States had been extraordinarily limited. The case of U.S. policy toward Cuba fit that proposition, however, even for the 1990s. The premier neorealist scholar, Kenneth Waltz, has written about the international system after the end of the Cold War, arguing that "the response of other countries to one among them seeking or gaining preponderant power is to try to balance against it. Hegemony leads to balance, which is easy to see historically and to understand theoretically." In the post–Cold War world, Waltz averred, "that is now happening, but haltingly so because the United States still has benefits to offer and many other countries have become accustomed to their easy lives with the United States bearing many of their burdens."

In general terms, the Cuban government and communist party also had empirical reasons to expect such U.S. behavior even if they could not have predicted its timing or the specific actions involved. The United States had relentlessly opposed the Cuban government during the preceding decades. Except for a brief interlude during the Ford and Carter administrations in the 1970s, U.S. policy toward Cuba had had a strong ideological anticommunist component. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States sought to enlarge the world of democracies, fostering regime change in Cuba. The United States had an even longer history of behaving imperially, at times arrogantly, toward Cuba and its people; Cuban leaders expected this pattern to recur as the United States savored its triumph in the Cold War. Moreover, since the start of the 1980s Cuban–American lobbying organizations had become much stronger and sought to toughen U.S. punitive policies toward the Cuban government. The Cold War had not ended in the Caribbean. The legacy of U.S.-Cuban adversarial relations lingered.

The United States performed its role as expected and quickly. In 1992, the U.S. Congress enacted the Cuban Democracy Act (sponsored by then U.S. Representative Robert Torricelli) to prohibit subsidiaries of U.S. firms...
located in third countries from trading with Cuba. In 1996, the U.S. Congress approved the Cuban Democracy and Solidarity Act (better known as Helms–Burton), which sought to stop direct foreign investments in Cuba and to impose substantial financial penalties on those firms that had already done so. The law angered a number of U.S. allies that opposed the extraterritorial reach of U.S. law even if they agreed with the United States in their opposition to the Cuban regime.

Building on the legacies of a successful foreign policy during the Cold War, the Cuban government mobilized its diplomats in the UN General Assembly and other UN organizations, the Iberoamerican summits, and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). Cuba's UN activism drew on decades of hard work by its diplomats and the gratitude of many African states that had received Cuban assistance on generous terms in decades past. Membership in Iberoamerican summits was a culmination of long and sustained Cuban engagement with Spain and Mexico — the leaders in founding the Iberoamerican summits and hosts of the first two summits — and to a lesser extent also with other Latin American countries. ACS membership was a legacy of Cuba's political relations with Anglophone Caribbean countries since the early 1970s, even though the ACS itself was founded in the 1990s. Thus unlike most governments that believe in neorrealist international politics, Cuba acted pragmatically through nonfinancial multilateral institutions. Its armies can no longer contain the United States; its diplomats may.

In the UN, one measure of broad and growing opposition to these U.S. laws has been the vote in the UN General Assembly on a Cuban motion to condemn U.S. economic sanctions on Cuba. Cuba's diplomatic corps has worked worldwide over the years to build support for Cuba's position. In 1992, this Cuban motion received the votes of 33 percent of all UN members. In 1994, it got 54 percent. In the aftermath of the enactment of Helms–Burton in 1996, the Cuban motion garnered support from 73 percent of U.N. members. In 2001, at the apogee of U.S. power during the war on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, 88 percent of UN members voted for the Cuban resolution. The European Union (EU) illustrates how U.S. allies balanced against U.S. policy. In the early 1990s, the European Parliament condemned the Cuban Democracy Act, yet it also called for Cuba's democratization. In 1993, the European Commission approved its first program of humanitarian assistance to Cuba. Yet the Commission refused to sign a formal "cooperation agreement" with Cuba — the only Latin American country with which it still lacks such an agreement. Beginning in 1995, the EU fashioned a comprehensive policy toward Cuba, a "common position."

approved in December 1996 — the first time that the EU adopted such a mechanism in its relations with a Latin American country. The EU opposed U.S. policy toward Cuba as embodied in the Helms–Burton and Torricelli Acts. It also supported Cuba's democratization. It would continue humanitarian assistance. Consistent with this policy, the EU invited Cuba as an observer to participate in the renegotiation of the Lomé Convention that was about to become the Cotonou Convention. Through these means former European colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Ocean received certain EU preferential trade treatment and economic assistance. Yet the EU's insistence that only a democratic Cuba could join the Cotonou Convention led Cuba in April 2000 to withdraw its request to join the Cotonou system. The Cuban government accorded primacy to its survival as an authoritarian regime; it would reject democratizing pressures from the EU (and others).

Parallel to those Cuba-specific actions, the EU contested the Helms–Burton Act, litigating before the World Trade Organization (WTO) while also negotiating with the United States. On May 18, 1996, the EU agreed to discontinue its complaint against the United States before the WTO and to discourage investment in certain properties of doubtful title in Cuba. The United States pledged that the president would henceforth exercise his lawful right under the Helms–Burton Act to suspend every six months the enforcement of Title III — the guts of the Act, applying to direct foreign investments in Cuba. The White House also agreed to seek a congressional amendment to Helms–Burton to eliminate its Title IV, which mandated the denial of U.S. visas to executives (and their families) whose non-U.S. firms invested in Cuba. At the time of signing, the United States did not believe that the EU would discourage investments in Cuba and the EU did not believe that the U.S. Congress would repeal Title IV. Nonetheless, the result of this negotiation killed Helms–Burton de facto. President George W. Bush's administration honored this agreement, regularly suspending Title III and keeping to a minimum the enforcement of Title IV on Europeans. In U.S.–EU relations, Cuba was a cheerleader for the EU's neorealism balancing but not a direct participant. In the end, the EU neutered Helms–Burton and saved Cuba from potential risks.

Cuba played a more active role to break out of its isolation in the Americas. Iberoamerican summits have been held every year since 1991; the Spanish-American countries, Spain, Brazil, and Portugal, attend them. President Castro has attended them as well and hosted one in Havana. These summits regularly approve ringing endorsements of pluralist democracy, which Castro signs without blushing. Through these summits,
Cuba and the Pax Americana • 203

Cuba unfurled the flags of sovereignty and nonintervention in the domestic affairs of countries. Its government's top goal — to avoid domestic political regime change — was a goal that both neorealists and multilateralists understand well. Cuba's neorealist multilateralism parried U.S. pressures. This strategy, however, could not address Cuba's most important vulnerability in the post-1990 world, namely, the authoritarian character of its political regime. Cuban leaders resisted domestic regime change. As a result, relations with the EU and all countries in the Americas, including the United States, remained distant and, at best, formally correct.

Defensive International Economic Links

As the 1990s opened, Cuba designed a strategy to prevent the United States from manipulating its new economic vulnerability to accelerate its domestic regime change. In 1986, Cuba had defaulted on its international debt to market-economy countries and remained unable to work out a rescheduling; as a result, it received no new long-term lending. For political reasons, it obtained no "soft" loans other than $9.8 million from the People's Republic of China in 2000. It relied on suppliers' credits at a high margin over LIBOR (London Interbank Offered Rate). Foreign direct investment developed the international tourism sector effectively, but the monetary value of such investment was modest. Cuba's international economic strategy did not generate a vigorous recovery or renew economic growth. In 2000, on the eve of the economy's new slowdown, GDP in constant prices remained 18 percent below its 1985 level. On the other hand, since 1990 Cuba has diversified its international economic partners. In 1989, the Soviet Union purchased 60 percent of Cuban exports and supplied 68 percent of its imports. In 2000, Russia remained the most important buyer of Cuban exports, but it only took 18 percent. Spain was the main supplier of Cuban imports, but it accounted for just 16 percent. In none of the six international economic partnerships recorded in Table 8.1 — exports, imports, international tourism, financial debt, foreign direct investment, and international donations — does Cuban dependence on a single partner exceed 27 percent. The lead partner is different in all but one category. Eleven different countries or entities occupy the eighteen slots in Table 8.1.

These outcomes did not occur by chance. The Cuban government no longer manages all international economic transactions, as it did prior to 1990, but its state enterprises continue to control all foreign trade and international tourist partnerships directly or through association with international firms. The government gives prior approval to all foreign investment deals, and only the government incurs international debts.
Mindful of a legacy of dependency on a single country (Spain in colonial times, the United States from 1898 to 1960, and a single product (sugar)), Cuban officials worked hard and with stunning success to diversify international economic partnerships since 1990. Cuban officials do not worry much that any one of the governments in Table 8.1 would punish Cuba, but rather that excessive reliance on one partner might cause a problem. First, the U.S. government could affect the policies of any one of Cuba's partners. Second, any one of these countries could suffer an economic crisis that might adversely affect Cuba. A diversified portfolio of international economic partnerships provides some insurance against both risks. These were not abstract concerns.

The Russian government's decision to close the electronic intelligence center at Lourdes, Cuba, exemplifies the first risk. The Soviet Union had established the facility in 1964; Cuba supplied services free of charge. In 1992, the Russian Federation negotiated an agreement with Cuba to retain the Lourdes center but pay for rent and services from the Cubans. Russia paid $90 million in 1992, $160 million per year in 1993–1995, and $200 million per year from 1996 to 2000. Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly toured the Lourdes center during his visit to Cuba in December 2000; he stated Russia's continuing interest in operating the facility. In mid-October 2001, however, Russia announced that it would close the Lourdes center and stop payment for rent and services. In the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks on the United States, Russia gave priority to its antiterrorist cooperation with the United States. This Russian decision had mainly an economic impact on Cuba because Russia had stopped supporting Cuba militarily a decade earlier.

The crisis of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's government in 2002–2004 exemplifies the second problem, namely, the effect on Cuba from a partner's crisis. Nearly all of Cuba's imports from Venezuela had been petroleum products. In late 2002, the anti-Chávez two-month-long strike in Venezuela's oil industry compelled Cuba to enact emergency energy conservation measures, drastically cutting back oil supplies for public transportation and household consumption.

Cuba's defensive international economic strategy in the 1990s was the most successful in its history. It diversified political risks in its international economic transactions. It made less sense to link the United States because Cuba could injure its economy. It limited the damage from troubles that might arise in Cuba's bilateral economic relations with any one partner. This strategy, however, did not generate a full economic recovery, much less growth. Cuba's leaders remained unwilling to adopt deeper market-oriented economic reforms and were thus unable to reap their benefits.

**Cooperating with the United States**

Well before 1990, the Cuban government had found areas of cooperation with the United States and reached agreement. In the 1990s, this strategy served two purposes. First, it addressed issues that mattered to both governments, such as migration, drug trafficking, terrorism, and relations around the U.S. naval base in Cuba's Guantánamo province. Second, given such responsible Cuban behavior, its government hoped to persuade U.S. officials that it was not a "rogue" state, much less a charter member of an "axis of evil."

The first U.S.-Cuban security agreement was signed in March 1973 (during the Nixon administration) to prevent air piracy over the Straits of Florida, thereby stopping the local air piracy crisis that had erupted after 1968. In 1977 (during the Carter administration), Interests Sections were established in the respective capital cities, operating as de facto embassies to facilitate agreements and reduce the likelihood of accidental conflict. Also in 1977, the two governments delimited their maritime boundaries. In 1984 (during the Reagan administration), a bilateral
migration agreement permitted the repatriation of Cubans who had entered the United States illegally and, for the first time since 1960, permitted Cuban emigration to the United States within the framework of law in both countries. In the late 1980s, Cuba also cooperated actively with the United States to settle the military crisis in southern Africa, advancing their joint interests.

Significant steps toward broader and deeper cooperation took place during the Clinton administration and were sustained during the second Bush administration. Migration agreements signed in 1994 and 1995 greatly reduced illegal Cuban migration. The U.S. Coast Guard would return to Cuba those Cubans picked up in the high seas, intending to enter the United States without documents; the United States also took steps to facilitate lawful Cuban immigration well beyond the terms agreed to in the 1980s. Most aspects of U.S.-Cuban migration relations would henceforth receive routine treatment. The coast guards of both countries came also to collaborate in search and rescue missions at sea, especially useful during the 1994 migration crisis.

In 1993, the U.S. and Cuban armed forces began to develop confidence-building measures in and around the U.S. naval base located in Cuba's province of Guantánamo. U.S. and Cuban forces started to notify each other in advance of military movements. The highest-ranking military officers from both sides established regular and periodic communication. These relations would be helpful during the 1994 migration crisis and its aftermath when, for several months, the United States held several tens of thousands of would-be illegal migrants at the base (eventually most were allowed to enter the United States). At that time, meetings between the respective top military commanders took place every six weeks; lower-level technical meetings took place more frequently. The highest-ranking U.S. officer participating in these meetings was General John Sheehan, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Atlantic Command.

In 1996, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) published a finding that Cuba did not represent a significant military threat to the United States or to any of its neighbors. Its military capacities and intentions were limited to the defense of the homeland. That formal finding facilitated military cooperation between Cuba's Eastern Army and the U.S. armed forces at the Guantánamo base. Computer connections were set up between the two forces to facilitate communication and prevent a military accident. Collaborative plans were developed to facilitate civil and military aviation over the Guantánamo naval base air space.

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. and Cuban coast guards also began to cooperate on an ad hoc basis to combat drug trafficking. The U.S. Coast Guard would supply the information; Cuban Guardafronteras would arrest criminals in Cuban space. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation started to inform Cuba about terrorist activities of some Cuban-origin persons in the United States. U.S.-Cuban cooperation over drug trafficking received a boost in October 1996 when the coast guards of both countries collaborated in the interdiction and arrest of the Limerick. Approximately 1.7 tons of cocaine were found aboard this vessel. Bilateral cooperation expanded thereafter.

In May 1999, U.S. drug czar General Barry McCaffrey, former Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Southern Command, declared that Cuba was not an accomplice of drug traffickers. Drug trafficking through Cuba represented only 9 percent of all traffic in the Caribbean's Bahamas-Cuba-Jamaica area. McCaffrey noted that Cuba made substantial efforts to combat drug trafficking and that it could not do more practically if it lacked the necessary equipment or effective interdiction. He acknowledged Cuban initiatives to cooperate with the United States to combat drug trafficking. In October 1999, Cuba and the United States reached agreement on technical measures to improve cooperation, establishing telephone and fax communication and coordinating the radio frequencies of the respective coast guards. Procedures were approved to coordinate future joint jointing parties involving U.S. and Cuban forces. Drug trafficking through Cuba fell following this agreement.

In the 1990s, the worst incident in U.S.-Cuban relations occurred on February 24, 1996, when the Cuban Air Force shot down over international water two unarmed civilian aircraft that had previously penetrated Cuban air space without authorization. The President of the United States considered military retaliation but settled, instead, for accepting the enactment of the Helms-Burton Act, which he had hitherto opposed. To prevent future incidents between the two countries that might be provoked by militant Cuban exiles, the two governments ordered their coast guards to cooperate to contain conflict on the high seas. Whenever a group of exiles organizes a flotilla to sail toward Cuban waters to organize a protest, the two governments activate stand-by procedures. The U.S. Interests Section in Havana coordinates meetings between officials of both governments. High-ranking U.S. Coast Guard officials travel to Havana to work with their Cuban counterparts in minute detail — the location of the flotilla and the Cuban and U.S. forces, the equipment that each will have, and the means for instant communication. On the day of the flotilla's protest, a U.S. officer is posted to Havana to facilitate communication with Cuban officers. Since 2000, a U.S. Coast Guard Commander has been posted permanently to the U.S. Interests Section in Havana to foster cooperation.
been subsequent effective and continuing medical collaboration across the U.S.-Cuban land boundary to control a malaria outbreak at the base and a dengue outbreak in eastern Cuba. Cuban and U.S. officers have met approximately once a month and continue to provide advance notification to the other side of any unusual military maneuver. Moreover, in the late fall of 2001 the Bush administration changed some rules governing the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba to permit U.S. agricultural and some medical exports to Cuba. In 2002, U.S. exports to Cuba were worth approximately $114 million, the first time since 1990 that U.S. exports to Cuba exceeded $10 million in any one year. Also in 2002, Cuba signed contracts with U.S. firms worth over $200 million, covering both past and prospective deliveries. The United States accounted for about 2.3 percent of Cuba’s imports, becoming Cuba’s tenth most important supplier of imports. Well over one hundred thousand U.S. citizens visited Cuba lawfully in 2001 when the United States became Cuba’s principal partner for international academic and cultural exchanges.

The U.S.-Cuban negotiations that permitted this significant break of U.S. trade embargo policy toward Cuba also called attention to Cuba’s diplomatic skill. In early November 2001, Hurricane Michelle devastated parts of Cuba. On the afternoon of November 7, in a respectful letter the U.S. State Department communicated its sorrow for the effects of the hurricane and offered humanitarian assistance. On the evening of November 7, the White House spokesman, employing undiplomatic language, seemed to condition U.S. humanitarian assistance: it would be delivered only through international organizations and other intermediaries, provided assurances were given that the Cuban people would benefit, not Castro’s regime. The Cuban government deliberately ignored the White House statement and, also in respectful diplomatic language, responded only to the State Department communication. Cuba politely declined the humanitarian assistance but proposed, instead, to be allowed to buy U.S. foods and medicines purely on a cash basis. The Cuban proposal became the basis for the agreement.

Also known as Trollope’s Play, this negotiating tactic has an honorable pedigree. President John Kennedy employed it during the Cuban missile crisis, ignoring a message from Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev that he did not like and accepting a Khrushchev message that he did like, thereby opening the way to a settlement of the crisis. In November 2001, Cuba employed the same tactic to considerable success.

Nevertheless, after September 11 three issues complicated U.S.-Cuban security relations: terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and espionage.
Terrorism. For many years, the U.S. Department of State has included Cuba on the list of states that sponsor terrorism. Cuba harbors at least 20 Basque Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) members. It also provides "some degree of safe haven and support to members" of Colombian guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Army of National Liberation (ELN). Cuba has long permitted numerous U.S. fugitives to live there. In 2001, the State Department added the prolonged stays in Cuba in the 1990s and thereafter of cadres from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Chilean Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front (FPMR).48

Weapons of Mass Destruction. Speaking on May 6, 2002, before the Heritage Foundation, U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton affirmed, "The United States believes that Cuba has at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort. Cuba has provided dual-use biotechnology to other rogue states. We are concerned that such technology could support BW programs in those states." 49 A political storm followed because former President Jimmy Carter was visiting Cuba at that time. Prior to his trip a few days earlier, Carter had been briefed by U.S. officials who made no mention of this subject; Carter wondered publicly whether this was an effort to undermine his trip and to cater to a highly ideological conservative audience.

On May 13, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made a rather different affirmation:

We do believe that Cuba has a biological offensive research capability. We didn't say that it actually had such weapons, but it has the capacity and the capability to conduct such research. This is not a new statement; I think that it is a statement that has been made previously. So Undersecretary Bolton's speech ... wasn't breaking new ground as far as the United States' position on this subject.50

Powell's remarks undercut Bolton's. First, Bolton spoke of an actual "effort," whereas Powell referred only to Cuba's capability. Indeed, for years Cuba has had impressive biotechnology facilities and it exports many pharmaceutical and other biotechnical products. Second, by underlining that there was nothing new in Bolton's remarks, Powell admitted that there had been no change in Cuba's behavior.

Espionage. In the same speech addressing Cuba's possible biological warfare "effort," Undersecretary Bolton challenged the accuracy of the 1998 DIA finding that Cuba did not represent a significant military threat to the United States. Bolton reported that one of the drafters of that DIA finding, Ana Belén Montes, the DIA's senior Cuba analyst, was a Cuban spy. (Montes was subsequently arrested and pled guilty to espionage.) In addition, it, 2001, several Cuban spies were arrested in southern Florida; five of them were tried, convicted, and imprisoned for spying on U.S. installations.

Cuba's responses. The Cuban government acknowledges that some alleged terrorists or revolutionaries reside in Cuba. There are also U.S. fugitives, pending an agreement between the two governments on an extradition treaty. Cuba has offered to sign such a treaty; the United States has refused. More generally, in 2002, Cuba proposed to sign agreements with the United States to foster cooperation over migratory issues and to combat terrorism and drug trafficking; on June 13, 2002, the U.S. government declined.51 ETA members received asylum in Cuba in the 1980s in response to a request from the Spanish government, which wanted ETA terrorists out of Spain. The IRA and FPMR members accused of engaging in terrorism were no longer in Cuba. Cuba admits that it once supported FARC and ELN Colombian revolutionaries but denies that it currently supports violent actions on their part.51 Cuba has also hosted several informal and formal meetings between Colombian officials and the ELN and the FARC to facilitate an end to the decades-old Colombian civil war. Cuba has worked with various Colombian presidents, including incumbent President Alvaro Uribe, on this aspect of the peace process. Cuba has supported an active role for the U.S. government in this peace process.52

The Cuban government claims to be responsible regarding weapons of mass destruction. In the early 1990s, it shut down and mothballed the unfinished nuclear power plant whose construction had begun during the Cold War with Soviet financing and technical assistance. That facility complies with International Atomic Agency regulations and is the object of routine international inspection.

Cuba denies that it is making any "effort" to develop biological weapons, challenges the U.S. government to provide evidence, and has opened its biotechnology labs to visits from scientists worldwide, including the United States, and from regulatory agencies of countries to which it exports its products. Cuba complies annually with its obligations under the Convention on Biological and Toxic Weapons through reports to the UN on confidence-building measures. Cuban scientists hold over 500 patents registered abroad, for which pertinent documentation has been submitted.53

Cuba acknowledges that it engages in espionage activities in the United States just as the United States engages in espionage activities in Cuba.
promoted the spread of the French language and culture to secure a leading role for France in the world. The Cuban government does not have a laissez-faire attitude toward interocular relations. Its artists, athletes, and physicians cannot leave Cuba without an exit permit. Most travel abroad only as part of explicit agreements that the Cuban government has signed and often as part of clearly identified policies. The Cuban government understands that its soft power is about power, not just about good feelings.

Some of Cuba’s soft power dates from the Cold War years. Cuba defied the United States in the 1960s. For many Latin Americans, not just for left-wingers, the Cuban Revolution exemplified courage, creativity, liberation, the opening of new vistas, and a praiseworthy Latinamericanist affirmation facing the United States. Cuba’s defiance drew from the deep well of a long-lived Latin American tradition, culturally and politically at odds with the United States. Cuban soft power in the twenty-first century retains some of those themes but it gathered some appeal even within the United States.

Cuban athletes impressively win many medals in the summer Olympics and in the Pan American games. The Buena Vista Social Club film had a considerable impact on a segment of the U.S. public, charmed by its character and their music. Cuba sends its orchestras and smaller musical groups on international tours, including U.S. tours. Cuba welcomes international visitors to large-scale art exhibits, each time with greater participation from U.S. art collectors. The subtle political message is, Could Cuban art be so attractive and its popular music so much fun if its government were so bad? The Cuban government actively regulates, promotes, and distributes the products of Cuban artists and musicians.

The development of international tourism in Cuba generates the funds to enable the Cuban economy to recover and also brings millions of foreigners to see for themselves how great Cuban society is. Canadians, Europeans, and Latin Americans have already visited Cuba in large numbers.

Cuba’s soft power became better known and thus more effective in the United States as a result of a U.S. government liberalization of its visa rules late in the Clinton administration and continuing through most of the second Bush administration, unleashing a soft power battle between the two governments. Because U.S. soft power had had a pervasive and deep penetration in Cuba for centuries, in the 2000s Cuba seemed to be gaining more from its soft power offensive in the short term, making it less likely that the U.S. government would obtain sufficient domestic support for more aggressive policies against the Cuban government. Perhaps for that reason, in 2004 the Bush administration prohibited most of these cultural and academic exchange programs.
Cuba continued to develop its medical diplomacy as one element of its soft power, hoping for influence in parts of the developing world. In 2001, 2,146 Cuban medical doctors and other health care personnel were posted in 14 countries. At the end of the 1990s, Cuba founded a new medical school to train Latin American medical doctors; in 2001, this school had 3,460 students from 23 countries. In 2000–2001, there were 11,366 international scholarship students from 89 countries in all Cuban universities. This policy has been especially effective in the Anglophone Caribbean, whose governments have sought but failed to receive U.S. health care assistance.69

Conclusions

In the 2000s, Cuba has no allies. It does not belong to the international financial institutions. Its authoritarian domestic political regime has turned it into a pariah in Latin America and causes continuing friction with the United States, Canada, and the EU. The character of its domestic regime is the Cuban government's principal international liability. In the 1990s, this government was compelled to adjust to the changes in the international system and the rise of unrivaled U.S. hegemony. It felt the heavy cumulative weight of the loss of its international military, economic, ideological, and political support. It adjusted successfully to permit the survival of the political regime — yet without the ideological fervor that once had buttressed it. It did not succeed in reactivating the economy or returning the welfare of its people to the levels that prevailed in the mid-1980s. Cuba is a poster child for the meaning of constraint in the international system of the twenty-first century.

Yet Cuba also exemplifies how a talented and committed political leadership can exercise a wide range of choice under very adverse international circumstances. To respond to the rising power of the United States in the 1990s, the Cuban government developed a four-pronged international strategy: It behaved as a neoconservative multilateralist, taking advantage of U.S. hegemonic blunders as Washington tried to impose on its allies its preferences in Cuba policy. It fashioned a defensive international economic strategy to diversify risk. It constructed a web of cooperative bilateral agreements with the United States to advance shared interests. And it deployed its soft power creatively. The Cuban government's coping strategies worked well even with less united U.S. power after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Pax Americana is not the international system that President Castro and his older associates would have chosen for the waning years of their rule, but they showed, in the twilight of their careers, an unusual skill — unparalleled by any other authoritarian regime in the post-Cold War international system — to advance their interests and preferences beyond the boundaries of their very small country, notwithstanding the overwhelming power of the United States.

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Notes

10. Anuario 2000, 128, 137. CEPAI, Table A.30.
11. See remarks by Cuba's Minister for Economy and Planning, José Luis Rodríguez, before the National Assembly on 21 December 2002, Granma, December 23, 2002.
16. Ibid., Chapter 7.
18. Instituto de Relaciones Latinoamericanas y del Caribe, 40 años de revolución en Cuba: Más allá de la isla (Madrid: Instituto de Relaciones Latinoamericanas y del Caribe, 2001), 199–309, 43; and the Cuban Foreign Ministry's website http://www.cubaintmex.co/politicasregionales/REGANAmex.htm.