

# Cuba and Russia at a Time of Change

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Significant change is taking place in Cuban society with this also occurring in the island's foreign policy, evidenced by Raúl Castro and Barack Obama shaking hands in December 2013. Havana's relationship with Moscow also appears to be evolving and is at its most robust since the end of Cuba-Soviet relations in late 1991, demonstrated by Raúl Castro and Dmitry Medvedev having both twice visited Moscow and Havana, respectively since 2008. This article examines the foundations, and theoretical underpinnings, of the bilateral relationship before examining it in detail in the post-Soviet era and specifically since August 2006 when Raúl Castro replaced Fidel Castro as the President of Cuba. It posits that although change is occurring in the relationship it is not as pronounced as that which is taking place within Cuban society as many of the foundations of the relationship remain the same as that of the post-Soviet period and even the Soviet period. This is particularly the case with regards the Cuban ruling elite's thinking towards the relationship. It also suggests that Cuban-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged in the short to medium term.

*Keywords:* Cuba, Russia, bilateral relations

## Introduction

Under the Presidency of Raúl Castro fundamental change has occurred, and continues to occur, within Cuban society, being particularly pronounced in the field of economics, demonstrated by the new foreign investment law passed by National Assembly in late March 2014 (Trotta, 2014). Despite not receiving the same attention as internal change the island's foreign policy has also continued to evolve. This has been evident in the number of foreign trips undertaken by Raúl Castro and also the handshake which he shared with Barrack Obama at Nelson Mandela's memorial service in December 2013. Moreover, this also appears to be occurring in the contemporary relationship between Cuba and the Russian Federation with it being at its most robust since the end of Soviet-Cuban relations in December 1991. This is evidenced by Raúl Castro and Dimitry Medvedev both twice visiting Moscow and Havana, respectively, since February 2008.

This article will examine Cuban-Russian relations in the second decade of the 21st century to ascertain the processes and pressures within this relationship and therefore the foundations of this rejuvenated alliance. This will allow the article to conclude the agendas and interests at play within it to conclude whether the relationship has also undergone fundamental change similar to Cuban society.

In order to do this the various theories which underpin the foreign policies of Cuba and Russia will be briefly detailed before the relationship in the 21st century, but more specifically since August 2006 will be examined. The paper will posit that the foundations of Cuba-Russian relations under the Presidency of Raúl Castro remain those which have been in place since the mid-1990s. Some change has occurred and they are at

their most robust since 1991, but the underlying reasons, processes and pressures remain the same as those which emerged in the mid-1990s.

### **Theories in Havana and Moscow's Foreign Policies**

In *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*, Michael Erisman (2000) has outlined four concepts that he believes have been key to understanding revolutionary Cuba's foreign policy. In the Cold War era much attention focused on the ideas that Cuban foreign policy was dominated by a revolutionary crusade and the superclient/surrogate thesis. However, Erisman believes that the island's foreign policy was always much more nuanced and complex than to be dominated by simply one of these concepts. Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War both have waned in significance despite the continuing importance of internationalism within Cuban foreign policy (p. 3, pp. 33-36).

Similarly, since Raúl Castro replaced Fidel Castro as the President of Cuba in August 2006 the significance of Fidelista personalismo, the specific Cuban version of the Great Man Theory, has also receded. Fidel Castro, in no small part due to his personality and force of character, certainly dominated Cuban politics for more than 50 years, but even before 2006 and the deterioration in his health, Erisman believed that Fidel Castro was never able to act as he pleased within this system. The revolution became increasingly institutionalized from the 1970s onwards, with the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and organizations such as the National Assembly, the Cuban Armed Forces (FAR) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) all being important in the Cuban decision making process (Erisman, 2000, pp. 30-33; Montaner, 1989).

Erisman has also written of the prevalence of dependency and counter dependency in Cuba's foreign policy since 1959. Throughout Cuba's history, outside powers have dominated the island. In the colonial period Spain and then from the time of independence until 1959 the United States, with some arguing that after the Revolution dependency merely moved from Washington to Moscow (Erisman, 2000, pp. 43-47). However, due to the significance of nationalism within the Revolution, Erisman (2000) has stated that after 1959 what actually materialized was counter dependency and not merely dependence as throughout the existence of Soviet-Cuban relations Havana strove continuously to reduce dependency on the Kremlin (pp. 43-47).

The realist paradigm of international relations has also been key to understanding Cuba's revolutionary foreign policy, but also the Kremlin's which will be detailed below. At the core of realism is the concept that within the international system sovereign states are the most important actors, but that this system is inherently anarchic. The pre-eminent goal of states is their own survival which results in their actions centring on their own survival which often leads them striving to maximize their own power. On this Hans Morgenthau (1995) has famously stated, "...international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power" (p. 25). This dominated the actions of the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War, but the ideas of realism can be traced to the writings of Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War. Over time a variety of different strands of realism have emerged with Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* detailing the ideas of defensive realism. This posits that states are security maximizers rather than power maximizers due to security being the most important aspect for states. Regarding this he has written, "...self-help is necessarily the principle of action" (Waltz, 1979, p. 111). Conversely, the ideas of offensive realism, provided by John Mearsheimer (2001), suggest that states act to maximize their relative power at the expense of other states.

This, or more specifically realist pragmatism, has been of the utmost importance for the actions of the Cuban ruling elite since January 1959 because at the forefront of the decision making process throughout the

Revolutionary period has been the survival of the Revolution (Erisman, 2000, pp. 25-26). More specifically this demonstrates the ideas of defensive realism, and in conjunction with counter dependency and nationalism, has underpinned Cuba's relationship with the Kremlin since its inception in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

A number of issues have dominated Russia's relationship with the outside world throughout its history. Stephen White (1991) has written of a desire for warm-water harbours and the question of the country's role in the world having been of fundamental significance (pp. 179-180). In addition, Tsygankov and Caldwell believe that an inferiority complex due to perceived backwardness and feelings of vulnerability along its borders have dominated Moscow's thinking towards both its national security and foreign policy. Furthermore, these ideas have transcended the tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet eras (Tsygankov, 2006, p. 6; Caldwell, 2007, pp. 280-283).

During the Soviet era Marxist-Leninism dominated both Soviet society and also its foreign policy, but for the reason detailed above, the realist paradigm of International Relations was also key for the Kremlin's foreign policy. Grigor Suny (2007) believed that realism has been prominent within the Soviet ruling elite's thinking since the time of Lenin (p. 57). Moreover, this was also vital for the interest which the Kremlin took in the Cuban Revolution in the months after January 1959. The island's geographical location and relationship with the United States sparked Soviet interest in the events unfolding in Cuba, which were only heightened as Havana's relationship with Washington deteriorated in no small part due to the anti-American nature of the Revolution (Fursenko & Naftali, 1997, p. 2). In addition, the victory of the Cuban Revolution took place at the height of the Cold War, and when combined with the increased interest which the Kremlin was taking in the developing world in the aftermath of Josef Stalin's death, meant that the time was right for the Soviet Union to acquire an ally in Latin America, especially one in such a geostrategically significant location as Cuba. The outcome was that the blossoming of Soviet-Cuban relations perfectly illustrated to Washington that Moscow was now the capital of a global power which could challenge US hegemony in Latin America and even Cuba. This is in accordance with the ideas of offensive realism detailed by Mearsheimer.

### **Cuban-Russian Relations in a Post-Soviet World**

The theories detailed above underpinned Havana's relationship with Moscow for over 30 years, but in the early 1990s Cuba faced the realities of a new world order without its socialist trading partners while continuing to face hostility emanating from the United States. In this situation the island's foreign policy underwent significant change. Regarding this, John Kirk (2006) has written, "The greatest single task in terms of foreign policy facing the Cuban government in the early 1990s, however, was how to keep the traditional (self-declared enemy at bay" (p. 334). Erisman (2006) has written that this was achieved by the creation of greater economic and political space that resulted from a diversification of the island's foreign policy (pp. 3-5). Furthermore, Julie Feinsilver (1993) wrote that,

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

Jorge Dom ínguez has written that Cuba employed a four part strategy to achieve this; attempts to balance the United States were made due to a neo-realist perspective, the possibility of economic dependence appearing was negated by a diversification of economic policy, cooperation with the United States was desired with regards common security issues as was a wish for a "constituency abroad" particularly in the global South

(Dom ínguez, 2008, p. 203). Due to the severity of the situation which Cuba found itself in with the end of the Cold War, and subsequent upheaval to the international system, the significance of these are difficult to overestimate. The result is that all the changes listed above have been underpinned by the principles of defensive realism and realist pragmatism as they have helped the Revolution endure this highly difficult period. In addition, this is also in agreement with Waltz's (1979) idea that "...self-help is necessarily the principle of action" (p. 111).

Russian foreign policy also underwent significant change in the 1990s. In the early to mid-1990s Moscow's foreign policy became much more western looking when compared to the Soviet era. This was in part due to the hope of gaining aid and assistance from the United States in the Russian economic transition. It appeared that Liberal Westernizers had defeated both the Pragmatic Nationalists and Fundamental Nationalists in the debate which had raged within Russia regarding foreign policy (Light, 1996, pp. 33-100; Malcolm & Pravda, 1996, pp. 537-552; Kubicek, 1999-2000, pp. 547-550), with this also having consequences for Moscow's relationship with Havana. On this professor Eugenio Larin (2007), director of Latin American Studies at the Institute of Cold War History of the Russian Academy of Sciences has written, "In order to improve political ties Washington demanded of B. H. Yeltsin that he must cut ties with Cuba. This course of action dominated the 1990s" (p. 164). Simply this prevented cordial relations between Russia and Cuba.

However, from the mid-1990s a further change took place in Russian foreign policy, evidenced by Andrei Kozyrev being replaced as Russian Foreign Minister by Yevgeny Primakov in December 1995. Primakov believed much more in "spheres of influence" than his predecessor who had been closely associated with the pro-US foreign policy of the early to mid-1990s (White, 2004, p. 230). This change manifested itself in the Kremlin taking much more interest in their "near abroad".

A resurgence in nationalism within Russian society was key for this alteration. This occurred for a number of reasons with many Russians believing that the Kremlin's western looking foreign policy had failed, and they blamed the West and organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for the economic problems which continued to engulf the country (Kanet, 2011, pp. 204-206). Furthermore, Russian nationalism had been gravely offended by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to the east and also over the treatment that their fellow Serbs in the former Yugoslavia had received from this organisation. Regarding NATO bombing of Belgrade in March 1999 Yeltsin has called this as "undisguised aggression" (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 1999) and that, "...the Kosovo crisis increased the anti-Western sentiment in society" (Yeltsin, 2000, p. 271) .

The outcome was that the Kremlin wished to reassert itself in international relations having been marginalized for a number of years with the Kremlin desiring a much more multipolar world than the one which had emerged from the Cold War. In the 21st century this wish has continued under the Presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Medvedev. Crucially Putin strengthened relations with many former Soviet allies and the result was that a "Putin Doctrine" has emerged which has close traditions to, and some Soviet features, but also nationalistic sentiments and anti-Western reflexes (Grachev, 2006, pp. 262-264). In sum, Putin wished to return Russia to some of the prominence that it had enjoyed as a global superpower.

An improved relationship with Havana illustrated this very point to Washington that Moscow once again had a global influence and was not on the periphery of international relations as had been the case in the early to mid-1990s. It appeared as if the geostrategic importance of Cuba for the Kremlin was increasing. This is not to suggest it returned to the level of the Cold War, but Moscow did wish to "tickle the Americans' underbelly"

with closer relations with Cuba achieving this aim (Sosnovsky, 1996, p. 5).

These changes in Cuban and Russian foreign policies have had a number of outcomes, not least resulting in the two countries having a shared global outlook, but they have also been key to the upturn in the bilateral relationship which has taken place from the mid-1990s onwards, demonstrated by Russia being Cuba's chief trading partner in 1996 (Anuario Estadístico, 2000, June 5-7). The changes implemented to the Cuban economy in the early to mid-1990s were crucial for this economic upturn, with these reforms being designed to attract foreign investment to the island's economy (Pérez-López, 1997; Mesa-Lago, 1993; Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2005). This also resulted in the Cuban economy being opened to the world market which had the knock-on effect of the Soviet position within it being usurped. In the two-year period from 1995 to 1997, 260 joint ventures with foreign money were opened but only two of these were with Russian money (Batchikov, 1997, p. 2). Furthermore, in December 2000 when Vladimir Putin travelled to Cuba he said "We lost a lot of positions which were a top priority for both countries, and our Russian companies in Cuba have been replaced by Western competitors" (Newman, 2000). A wish within Russia existed to address this, which was vital for this upturn in bilateral trade.

With regards the importance of the upturn in the relationship for Cuba, Feinsilver's aforementioned quote is significant, with it also displaying the central tenets of defensive realism. The Russian Federation may not constitute part of the developing world, but the improvement in Russian-Cuban relations certainly did not go against this process with crucially the Kremlin being able to provide important backing for the Cuban regime in various UN forums. From 1995 onwards the Kremlin has once again voted with Cuba at the Conventions on Human Rights held in Geneva, which had not been the case in 1992 to 1994. Moreover, in November 1992 Moscow sensationally abstained in the UN vote condemning the Cuban Democracy Act, or Torricelli Bill. (Izvestia, 1992). Crucially on 26 July 1996 at the UN meeting in New York City to discuss the shooting down of the two planes belonging to the exile "Brothers to the Rescue" organisation in February 1996, the Kremlin criticized the UN resolution and the actions of the exile group. Speaking about the resolution the Russian representative Alexandre Gorelik said, "It clearly does not strike a balance between two fundamental principles: the non-use of weapons against civil aircraft and the non-use of such aircraft for illegal purposes. In our view, this establishes an unfortunate precedent for the future" (UN Security Council, 1996).

In addition, Russia was also highly critical of the Helms Burton Act which was also passed into law in the aftermath of this incident which was not just extraterritorial in general, but also contained a section which focused exclusively on Russia's continued use in the 1990s of the Lourdes listening post on the outskirts of Havana. Regarding this law a Russian Foreign Ministry declaration stated, "we confirm our intention to develop and broaden mutually beneficial cooperation with Cuba as well as sectors of mutual interest, particularly in the commercial and economic sphere" (Granma International, 1996).

This was highly important for Cuba with Russian criticism of the US embargo against the island since continuing, with the situation which has emerged also being in accordance with Erisman's beliefs that Cuban foreign policy was diversified in attempts to create greater economic and political space. Moreover, this also demonstrates Domínguez's ideas that since 1992 Cuba wished to both balance the United States on the global arena and also acquire a "constituency abroad". In addition, Cuba and Russia have a shared dislike of the unipolarity that appeared in international relations in the 1990s.

In turn, Havana has also backed Moscow at various times in the United Nations, not least in 2008 regarding the war in Georgia. Regarding this situation Cuba described Georgia as the "aggressor" and Raúl

Castro stated that, a disturbing crisis has erupted originated in the news of the combats unleashed in the Caucasus, at the Russian south border.

Following the disintegration of the USSR, South Ossetia was forcibly annexed to Georgia, a country with which it shared neither nationality nor culture, but it preserved its status as an autonomous republic with its local authorities and its capital Tskhinvali. At dawn on August 8, Georgia, in complicity with the US administration launched its forces on South Ossetia in an attempt to occupy the capital (Castro, 2008).

However, since 1996 Russia is no longer Cuba's chief trading partner with before the year 2000 Canada and Spain becoming the island's most important trading partners and in the 21st century it is China and Venezuela that the Caribbean island conducts most trade with (Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, 2008, 8.4-8.6). Moreover, in January 2002 the decision was made in Moscow to close the Lourdes listening post on the outskirts of Havana which had remained open throughout the 1990s. The Kremlin cited the issue of cost as the reason for this decision, but the Cuban government did not believe this to be the case with *Granma* at the time stating that the \$200m, "was not an extraordinary figure if one considers that it is barely 3% of the damage to our country's economy by the disintegration of the Socialist bloc and the USSR" (Granma, 2001). Furthermore, Fidel Castro has also likened this decision to the agreement at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis when he said of the agreement over Lourdes, "...it was a fait accompli—they informed us, hoping we'd go along" (Castro & Ramonet, 2007, p. 287).

### **Bilateral Relations Raúl Castro's Presidency**

However, any tension which existed between Havana and Moscow over this decision did not last long and since August 2006 and Raúl Castro's ascendancy to the Cuban Presidency relations between Cuba and Russia appear to have improved and be at their most robust since the Soviet era. This is evidenced by Raúl and Dmitri Medvedev both making two trips to Moscow and Havana since January 2008, respectively. Moreover, Raúl's trip in January 2009 was his first official visit to the Russian capital in more than 20 years.

Bilateral trade is highly important despite its current low level (Anuario Estadístico, 2012, August 4). Highly significantly the political will for trade to increase exists in both governments with in December 2010 Boris Gryzlov, speaker of the Russian State Duma, and Ricardo Alarcon, President of the National Assembly signing an inter-parliamentary agreement to boost bilateral trade (RIA Novosti, 2010). Furthermore, in February 2013 while in Cuba, Dmitiri Medvedev commented "Regrettably, trade between Russia and Cuba is not high as it should be... There are good investment plans, and investment is developing despite its small volume. I am sure it will grow and our cooperation will expand to many new areas" (Medvedev, 2013).

Valentina Matvienko, President of the Council of Federations of the Russian Federation's Federal Assembly, reiterated this desire for bilateral trade to increase when during her trip to Cuba in May 2013 she told *Granma*.

Despite the fact that trade relations have grown recently, they still do not reflect the potential and possibilities of our two countries. The value of our trade exchange is approaching \$270 million, according to 2012 figures, which is insufficient. We are currently negotiating a broad range of projects relating to energy, and Russian companies such as Zarubezhneft are actively involved in oil prospecting in Cuban waters, and this work is going to continue (Granma, 2013).

Furthermore, this topic also dominated talks between Medvedev and Bruno Rodríguez, the Cuban Foreign Minister, when he visited the Russian capital in May 2013 (Agencia de Información Nacional, 2013).

Significantly this returns the ideas of Erisman that change in Cuba in the 1990s was designed to increase political and economic space, but also the ideas of both Feinsilver and Dom ínguez detailed above. Furthermore, it is also in accordance with the Cuban Revolution's historical desire to avoid forms of dependency appearing and Waltz's (1979) belief that "...self-help is necessarily the principle of action" (p. 111). This is the result of the importance of bilateral trade with Caracas for Cuba. In the five year period from 2003 to 2008 Cuban-Venezuelan trade increased by more than totalling almost five billion pesos in 2008. This constituted almost one third of the island's total trade. Highly interestingly the level of trade conducted between Havana and Caracas in 2008 figure was the first time that the 1991 level of Soviet-Cuban bilateral trade had been exceeded. Cuban-Venezuelan bilateral trade has since increased exceeding eight billion pesos in both 2011 and 2012 (Anuario Estadístico, 2012, August 6).

The upshot is that Havana's desire to increase bilateral trade with Moscow can be perceived as an attempt to diversify its markets and avoid any forms of economic dependence with Venezuela appearing. Cuban-Venezuelan relations do not have the same characteristics as Soviet-Cuban relations had, but after Hugo Chavez's death in January 2013 uncertainty surrounds Havana's relationship with Caracas and a wish to diversify its markets may ultimately prove somewhat astute.

Further agreements have also been signed, including in April 2013 for a joint Cuban-Russian project to construct a new international airport at San Antonio de los Baños, 30 kilometres from the Cuban capital, scheduled to be completed by the year 2020 (Correo del Orinoco, 2013). In addition, a number of agreements were signed in February 2013 during Medvedev's trip to Cuba, including one for the Cuban purchase of Ilyushin aircraft and an increasing general cooperation between the two countries. During his visit the Russian Prime Minister also spoke of a wish to increase scientific links, especially with regards Cuba's biotechnology industry. Highly significantly an agreement regarding Cuba's Soviet era debt was also signed, which replaced the one signed in September 2005. This entailed a partial write-off of the debt with the remainder being refinanced over a 10-year period (ITARR-TASS News Agency, 2005; Medvedev, 2013). This again can be seen to display realist pragmatism and Waltz's ideas of self-help as other markets, but most noticeably the US one remains unopened to Cuba. Simply the Caribbean island is diversifying its trading portfolio.

In May 2013 Russian Army General Valeri Gerasimov also travelled to Cuba during which he confirmed the continuation of military cooperation between Russia and Cuba. Significantly, Alexandr Fom ín, Vice-President of the Russian Federal Service of Military and Technological Cooperation, stated that this would be of a modest level and that "We will not supply Cuba with the most modern armaments, but rather it will be of a level to maintain Cuban defense" (eldiario.es, 2013). This would be linked to the Soviet era hardware that Cuba still possesses. In addition, in August 2013 a Russian naval task force led by the Moskva missile cruiser visited Havana and at the end of February 2014 the Viktor Leonov docked for a number of days in Havana (RIA Novosti, 2013, August 4).

Both countries continue to support each other politically with in February 2013 Medvedev calling the US economic embargo against Cuba "outrageous and outdated" (RIA Novosti, 2013, February 23). Moreover, Havana has also given very public support to the Kremlin with the situation in the Crimea in early 2014, evidenced on 27 March 2014 when Cuba was one of 11 countries to vote against the UN resolution condemning the Russian referendum held in the Crimea (UN News Centre, 2014). Feinsilver's aforementioned

quote regarding Cuba desiring a constituency in the Global South is again significant as are the central tenets of defensive realism. The Russian Federation may not constitute part of the Developing World, but the improvement in Russian-Cuban relations certainly did not go against this process with crucially the Kremlin being able to provide important backing for the Cuban regime in various UN forums, which is highly significant due to the role of the United States in these forums. Furthermore, Cuba is now performing a similar process for Russia, demonstrated in the vote on the UN resolution regarding the situation in the Ukraine detailed above.

Some change in the bilateral relationship is apparent with the cultural links between the two countries having increased since August 2006. In February 2010 Russia was the “guest of honor” at the Havana International Book Fair which Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, visited during a trip to the island. In the aftermath of this, and with the aid of the Russian “Mir” Fund, a permanent Russian exhibition has been opened in the José Martí National Library in the Cuban capital. In October 2012 the Moscow theatre company “Et Cetera” performed in Havana during a four-day stay in the Cuban Capital (Edición de la Embajada, 2012, p. 20). Furthermore, in early 2008 the Our Lady of Kazan Russian Orthodox Cathedral was opened in Havana, which Medvedev visited during his November 2008 trip to Cuba (Edición de la Embajada, 2010, p. 28).

In addition, since the year 2000 the number of Russians vacationing in Cuba has steadily increased. In 2003, 10,653 Russians holidayed in Cuba with this increasing to 78,472 in 2011. This means that since the end of Soviet-Cuban relations, the largest number of Russians are now travelling to Cuba. Moreover, only tourists from six other countries exceed the numbers of Russians now vacationing on the island (Anuario Estadístico, 2012, March 15). Russians travelling to Cuba do not require entry visas, making travel easier, but the importance which the Cuban government attaches to Russian tourists is highlighted by the Official Portal of Tourism, [Cubatravel.cu](http://Cubatravel.cu), having only four language options, one of which is Russian ([www.cubatravel.cu/client/home](http://www.cubatravel.cu/client/home)). In addition, Cuba was also represented at the Seventh International Tourist fair held in March 2012 in Moscow, further demonstrating the Caribbean island wish to further increase the number of Russians holidaying in Cuba. (Rondón, 2012)

Havana wishing to increase the number of Russian tourists visiting Cuba can be perceived as attempts to diversify the number of countries which tourists visiting Cuba originate from. If successful this would reduce the potential negative effects in a fall in the number of Canadians vacationing on the island. Once again this returns to the ideas of defensive realism, realist pragmatism and the ideas of Ersiman, Feinsilver and Domínguez previously detailed.

Since Raúl has become the President of Cuba what has also become noticeable is that both Havana and Moscow have begun to make increasing reference to the longevity of the bilateral relationship. Moreover, this is not just to the era of Soviet-Cuban relations from 1959 to 1991, but even to the relationship that existed before the Cuban Revolution (Bain, 2013). This was most graphically demonstrated in January 2009 when Raúl Castro visited the permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War to Jorge and Aldo Vivo and Enrique Vilar who fought for the Red Army during World War II (Raúl in Moscow, 2009, pp. 8-9). In July 2012 when the Cuban Premier was again in Moscow, Putin commented, “Cuba is not only an old ally, but remains a great friend”. He continued, “...all that we have achieved during these past years, it’s our common treasure” (Puig, 2012). These sentiments were echoed in an interview with *Prensa Latina* which Dmitiri



Medvedev conducted during his February 2013 trip to Cuba. In this he stated, “Our relations with Cuba rest on a formidable basis that had been laid previously. The author thinks it is essential not to squander our past achievements but to build on them” (Medvedev, 2013). This demonstrates both the long-standing nature of the bilateral relationship, and also the desire for it to continue.

### Conclusions

Since Raúl Castro replaced Fidel Castro as Cuban President in August 2006 significant change has occurred within Cuban society, with this being repeated to a lesser extent in the island’s foreign policy. Specifically Russian-Cuban relations have also appeared to have undergone change with the relationship appearing to be at its most robust since the end of the Soviet-Cuban relations in late 1991. However, since August 2006 no demonstrable change to Cuban-Russian bilateral relations has occurred.

Crucially the underlying principles within the Cuban decision making process have remained unchanged not only after August 2006, but since January 1959. Realist pragmatism remains at the forefront of the thinking of the Cuban ruling elite resulting in the same driving forces and decision making processes in Havana’s relationship with Moscow. In addition, since the mid-1990s no significant change has occurred in Moscow’s policies towards Havana.

Bilateral trade demonstrates this because although it remains at a very low level, both Havana and Moscow show a wish for it to increase. This has been a recurrent theme within speeches by leading government officials from both Cuba and Russia in the 21st century. This is repeated with Russia’s wish to increase its links to Cuba’s biotechnology industry and also the Caribbean island’s debt accumulated to the Kremlin during the Soviet era. The February 2013 agreement over this merely replaced the one signed in September 2005.

Realist pragmatism is also highly significant in Cuban attempts to increase bilateral trade with Russia. This can be perceived as a desire to reduce Cuban forms of dependency that may have emerged with Venezuela since the year 2000. This would be inline with the traditional desire of the Cuban ruling elite to reduce all forms of dependency and diversify its markets.

Havana’s relationship with Moscow is unlikely to change significantly in the short to medium term demonstrated by the agreement signed in April 2013 for the joint project to construct a new international airport on the island which is scheduled to be completed in the year 2020. This is crucial as after 2018 uncertainty could surround the relationship resulting from Raúl Castro’s statement in February 2013 that he will retire in 2018. Change will undoubtedly occur after 2018, but Cuban-Russian relations may not undergo fundamental change. The importance of realist pragmatism within the Cuban government is crucial for this as it is highly likely to remain fundamental post 2018 due to its presence in the Cuban ruling elite since 1959. A generational change in the Cuban leadership is probable after 2018 with the new Cuban president likely to be born after the victory of the Revolution. Their political career will, however, have been constructed within a system where realist pragmatism, defensive realism and the idea that “...self-help is necessarily the principle of action” (Waltz, 1979, p. 111) have been central to all decision making processes with this increasing the likelihood that this will remain the case post 2018. The result is that Cuban-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged due to the importance of realist pragmatism within bilateral relationship since its inception in the late 1950s, In sum, Havana’s contemporary relationship with Moscow remains underpinned by the same pressures and reasons as it has been for the last 50 years.

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