

CUBA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS AFRICA: IDEALISM OR PRAGMATISM?

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There is a complexity in the difficulty of revolutionary development. Socialism needs productive forces and social and cultural awareness. In order to do so, it is up to the socialist state to assist and sympathize with development, giving the “aspiring” socialist state political, cultural and military support. But the progress of one state should be the result of its own people’s work.

(Yuri Andropov, 1983)

The connection between Cubans and Africans can be defined as a successful South-South Cooperation experience, which has assured political and military advantages in the short term, both for Cubans and for Africans, at a relatively reduced cost, making it a topic for further study. The small Cuban state, individually or through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Soviet Union (USSR), was able to develop a middle power policy, with high military impact. There is a wide variety of studies about the relations of great powers and former Metropolitan states with Africa and, more recently, about the relations of China, India, Brazil and some Arab countries within the continent, but few of them are about Cuba. Apart from this, regimes like the one in Angola, as a way of fostering greater internal and international legitimacy, nowadays produce a historiography which reduces Cuban participation in African political processes to the minimum.

In this sense, it is important to observe an exceptionality of African foreign relations – cooperation with Cuba. Cuba was the only economically underdeveloped state which carried out, effectively, an African policy comparable to that of great powers. Either on its own account or as part of an alliance with the USSR, the Cuban role in Africa was unprecedented.

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Never another Third World country projected its power so far beyond its neighborhood. Intercontinental intervention referred to an attitude of superpowers, of few European countries and of China (whose role was smaller than Cuba's until recently). It is important to observe as well that Cuban-African cooperation has been maintained (although it has suffered a reduction) during the critical period of the 1990s, acquiring renewed strength on the 2000s.

The conditioning factors of Cuban African policy

Cuban revolutionary movement, while fighting for power in a “neocolonial” state, reinforced itself with the advancement of African national liberation movements. Cubans and Africans were in touch before the development of revolutionary processes (in Cuba and in Africa), having the taking of Havana been simultaneous to the African independences, happening just a year before the “Year of Africa”. As a result of the radicalization of the revolutionary process, Cuba was soon isolated in Latin America (to the point of reducing its relations only to Mexico), and, upon defining itself as a socialist state, approached the USSR. In this context took place the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement, which had the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, defined in Bandung, as its bedrock, with an anti-hegemonic profile and based in a non-socialist internationalism which supported emerging nationalism. However, the Cuban Revolution's poorly calculated radicalism ended up distancing it from the USSR, without achieving a closer relationship with China (Kapcia 2008). Havana, thus, would eventually emphasize its revolutionary third-world profile in spite of its socialist profile.

Cuban involvement in the Third World was characterized by idealism and pragmatism, despite the fact that, in many moments, the *Realpolitik* expressed itself in a more powerful way than the idealist aspect. Anyways, Cuban presence in the African continent has combined these two factors. Although the links between Cubans and Africans date back to the second half of the 1970 decade, Cuban policy towards Africa was only asserted from the so-called Operation Carlota, in Angola. From 1975 onwards, Cuba's relations with the African continent were resized, having reaffirmed themselves in Ethiopia, in 1977, and having impacted anti-apartheid movements in South Africa (especially the South African Communist Party), just to cite two of the main Cuban lines of action.

Until 1945, Africa was almost completely divided in European possessions. Approximately 15 years later, most of the territories were

already independent. For Europeans, the maintenance of the colonial rule collided with the discontent caused by two World Wars, although new forms of domination (neocolonial) were created to assure profitable relationships. European policy in Africa was maintained, in many cases, through a multilateral approach, despite the presence of new and important actors in the continent – USA and USSR. North Americans, as a result of the *détente's* erosion, came to see the African continent as an unstable and explosive area. They thought that political immaturity and resentment against the West could turn the new African countries towards the USSR or China. The African space, from then, became a stage for the Cold War.

The founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 gave power and relevance to the continent and produced impacts on the international setting. The United States had to cover up protests in its territory for African-American Civil Rights and closely watch the African continent. However, the United States also had two advantages – they were better prepared than the USSR and its European allies to help the new states economically, and they counted on the former metropolises, France and the United Kingdom, to take “new responsibilities” in Africa. Nonetheless, USA's European allies often made American policy harder to be put to practice, as in the case of Portugal, who denied any possibility of abandoning its colonies without fighting.

The West's concern with African political evolution or with the ability of the other side of the balance of power to influence African politics was related to the role that the USSR or China could play in that continent, but was not related to the role of Cuba, whose only link to the continent was represented by slaves who once arrived from African to work on the other side of the Atlantic. And yet the Cuban government was thinking of it. Two years after its revolution, Cuba was already sending medical and military support to rebels in Algeria in 1962. It was the beginning of Cuba's important role in Africa.

Despite its dependency in certain areas – the soviet help prevented Cuban economy from collapsing and its supply of weapons guaranteed the island's integrity –, Cuba did not want to submit itself to the USSR. According to the view of Cuban policymakers, the USSR was looking for a “settlement” with the USA, which affected its support to revolutionary movements in the Third World. Actually, Cubans felt free to criticize the United States and pursue their own policies. Their dependence from a foreign power's economic and military help, in this sense, deepened the Revolution's permanent need to reaffirm itself.

In 1964, Che Guevara went to Africa with a project which showed Cuban interest in the region more clearly. The idea that a revolution

in Africa was imminent due to the instability in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Congo and Zaire, made Cubans believe in the importance of establishing a policy towards Africa. Che's journey was monitored by the United States through the CIA which, in order to contain revolutionary movement, supported and sent white mercenaries to Africa. In 1965, there were 400 Cuban soldiers in central Africa, especially in Zaire and Congo, but also in Angola (Gleijeses 2003). Cubans aimed at rising to prominence within the Non-Aligned Movement and making socialist countries support their foreign policy.

Cuban Revolution's Internationalism, or rather Third-Worldism, acquired an institutionalized profile after the Tricontinental Conference was held in Havana in 1966, gathering national liberation movements and progressive governments. It originated the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) was also created in order to coordinate the support from the continent's Left to Cuba and to guerrilla actions. At the first summit meeting, Guevara urged the creation of "two, three, many Vietnams". Soon after that, he left Cuba, and it was said that he had been killed by Fidel. But he had decided to engage in the revolution in other countries, traveling throughout Africa and then Bolivia, where he was captured and killed in 1967. He became an iconic public figure, revered worldwide for a certain revolutionary romanticism, but which contained the basic values of socialism.

For Western scholars, Cuban-African relations are focused in terms of their military aspect. However, this focus neglects other important aspects, especially the political and civil cooperation ones, which are rooted in the relationship. In comparative terms, Cuba's policy towards Africa was sustained and coherent, a commitment previous to Cuba's alliance with the USSR and transcending it in a way. Thus, it becomes important to observe the motivations for Cuban action and for the establishment of its diplomacy. If, on the one hand, world powers tried to create areas of influence or even to promote a distribution of power, on the other, African political elites, often pressured by domestic problems and conflicts, frequently searched for external support. Actually, it is about the dialectic between African autonomy and foreign intervention. Africans tried to increase their freedom of action while great powers tried to intervene according to their own agendas. Thus, African interests for autonomy and development have been conditioned by the global logics of rivalry among the main powers.

Cuba's "great diplomacy"

With the expansion of decolonizing processes in the African continent, West-East rivalry represented a considerable change in the external environment for new African states. The Cold War thus conducted the USA and the USSR to the condition of main actors in African international relations. While Europe preserved its essentially commercial relationship, rival superpowers entered the continent through the political sphere. For the USSR, decolonization of African countries meant an opportunity of forging links with new states, especially those where strong anti-imperialist movements arose. As for the USA, African independencies offered an opportunity for maintaining European ex-colonies in the Western area of influence. However, their reduced experience and little knowledge of Africa made superpowers stumble upon their African policy, while their military and economic abilities were important to establish their roles in the continent².

Cuba's identification as a Third World country and its isolation in Latin America increased, in terms of external relations, its empathy for the region and the idea that it had a special role to develop in that space. Soviets and Eastern Europeans, richer and whiter, or Chinese, who didn't understand a culture so different from their own, distinguished themselves from Cubans, who had the ability to project themselves in the Black continent. With a population of Latin-Americans descended from Africans, being poorer and threatened by a powerful enemy, as well as being a socialist state sensitive to Third World problems, Cuba tried to take a stand in a world in conflict between developed and non-developed and in the anti-imperialist struggle.

2 It is important to emphasize that, from 1960 to 1990, French policy remained strong in Africa. The African Empire was one of the greatest historical French conquests, especially from 1830 onwards, when they arrived at Algeria. By the end of the XIX century, France took control of a vast part of the Sahara, the Sahel and the Atlantic Coast, extending its presence all the way until Congo, to the South. In the following 20 years, France conquered protectorates in Morocco, Togo and Cameroon. This extensive rule through the seas was crucial for the wealth of "Free France", under the leadership of General Charles De Gaulle, during the Second World War. When President De Gaulle later managed the decolonization of this empire, he was very careful to preserve a close relationship with "Francophone Africa". De Gaulle and his successors had created a "club" environment, which offered prestige to the elites of francophone states. The French kept their military bases in former colonies and kept supplying them with weapons and police and military training. However, France was not the only neither the main supplier of weapons to countries in the "francophone club". The USSR took the position of main weapon supplier for the region. It is important to highlight that francophone elites got used to the special treatment they received from the French government at the highest level. The maintenance of this relationship was actually the French alternative to superpowers' hegemony. See Chazan et al. (1992) and Visentini (2010).

For this reason, Cuba's policy towards Africa can be described with the following dominant characteristics: a) coherence – correspondence between political discourse and concrete action; b) immutability – permanence of basic principles throughout the years despite of the need for certain adjustments and changes; c) adaptability – the capacity to operate in changing contexts and conditions which affected Africa and Cuba in general³. Cuba had as its main purpose the promotion of revolutionary processes and the survival of the Cuban Revolution. So, it was important to make Cuba viable and to preserve its independent status and prestige. Being a small country and suffering from the imposition of a policy of undeclared war, Cuban political leaders believed that if revolution happened in the African continent, the United States would be obliged to accept and negotiate with new revolutionary countries. These two dynamos – self-preservation and revolutionary zeal – were the bases of Cuban foreign policy.

On the other hand, African states rapidly reached 27% of United Nations' seats and represented a third of Non-Aligned countries. Africa, in this sense, became a viable area for the projection of the Cuban Revolution. The cultural revolution in Cuba allowed the offer of help for Africans and for the involvement in revolutionary processes, as well as in wars, in a way that didn't disturb internal cohesion or revolutionary ideology. On the contrary, it was a permanent tool for reaffirming the Revolution's purposes.

The greatest proof of Cuban internationalism took place in Angola. In 1975, the MPLA, threatened by two rival groups, FNLA and UNITA – the former supported by China and the latter by the United States and South Africa – turned to Cuba for support. Due to the connection of their leaderships, MPLA, in the person of president Agostinho Neto, required Cuban military assistance when UNITA rebels advanced to the capital with South African military support. Before sending troops to Angola, Fidel asked for Brezhnev's support. On the one hand, this was a new situation for Cuba, because the country had never asked for support to accomplish a military operation before, but on the other, Havana also had never accomplished such a large operation in another continent. Asking for the USSR's help was reasonable at that moment. However, the USSR denied support and Cuba found itself in a position of either intervening or sealing the fate of the MPLA. In that way, and at a crucial time, the Cuban government sent troops without Soviet support, at the risk of not receiving any endorsement. Havana launched, then, the so-called Carlota Operation.

In November 1975, 4,000 Cubans disembarked at the Luanda coast. Within weeks, the troops grew to 7,000 with logistic support from

³ These ideas are based on López (2002).

the Soviets, who were convinced to get involved in the conflict. The military power eventually grew to 20,000 men. In 1976, the Soviets signed many economic agreements with Cuba, which included the shipping of more sophisticated weaponry to Havana. Cuban action in Angola was successful, resulting in a popularity and legitimacy increase for the Cuban Revolution and government, both inside and outside of the country. Cubans admired the role that their country, however small and suffocated by superpowers rivalry, was playing, sacrificing itself in order to help liberate a former colony and, on top of that, being able to resist the powerful aggressions and military might of South Africa and the United States of America. Resisting the United States' siege at home was one thing. But resisting this siege in another *front* was something greater, especially when the hateful South African racist regime was being defeated as well.

Another great intervention occurred in Ethiopia in 1977-1978. Cubans were called to support Mengistu Haile Mariam's revolutionary government alongside Soviet experts. From December 1977 to April 1978, Cuban troops went from 400 to 16,000 combatants (Azicri 1988). The conflict had started in Somalia, which had obtained North American assistance. Initially, Cubans were reluctant to get involved, for Somalia was an old ally and a Third World country. A great effort was made to avoid conflict; Fidel met with Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalis, trying to create a Socialist Federation between them, but it wasn't possible. Cuban forces fought well – they reversed the war in Ethiopia in seven weeks and in Angola in ten weeks. However, due to the fact that the conflict in Ethiopia occurred between two Third World nations and that the USSR got involved, Cuba's role in Angola received greater attention.

There were more Cuban military actions in Africa, such as the support of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) and the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), in Namibia. So, by the end of the 1970s, Cuba maintained personnel in various American, African and Asian countries. However, disappointment and the new world conjuncture of the end of the 1970s led Cubans to a less active state and a position closer to the USSR. Rushed observers affirmed that Cuba had lost its enthusiasm for Revolution, and so had lost its heterodox commitment to it. What was happening, though, was that it took a more consistent and pragmatic attitude, in face of the world's transformation. Previously, Cuba, isolated, had nothing to lose. Now, in a new context, and after many victories by the Revolution, it was necessary to preserve itself in order to survive. However, these aspects did not mean the end of Cuba's policy towards Africa, nor of Cuba's third-world profile, for example. It was precisely in this framework that Africa became a fruitful place to

demonstrate its commitment to the Revolution.

Crisis and resizing of Cuban-African cooperation

The ideals defended by Cuba – the principle of sovereign equality among nations; multiple solidarity towards underdeveloped countries; and support to national liberation movements all over the world – drafted the dominant traits of its policy towards Africa. Nevertheless, if revolutionary internationalism is a result of revolutions, this is also valid for its opposite – counterrevolutionary internationalism.

It is important to remember that in the passage of the 1980s decade to the 1990s, with socialist countries in a defensive position, Washington developed the strategy of low-intensity conflict, initiating a vigorous counterrevolution in the Third World. The end of the bipolarity made the African continent lose its strategic importance and its capacity of bargaining. In this context, African states suffered greatly from the effects of the crisis and restructuring of capitalist world-economy, which started in the 1970s. Due to African countries' fragility and vulnerability, as well as their inability to react in an articulated manner, it was inevitable to resort to world financial organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Africa was entering the so-called "lost decade", shrinking economically, resulting in profound social crisis. Obviously, the end of the bipolarity also affected the Cuban state in an essential point – the revolutionary force that was obtained, in a way, through Cuban presence in the Third World. However, Cuban presence in Africa from the 1960s and the maintenance of the cooperation scheme after the Cold War revealed the conditions of *adaptability* to the local reality, expressed by the modest conditions which Cuban technicians and specialists lived in and the high level of *integration* and *acceptance* which they achieved (López 2002).

Another important aspect to consider is the Cuban respect for organizations which acted in favor of international solidarity. When the Organization of African Unity was founded and the groups that preceded it were dissolved, Cuban policy always took into account the positions of this Organization and extended its support to the unity of the continent in the landmarks of the Third World, the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-apartheid struggles. Cuban official discourse highlighted as main virtue of the OAU the absence of neocolonial powers in it. Another reason for Cuban respect for the Organization was in terms of its defense of sovereignty, non-interference of external actors in internal issues, as well as the general principles of International Law. It is important to emphasize that when Cuba

took troops to Africa, the role of its contingent was limited to defend the country. There was a clear orientation of no involvement in internal fights or in counterinsurgency missions. When external aggression or threat ceased, Cuban troops promptly abandoned the territory. Thus, for instance, Cubans played a key role in negotiating Namibia's independence and, consequently, the end of apartheid in South Africa. The clear counterpart was revealed in the form of diplomatic support of African countries to Cuba, voting against the embargo and against the accusation (condemning) of human rights violation at the UN.

The post-Cold War era presented a new moment of difficulties for Cuba and for African countries, but, at the same time, it created new conditions for its international integration. In comparative terms, if 2001 produced some sort of international collapse due to the so-called War on Terror sponsored by the USA, in Africa the creation of the African Union (AU) and, the following year, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), projected the continent positively. If we take into account the transformation of the international system, we will notice that some African states consolidated as medium powers and, among these, some acquired the status of regional powers. At the same time, to the extent that wars in Africa ended, Cuban cooperation expanded to other beneficiaries. In 2000, at the G-77 South Summit, in Havana, many African countries of relative economic power committed themselves to contributing to a fund which would allow 3,000 Cuban doctors to act in Africa. So, until 2000, out of 138,805 Cuban civil technicians working abroad, 76,771 (55%) were operating in Africa. In August 2008 there were 1,886 Cuban cooperation workers in 30 African countries (López 2002).

In this perspective, taking a more far-reaching and collective posture has converted into an important objective for the African regional group, as well as for Cubans. African leaders were obliged to make an effort in this sense. They understood too well the consequences of unequal power relations, so as not to work for a movement towards equal relations. This perspective explains, in part, the reason why, even in times of galloping neoliberalism, it was important to maintain the cooperation with Cuba. Despite the prognosis of the collapse of Cuban-African cooperation because of the serious economic crisis of the 1990s, relations were maintained even in an unfavorable setting. Between 1990 and 1999, Cuban-African cooperation suffered a resizing and readjustment according to new circumstances. However, the impact of the formation of generations of technicians, specialists and even politicians in current African context guarantees a new phase for Cuban-African relations.

Gradually, democratization processes, alongside attempts of

conflict resolution and civil wars, meant an important step towards the construction of a new political and economic setting which can be translated into development opportunities. In this context, Cubans are important actors, although their presence in the continent has been relegated to the background by most of the specialized literature. Nevertheless, it remains to be comprehended how a small country, with no material resources and with the task of constructing its own state foundations, was able to develop a permanent and decisive role in contemporary international relations. Today, Cuba has diplomatic relations with 51 out of the 54 African countries; it hosts diplomatic missions in 23 African countries; it counts with embassies in 30 of the continent's countries; and not to speak of its cooperation in educational development (Isle of Youth). Between 1961 and 2007, 30,719 students from 42 Sub-Saharan African countries graduated in Cuba – 17,906 from high school; 12,813 from a bachelor degree; 5,850 were educated by Cuban specialists. The Cuban literacy program, which is carried out in five Sub-Saharan African countries and has reached 73,000 people so far, has more than 7,000 currently enrolled.

In terms of healthcare, between 1960 and 2000, 138,805 Cuban civil technicians had worked abroad, out of which 76,771 (55%) in Africa; 2,809 Cuban specialists had worked in 84 different countries, out of which 1,157 in Africa up to 1998. The Universal Healthcare Program gave coverage to more than 48 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa (almost 20% of the population); 5,463 Cuban cooperation workers fulfilled 42 million health appointments, 6 million home assistances, 600.000 birth assistances, 1.7 million surgical activities and applied over 5 million vaccines. Operation Miracle recovered the eyesight of 6,247 patients in an ophthalmological center in Mali and of 1,065 Angolans. Entrepreneurial Group Biological and Pharmaceutical Laboratories (Labiofam) works on transferring technologies for the development of nations in the continent (the Group also works for the elimination of malaria). There are still possibilities of cooperation in sectors such as biotechnology, commerce and investments.

It remains necessary, however, to establish the essential elements of the formation of the revolutionary state, of its foreign policy guidelines for these states, and, fundamentally, of social conflict as an international issue. According to Fred Halliday, “there is an assumption that the objectives of revolutionary states are similar to those of other states (...)”. However, according to the scholar, “all revolutionary states, with almost no exception, have tried to promote revolution in other states. The challenge they have posed for the international system doesn't reside in a new form of diplomacy or interstate relations, but in the very content of their foreign policy which prioritizes and sees almost as a right or obligation the transformation of

social and political relations of other states” (1999). It is upon this reality that lies the historic Cuban-African relations.

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ABSTRACT

Cuban-African relations are marked by traits of exceptionality. The Cuban Revolution coincides, in terms of time, with the intensification of the decolonization process in Africa. From the first years of the Revolution, Cuba has defined its line of action in the African continent, marked by civil and military cooperation. Cuban African policy was, in this way, defined by self-preservation and revolutionary zeal.

KEYWORDS

Cuban foreign policy; Africa; South-South Cooperation.

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