

A SURVEY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUBA AND CHINA: A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

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Cuban foreign policy can be divided into two stages since the victory of the Cuban Revolutionary in 1959. The first stage is from 1959 to the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In this period, Cuba adhered to the so-called proletarian internationalism, namely to keep the brotherly friendship with the Soviet Union and other communist countries and help and cooperate with each other. Actually, Cuba seemed to be more interested in establishing a close alliance with the Soviet Union. The second stage is from the late 1980s and the early 1990s until now, a period during which Cuba has tried to implement an omni-directional multilateral diplomatic policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It hopes to build favourable relations with European countries, Canada and Japan, and also return to the Latin America family. However, the former may be a nice ideal. The ideological gap between Cuba and Western countries seems to be insurmountable, more so with the antagonism to communist authority in Cuba from the United States. Dissatisfied with Cuba's crackdown on dissidents in 2003, the EU responded by imposing a series of diplomatic sanctions. For example, it reduced the rank of bilateral high-level visits and cultural communication, and invited Cuban opposition leaders to important embassy receptions. In response, the Cuban government cut all diplomatic contacts with EU and refused EU aid. Fidel Castro told reporters

that "Cuba does not need Europe" in January 2005.¹ In a word, Cuban foreign policy has attached great importance to actively developing friendly relations with developing countries, in the hope of receiving support from China.

China and Latin American countries are in an important stage of development now. The hope of further deepening mutual cooperation has become very strong. Cuba and China have some very favourable factors which help to develop foreign relations with each other. First and most important, Cuba and China are both communist countries; they need to support each other politically. Second, there is a desire for economic cooperation. As is well known, China is playing a more important role in the international economic and political arenas. Trade between Latin America and China reached \$100 billion in 2007. China has become the third largest trading partner of Latin America, and is already Cuba's second largest trading partner after Venezuela.² Economic and trade cooperation between the two countries has a huge potential in the future, such as in agriculture, communications, home appliances, food processing, commodities, etc. Third, people in the two countries have a strong favorable impression of each other. Most of the old Chinese generations still remember the song, "The beauty of Havana, there is my home..." which was popular in the 1960s in China.

1. Erikson, Daniel P., and Minson Adam, "Cuba and China: The New Face of an Old Relationship," *Hemisphere*, September 22, 2006.

2. "China signs trade deal with Cuba," November 19, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7733811.stm>.

For China, Cuba has a special position within all Latin American countries. It is the first Latin American country that established diplomatic relations with China and the only communist countries in Latin America today. In some sense, Cuba is regarded by China as having a triple identity: like a brother, a comrade and a friend.³

Raúl Castro was elected president of Cuba on February 24, 2008. Although Cuba has successfully completed the transition of the highest leadership and ensured that the Cuban socialist system will continue, it has to face a complex and changing internal and external situation, especially severe domestic economic problems that need to be solved. Under these critical conditions, on the one hand, Raúl will attach more emphasis on the development of foreign relations with Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and other Latin American countries, which is the basic foundation of Cuban foreign policy. On the other hand, the relationship between Cuba and China will continue. It has been 50 years since Cuba and the People's Republic of China established formal diplomatic relations on September 28, 1960. Raúl's ruling style is more pragmatic than that of his elder brother, so it will be helpful to deepen the relationship of both countries.

This paper discusses the special relationship between Cuba and China and its future through a Chinese lens. The first section mainly reviews three periods of the foreign relations between Cuba and China from the late 19th century till now. The second section elaborates on the issue of the transition of Chinese foreign policy towards Cuba, and the basic foreign regulations towards Cuba. The third section analyses the future of the Cuba-China relationship, and looks at some factors that might influence the bilateral relationship.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: FRIENDSHIP IS MORE THAN HATE

Historic Contacts since the Late 19th Century

Due to the geographic distance and difficult transportation, personal communication between Cuba and China can be traced from one hundred years ago. Tan Qiancu, a Chinese official interpreter in Cuba, gave an overall description of Cuba in his work named "Cuban Miscellanea" in 1887. Zhang Yinghuan, who was appointed as Chinese Minister to the United States, Peru, and American colonies of Spain in 1885 by the Qing Dynasty, in the preface for this book, said, "Cuba is located in South America, and is a Spanish colony. It has fertile land suitable for farming, especially the planting of cane sugar, tobacco, etc." Moreover, according to Zhang Yinghuan's introduction, Chinese contract workers came to Cuba in 1847. Since the failure of Qing Dynasty in the Opium War, the Chinese government had to change its policy about prohibiting people having any contact with other countries, and formulated regulations on recruiting Chinese workers. Spain hired many Chinese workers to work in Cuba in this period. Felix Duke mentioned the first batch of Chinese arriving in Cuba about 1847.⁴

Spain signed a treaty of trade with the Qing Government in 1864. The treaty allowed Chinese to work in all Spanish colonies, and made it legal for Cuba to hire Chinese workers. Although some Chinese had come to Cuba from the Philippines, California and other places, the treaty undoubtedly increased the scale of Chinese workers in Cuba. In addition, a lot of soldiers had to go into exile abroad after the Chinese Taiping Tianguo Revolution in 1864, and some of them came to Cuba. It can be estimated that the number of Chinese workers in Cuba had reached more than 126,000 from 1847 to 1878.⁵ Most of the contract workers stayed in Cuba. Mrs. Mercedes Hernan Crespo, the wife of a former Cuban ambassador to China who was interested in the cultural fu-

3. Liu Weiguang, "Review of Academic Seminar on Developments between China and Latin America after President Hu Jintao's Visit to Costa Rica, Cuba and Peru," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, December 2008, Vol. 30, No.6, p 72.

4. Chen Xiansi, "China and Cuba," *Journal of Zhengzhou University*, March 2, 1962, pp. 62-63.

5. Ibid, p. 63.

sion between Cuba and China, described in her monograph titled “Chinese in the Kingdom of Sugar in Cuba,” the following: “these Chinese workers across oceans began to become a part of the Cuban nationality. They took the gorgeous Chinese ancient civilization and colorful exotic culture, and they were melted into the Cuban national arms eventually.”⁶

Cuba and China first established formal diplomatic relations in 1875. After the Cuban Republic was founded in 1902, the two countries established diplomatic relations again. Wu Tingfang was the first Chinese ambassador to Cuba in 1906. Because of the colonial oppression, whether against Spanish colonial powers or American invasion of Cuba after the Spanish-American War in 1898, China felt close to Cuba and wanted to stand together with Cuba. Likewise, Cuba gave its support to the Chinese capitalist revolution in 1911 which Dr Sun Yat-sen led. In 1942, the Nanjing national government established formal diplomatic relations with Cuba.

The Special Twenty Years Between the Two Countries: From Peak to Trough

Cuba expressed welcome and support for the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Especially Cuba took active measures to develop a relationship with China after the revolutionary victory in 1959, and sent some party leaders to visit China. China and Cuba signed a trade treaty in December 1959. China provided material support to Cuba by buying 50,000 tons of sugar. Subsequently, both sides signed a five-year trade agreement and some trade contracts in July 1960. China would buy 500,000 tons of sugar from Cuba, and Cuba would import rice and consumer goods from China. Cuba published the First Declaration of Havana on September 2, 1960 and Fidel Castro declared the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China. A joint communiqué between China and Cuba was issued on September 28, 1960

whereby the two countries established a formal diplomatic relationship. Former Chinese President Liu Shaoqi said that Cuba gave great political support to China at that time, because it was the first country that recognized the People’s Republic of China in Latin America.

Relations between Cuba and China entered a honeymoon period shortly after the establishment of diplomatic relations. Che Guevara led an economic delegation that visited China in November 1960. The two governments signed the first economic and technical cooperation agreement. China would provide \$60 million of interest-free loans to Cuba, buy one million tons of sugar, and help train 200 Cuban technicians. From November to December 1961, Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado visited China, the first leader to visit the P.R.C. from Latin America. After the Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban missile crisis, the Chinese government protested strongly against America’s invasion of Cuba, and issued a series of statements to support the requirement of safeguarding Fidel Castro’s sovereignty. In July 1963, China provided RMB 70 million to aid Cuba after a powerful hurricane.⁷ During this period, Cuba always stuck to the policy of “One China” in UN conferences and objected to American proposals to obstruct China’s return to the UN.

However, the honeymoon of bilateral relations only lasted some time. With the increasingly ideological differences between the Soviet Union and China in the late 1960s, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated. It put Cuba in a dilemma. It was difficult for Cuba to balance its relationship with the two disharmonious partners. Finally, Cuba chose to stand on the side of the Soviet Union, which had a severely negative effect on the Sino-Cuban relationship. Both countries entered the coldest period in their bilateral relationship.

6. “The Relationship between Cuba and China,” *Macau: A Bridge between China and Latin America*, Macau Association for Promotion and Communication between Latin America and Asian-Pacific Region, 2006, p. 5.

7. Yang Jianmin, “Studies in Cuban Foreign Policies since 1959,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, February 2009, Vol. 31, No.1, p. 45.

Development of A New Period Since the Late 20th Century

From the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the relations between the two countries began to gradually improve. High-level visits from both sides increased and the two nations supported each other again in international affairs. Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen and the Cuban foreign minister exchanged diplomatic visits in 1989. It signaled that the relationship of the two countries had already fully recovered. Cuba has continued to adjust its diplomatic policy to improve and strengthen its relationship with China since the 1990s. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Cuba in November 1993. It was the first Chinese leader's state visit to Cuba. Fidel Castro was invited to an official visit to China in November 1995, his first visit to China.

The relationship between Cuba and China has continued to develop as we entered the 21st century. High-level visits from both sides were more frequent in this period. President Jiang Zemin visited Cuba again in April 2001, and both sides signed 7 important agreements, including economic and technical cooperation agreements. In November 2001, Premier Li Peng visited Cuba. President Fidel Castro also visited China from February to March, 2003. In November 2004, President Hu Jintao visited Cuba and signed 16 trade agreements with Cuba.⁸ China hoped to further deepen and promote the relationship between Cuba and China. When President Hu Jintao attended the APEC leaders' meeting which was held in November 2008 in Peru, he visited Cuba again. Cuba suffered strikes from two very damaging hurricanes at this time. China offered \$1 billion cash aid and the value of RMB 21 million of building materials to assist Cuba in dealing with the damages of the hurricanes; President Hu Jintao brought with him relief materials valued at RMB 0.6 million dur-

ing this visit and China announced that total aid to Cuba would be of the order of RMB 70 million.⁹

At present, the bilateral relationship between China and Cuba is part of the all-round development of the new period of relations. China's former ambassador to Cuba, Xu Yicong, has said that most of China's national leaders have visited Cuba, and almost all Cuban national leaders have come to China. Raúl Castro visited China twice; he spent 20 days in his first visit to China and visited six provinces.¹⁰ As evidenced by so many high-density and high-level visits during this period, the two countries have already entered the best period of development of international relations.

THE TRANSITION OF CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CUBA: TO BE MORE AND MORE RATIONAL?

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, on the one hand, some Latin American countries still kept diplomatic relations with Taiwan's authorities; on the other hand, the United States formulated a critical foreign policy towards China, that included political isolation, economic blockade, and military threats. Since the United States regarded Latin America as its backyard, it limited official contacts between Latin America and China, and prevented Latin American countries to export strategic materials like copper to China. China set up a basic diplomatic policy toward Latin American countries during this period consisting of "undertake active personal contacts, establish friendly relations, improve cultural and economic communication, gradually move towards the diplomatic relations." As President Mao Zedong said, "as long as Latin American countries want to establish diplomatic relations with China, we would welcome them; if they don't want to establish diplomatic relations, we may do business with them; even if they don't want to do business, general communication is also very

8. Ibid, pp. 46–47.

9. Li Guanyun, Wan Xiangxin, "President Hu Jintao Visit to Cuba: China begins to improve the economic and trade relationship with Latin America," *The Economic Report of 21 Century*, November 19, 2008.

10. Yang Jun, "Exclusive Interview with Chinese Former Ambassador Xu Yicong: Cuba is a mirror to China," *A Window to the South*, October 16, 2009.

good.” China’s foreign minister and Premier Zhou Enlai pointed out that the development of relations between Latin American countries and China must observe the rule of “a slim brook flowing permanently, that would steadily move.”¹¹ Under this guiding policy, a diplomatic bulletin between China and Cuba, published on September 28, 1960, marked a new breakthrough in Chinese diplomatic relations with Latin American countries.

China made some adjustments of its foreign policy toward Latin America in the 1980s and drew up four basic principles for the development of the relationship with Latin American countries. They are “peace and friendship, support each other, equality and mutual benefit, and common development.” China emphasized it has had consensus with Cuba on peace and development, paid more attention to the development of trade relations with Latin American countries, and made the bilateral relationship more pragmatic.

On the eve of President Hu Jintao’s visit to Latin America in November 2008, China published a Chinese Policy Document on Latin America and the Caribbean. It is the first document of Chinese government policy toward this region. It indicates that China has already put the development of its relationship with Latin American countries at strategic height. China’s overall policy objective toward Latin America is proposed in the third part of the document. It says that “the general goal of politics is mutual respect and trust, a wider consensus. In economic aspects, deepen cooperation, mutual benefit and win-win results; in cultural aspects, closer communications.” The document especially emphasizes that the “One China principle is the political foundation on which China establishes and develops its relationship with Latin American countries and other regional organizations.”¹² During a visit to Latin American

countries in 2008, President Hu Jintao said China was willing to try its best to build the partnership of all-round cooperation built on equality, mutual benefit and common development between Latin America and the Caribbean countries. It also means that, as a key area, economic and trade cooperation will further deepen and expand in the future.

Cuba is the first Latin American country that established diplomatic relations with China and is the only communist country in Latin America. Furthermore, China is Cuba’s second largest trading partner. Cuba actively supports China on issues of principle in international affairs, such as the critical issues of human rights, Taiwan, Tibet. They also coincide on opposing foreign interference in internal affairs, observing the Charter of the United Nations and supporting the reform of the UN. China seems to be a strategic partner for Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chinese officials believe that the relationship between the two countries is better than in any previous period. Although China has pursued a non-aligned policy, China will give political support to Cuba because of its special position. As President Hu Jintao said, Cuba and China are “good comrades, good friends, and brothers.” While Raúl Castro’s ruling style is more pragmatic and flexible than his brother’s, it may be more conducive to deepen the relationship between the two nations.

From the economic and trade cooperative perspective, China has given much support to Cuban economic development. At the beginning, the trade relationship involved long-term trade protocols, exchanging commodities and signing an annual trade protocol. China imports sugar, citrus, nickel and cobalt ore, and pharmaceutical products from Cuba, and exports mechanical and electrical equipment, cereals, oils and foodstuffs, automotive equipment and parts, medical equipment, light industry products, and garments to Cuba. Bilateral cooperation in the future will be focused on agriculture and the oil industry. Cuba’s national the oil company CUPET recently declared that Cuba may have recoverable re-

11. “Foreign Relations and Diplomatic Policy,” <http://ilas.cass.cn/cn/lmgj/contents.asp?InfoID=1084>.

12. “The Policy Document of China on Latin America and the Caribbean,” *People’s Daily*, November 6, 2008.

erves of 20 billion barrels of oil in the Gulf of Mexico.¹³ SINOPEC, the Chinese state oil company, signed an agreement with CUPET in Havana on November 25, 2008 to develop oil resources. This is one of the important fruits of President Hu Jintao's visit to Cuba. Both sides will cooperate in oil and gas development, engineering, technical services, and trade of petroleum equipment.

China has trade relations with almost all Latin American countries, but 90 percent of trade concentrates in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Peru. China has seen its trade with Latin America climb from \$13 billion in 2000 to more than \$100 billion in 2007, with China turning into Latin America's third largest trading partner. Although the total trade with Cuba is small compared with Chinese trade with Brazil, Chile, and other Latin American countries, it is expected to grow quickly. At present, China is Cuba's second largest trade partner after Venezuela, with bilateral trade accounting for 12 percent of Cuba's total foreign trade. Cuba is China's largest trading partner in the Caribbean region. Bilateral trade has increased from less than \$0.8 billion in 2004 to more than \$2.2 billion in 2008. Moreover, China has launched extensive economic cooperation with Cuba. The Chinese had invested in 13 projects in Cuba by the end of 2006 in areas such as agriculture, tourism, telecommunications, light industry, etc. China has already directly invested more than \$70 million in Cuba, while Cuba has invested in some projects on tourism and biotechnology medications in Beijing and Shanghai. Cuba has also established ophthalmic hospitals in Qinghai and Henan.¹⁴

THE FUTURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUBA AND CHINA: A HEDGE BETWEEN KEEPS FRIENDSHIP GREEN

Cuban foreign policy has reaped some fruits since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most noticeably, Cuba

was invited to participate by the countries of Latin America in the first Latin American and Caribbean Summit for Integration and Development (CALC) in December 2008 in Brazil. Moreover, the Obama administration has taken some positive measures—different from the previous administration—to promote the relationship between the United States and Latin American countries. With regard to Cuba, he decided to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and lifted restrictions on remittances from Cubans in the U.S. to their families, and permitted Cubans residing in the U.S. to visit the island for the first time in decades.¹⁵ However, it is an obvious fact that Cuba's dislike of the U.S. for about 50 years has not been changed by one person or one administration. Most Latin American countries have kept their distance from the Cuban model, with Venezuela and Bolivia being the exceptions among these countries. But this is a problem itself, because Cuba has few friends in the world.

People may wonder, given the geographical distance, Cuba's weak economy and Cuba's loss of its game card between the Soviet Union and China after the collapse of the Soviet Union, why did China invest millions of dollars in Cuba in recent years? China has given impression to the whole world that it thinks highly of the relationship of the two countries. President Hu Jintao has visited Cuba more times than any other Latin American country. To think that the Chinese need for natural resources drives the two countries' relationship is wrong. Honestly speaking, Cuba is an impoverished island with fewer natural resources than other Latin American countries. The trade between the countries is often cited as being more than \$2.5 billion, a very small amount for an economic powerhouse like China. Therefore, more important for the relationship is that both communist countries support each other politically in the in-

13. Zhang Nan, "SINOPEC signed an operation agreement with Cupet," http://www.cs.com.cn/ssgs/02/200812/t20081201_1669192.htm.

14. Wang Xinping, "The Fast Development of Cooperation between China and Cuba," *People's Daily*, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/41214/9975898.html>.

15. Riordan Roett, "High and Low Points of U.S. Policy towards Latin America, 2009–2010," Testimony Presented to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, March 10, 2010, pp. 1–2, 10.

ternational arena. "Cuba has provided consistent support for China's international stance, especially with respect to the Taiwan issue," said Wang Youming, an analyst at the China Institute of International Studies.¹⁶

Most of the time, this support of each other is expressed by closer economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. At the same time, the development of the economic and trade relationship of the countries will be based on the principle of reciprocity and market regulation. Although Cuba and China are led by Communist parties, they have an apparent difference about what is socialism and how to build socialism. They also have differences in the development model and conceptualization of development. In particular, they have pursued very different economic models, with China adopting market economics while Cuba still has a command system with most of the economy under state control.

At present, Venezuela is Cuba's largest trading partner. Due to Venezuela's changeable condition, Cuba needs to put more emphasis on cooperation with China. Cuba is seeking to involve China in integration schemes with other Latin American countries (such as Venezuela's "Bolivarian Alternative Plan"). But this possibility is not very likely. In my opinion, although the Cuba-China alliance is often seen in the western press and commentary as consistent with China's nonaligned policy, China will try to avoid any negative influence from a political alliance with Cuba under today's complex international situation

even if both are communist countries. Of course, China will undoubtedly give political support to Cuba and vice-versa. After all, they have already walked side by side the whole 50 years since Cuba and the People's Republic of China established formal diplomatic relations on September 28, 1960. Currently, Chinese diplomatic policy toward Cuba maintains the principle of balanced friendship and focuses on economic and trade cooperation. The economic cooperation between the two countries should be the most important and the key area of cooperation, with sugar and nickel the main Chinese imports from Cuba. Cuba's announcement of the discovery of large oil resources may broaden the cooperation between the two countries.

With Raúl Castro's takeover of the presidency from his brother, Cuba has entered a period of adjustment of its policies and potential reconsideration of the Chinese path. Cuba is now very interested in the Chinese reform. This would be a good point of confluence for building a positive relationship between Cuba and China. However, Raúl is an elder leader and the future of the Cuban political situation is still not clear. Cuba and Venezuela, the most radical leftist countries in Latin America, will provide the highest tests of Chinese diplomatic art and strategy in Latin America. In my opinion, Chinese foreign policy towards Cuba will follow a path of moderate friendship. Perhaps as a famous Chinese saying goes, "a hedge between keeps friendship green."

16. Tom Lasseter, "Old friends Cuba, China Strengthen Ties," <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2009/09/16/75560/old-friends-cuba-china-strengthen.html>.