

# Cuba's Foreign Policy after the Castro Era: Revolutionary Continuity or Emerging Realism?

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## Abstract

Cuba's foreign policy in recent decades has been defined largely within an ideological and revolutionary framework—one originally established by Fidel Castro following the triumph of the 1959 revolution and later maintained to some extent by Raúl Castro. This discourse has traditionally revolved around three main pillars: opposition to U.S. imperialism, support for leftist movements in Latin America and Africa, and an emphasis on political independence and self-sufficiency. However, following Raúl Castro's withdrawal from power and the partial transition to a new generation of leadership under Miguel Díaz-Canel, Cuba's foreign policy has encountered new questions: Is it still rooted in the principles of the revolution, or is it shifting toward a new form of realism? This article explores whether Cuba's post-Castro foreign policy reflects a "continuation of the revolution" or a "transition to strategic realism."

Using a critical discourse analysis approach and framed by constructivist theory, this study investigates the dominant narratives within Cuba's foreign policy and interprets them within the context of broader structural and regional changes. The findings suggest that Cuba's foreign policy in the post-Castro era is marked by a duality. On one hand, the Cuban diplomatic apparatus continues to employ revolutionary rhetoric, emphasizing resistance to U.S. unilateralism and the defense of socialism. On the other hand, economic constraints and international pressures have compelled Cuba to reconsider some of its diplomatic priorities.

Especially in the wake of intensified U.S. sanctions and the decline of Venezuelan support, Havana has sought to strengthen more pragmatic ties with countries like Russia, China, Iran, and certain European nations—though these partnerships are still often presented within an ideological framework.

Regionally, Cuba remains active in organizations such as CELAC, ALBA, and CARICOM, using them to promote Latin American solidarity and regional autonomy. Nevertheless, its recent responses to internal crises in neighboring countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia have been more cautious and diplomatic rather than radical and interventionist. This shift in tone may be interpreted as evidence of a calculated realism where strategic goals increasingly take precedence over ideological fervor.

On the global stage, Cuba's foreign policy has shown a growing inclination toward multilateralism. Participation in United Nations forums, involvement in climate change negotiations, and efforts to reframe Cuba's international image as a peaceful yet sovereign nation all indicate a move toward global engagement beyond revolutionary isolation. One of Cuba's most effective soft power tools—medical diplomacy—remains central to its global influence, with the deployment of Cuban medical teams to various countries bolstering the legitimacy of its foreign policy. Simultaneously, pragmatic efforts to restore relations with the European Union and select Latin American governments suggest that Cuba's new leadership is embracing a form of calculated realism that departs in key ways from its earlier revolutionary foreign policy.

It is important to note that this realist turn does not necessarily signal a complete abandonment of the revolutionary discourse. Instead, it reflects what may be described as a “dual coexistence” of revolutionary principles and pragmatic logic. In essence, post-Castro Cuban foreign policy neither entirely breaks with its past nor remains fully confined by it. Rather, it represents an attempt by the Cuban government to preserve domestic legitimacy

through continued use of revolutionary symbols while also responding to external challenges through more adaptive and realist approaches. From this perspective, Cuba appears to be undergoing a “gradual transition” from revolutionary diplomacy to a more realist foreign policy orientation—one that is still marked by internal and external tensions.

In conclusion, the article argues that post-Castro Cuban foreign policy is a hybrid model shaped by two conceptual patterns: the persistence of resistance discourse and the strategic adaptation to a new global order. This development has not only influenced Cuba’s external relations but has also reshaped internal narratives about national identity, state roles, and the redefinition of national interests.

**Keywords:** Cuban Foreign Policy, Revolutionary Diplomacy, Realism, Soft Power, Post-Castro, Regionalism

### **Introduction**

Foreign policy is often a reflection of a country’s internal transformations and its external necessities. In the case of Cuba, this reflection has long been shaped by the 1959 revolution and the charismatic leadership of Fidel Castro. The revolutionary triumph not only restructured Cuba’s domestic order but also laid the foundations for a foreign policy driven by socialist ideology, anti-imperialism, and support for liberation movements (Domínguez, 1989). This ideological model persisted, albeit with some adjustments, under the leadership of Raúl Castro. However, in recent years—particularly following Raúl’s gradual withdrawal from power and the rise of Miguel Díaz-Canel as head of state—Cuba’s foreign policy has shown signs of transformation, prompting new academic questions. Is Cuba still adhering to the revolutionary foreign policy doctrine, or is it shifting toward a more pragmatic and realist approach?

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, Cuba's foreign policy was constructed in direct opposition to the United States. This antagonism manifested most dramatically

during the 1962 Missile Crisis and in Cuba's support for leftist insurgencies and governments across Africa and Latin America (Glejises, 2002). Cuban diplomacy during this era reflected a revolutionary foreign policy—a diplomacy that eschewed conventional international norms in favor of solidarity with the oppressed and a commitment to exporting revolution. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global restructuring that followed the Cold War placed Cuba under increasing strain, necessitating a reorientation of its foreign engagements (LeoGrande & Kornbluh, 2014).

Under Raúl Castro, although ideological language persisted, a cautious pragmatism began to shape Cuba's international behavior. Engagement with the European Union, efforts to normalize relations with the United States under Barack Obama, and deepening ties with countries in the Global South such as China and Russia all signaled a strategic shift. Nonetheless, these advances stalled with the election of Donald Trump, whose administration reinstated sanctions and reversed many Obama-era policies (Whitefield, 2017).

The rise of Miguel Díaz-Canel marks a new chapter in Cuban diplomacy—one that raises the central question of this article: does post-Castro foreign policy represent a continuation of revolutionary doctrine or a move toward strategic realism? This inquiry is crucial not only for understanding Cuba's evolving international posture but also for offering a conceptual framework through which the foreign policy of other ideologically-driven regimes may be analyzed.

To understand Cuba's current foreign policy direction, one must consider a combination of domestic, regional, and global factors. Domestically, economic hardship, public dissatisfaction, and demands for reform have pushed the state toward greater international engagement. Regionally, the decline of leftist governments in neighboring countries and the rise of right-wing administrations have limited Cuba's traditional sphere of influence (Cannon & Brown, 2017). On the global stage, the emergence of multipolarity—

most notably the rivalry between China and the United States—has created both new opportunities and new constraints for Havana.

Theoretically, this article adopts a constructivist framework in international relations, positing that Cuba's foreign policy is not solely shaped by material interests, but also by identity, discourse, and self-perception on the global stage (Wendt, 1999). In this sense, even seemingly realist shifts in diplomacy may still be embedded in revolutionary narratives. This dual character gives rise to what may be described as a “coexistence” of ideological continuity and pragmatic adjustment.

This study seeks to examine Cuba's diplomatic statements, regional and international behavior, and official discourse to determine how the country is balancing revolutionary legacy with strategic adaptation. Ultimately, it argues that Cuba's post-Castro foreign policy reflects neither a wholesale break from the past nor a static continuity, but rather a complex process of selective transformation—where the symbols and rhetoric of the revolution coexist with calculated responses to new geopolitical realities.

By situating Cuba's evolving diplomacy within this framework, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how ideological states adapt their foreign policies over time, and whether Cuba is in fact experiencing a foundational transition or merely reinterpreting past strategies through a new geopolitical lens.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and constructivist theory in international relations. Primary sources, including official speeches by Cuban leaders, foreign ministry statements, and regional summit communiqués, are analyzed to identify dominant narratives in post-Castro Cuban foreign policy. Secondary sources include academic literature and policy reports. The method aims to uncover how Cuba constructs its foreign policy identity and balances revolutionary discourse with

pragmatic adaptation. This interpretive approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the symbolic and strategic dimensions shaping Cuba's international behavior in the post-Castro era.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Analyzing the foreign policy of revolutionary states such as Cuba requires a perspective that transcends traditional materialist theories in international relations. These countries often define their foreign policy not only based on material interests and power balances, but also through identity, discourse, and ideological self-representation (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, the constructivist theory in international relations, which emphasizes the role of identity and discourse in shaping state behavior, provides an appropriate framework for understanding Cuba's foreign policy in the post-Castro era.

#### **1. Constructivism: Identity as a Source of Interests**

In contrast to realism, which assumes that states have fixed interests rooted in survival and power, constructivism argues that interests are socially constructed through historical interactions and discursive practices. As Alexander Wendt (1999) notes in his seminal work *Social Theory of International Politics*, "identities and interests are not exogenously given, but are constructed through social interaction" (Wendt, 1999: 231). Thus, understanding Cuban foreign policy is impossible without examining its revolutionary identity, anti-colonial history, and anti-imperialist discourse.

Since the 1959 Revolution, Cuba has portrayed itself not just as a state, but as a normative actor in the international system—one committed to supporting liberation movements and resisting imperialism (Domínguez, 1989). This self-perception has shaped Cuba's definition of its national interests—not merely as economic or strategic goals, but as preserving revolutionary values and serving as a model for the Global South.

## **2. Discourse and Foreign Policy: From Revolution to Adaptation**

Discourse theory in international relations, particularly within the post-structuralist tradition, emphasizes that foreign policy is not simply a reflection of external reality, but rather the product of linguistic and discursive practices (Hansen, 2006). Discourses provide the interpretive frameworks through which meanings, identities, threats, and interests are constructed.

In the case of Cuba, the revolutionary discourse remained dominant not only during the early decades of the revolution but also under Raúl Castro and Miguel Díaz-Canel. However, what has changed is the articulation of this discourse in response to new international conditions. For example, while in the 1960s and 1970s Cuba exported revolution and supported armed movements, in recent decades it has rearticulated the discourse of solidarity through diplomacy in medicine, education, and South–South cooperation (Feinsilver, 1993; Kirk, 2009).

In this way, Cuba has used its revolutionary discourse to maintain identity continuity while adapting its foreign policy behavior to global realities. This apparent contradiction can be explained through discourse theory, which shows how discourses evolve by re-signifying concepts, priorities, and signifiers over time (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

## **3. Identity Politics and Resistance to Global Dominance**

Another key concept relevant to Cuban foreign policy is international identity politics. From this perspective, Cuba has positioned itself as a "resistant other" in the face of global hegemonic structures. This representation extends beyond opposition to the United States to include resistance to international financial institutions and the neoliberal global order (Saney, 2009). Theoretically, this approach overlaps with postcolonial critiques, which emphasize the core–periphery divide in global politics.

This identity of resistance has enabled Cuba to maintain ideological legitimacy in the international arena, even under economic embargoes and political isolation. Especially among African and Latin American countries, Cuba has retained moral credibility. However, this identity-based posture has also constrained the flexibility of Cuba's foreign policy in adapting to changing geopolitical contexts.

#### **4. Blending Realism and Ideology: A Framework for Comparative Analysis**

In recent years, some analysts have viewed Cuba as an example of blending ideological and pragmatic foreign policy. That is, Cuba does not operate solely based on revolutionary principles or material interests but strategically combines both (Erikson, 2020). This fusion can be described as "revolutionary realism" or "strategic idealism"—concepts that highlight how ideological regimes balance international pressure with commitment to foundational principles.

For example, Cuba's engagement with the European Union or its normalization of relations with the United States during the Obama administration were realistic strategies that were nonetheless justified within a broader discourse of national dignity and anti-imperial sovereignty. Hence, analyzing post-Castro foreign policy requires a framework that considers both identity construction and strategic calculation.

#### **Research Findings**

Cuba's foreign policy following the era of Fidel Castro—particularly during the leaderships of Raúl Castro and Miguel Díaz-Canel—has undergone substantial shifts. While revolutionary ideological discourse remains visible in official rhetoric and diplomatic symbolism, there has been a growing realist trend in Cuba's external engagements. This transition is shaped by economic pressures, geopolitical transformations, and evolving regional dynamics in Latin America. This section explores Cuba's foreign policy across five key dimensions: (1) relations with the United States, (2) regional diplomacy in Latin America

and the Caribbean, (3) strategic partnerships with global powers, (4) health diplomacy, and (5) institutional participation in the global order.

### **1. Relations with the United States: From Rapprochement to Renewed Pressure**

One of the most central elements of Cuba's foreign policy is its relationship with the United States, which has experienced oscillating trends over the past decade. During Raúl Castro's leadership, a historic rapprochement began in 2014. Initiated through secret negotiations facilitated by Canada and the Vatican, this thaw led to the restoration of diplomatic relations in 2015 and the reopening of embassies (LeoGrande & Kornbluh, 2014).

President Barack Obama aimed to shift away from the isolation of Cuba, easing travel, trade, and financial restrictions, and allowing for direct engagement between American citizens and Cuba. For Havana, this opening presented both economic and diplomatic opportunities—particularly critical as Venezuelan financial support was declining.

However, under President Donald Trump, this progress was reversed. The Trump administration adopted a "maximum pressure" strategy, expanded sanctions, and re-added Cuba to the list of state sponsors of terrorism (Feinberg, 2021). These measures reduced tourism, halted several investment projects, and restricted remittances from Cuban Americans.

Although President Joe Biden made limited adjustments—such as restoring some flight routes and visa processes—his administration maintained many of Trump's sanctions. As a result, U.S.-Cuba relations remain tense, with a model of "cautious engagement" replacing the former spirit of normalization.

### **2. Regional Diplomacy: Sustaining Revolutionary Symbolism with Pragmatic Engagement**

Cuba has long been regarded as a symbol of anti-imperialist resistance in Latin America. While this revolutionary identity remains part of Cuba's image, the intensity of ideological activism has declined in favor of more pragmatic, multilateral approaches.

During Raúl Castro's administration, Cuba played a central role in regional organizations such as CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America). These forums aimed to counter U.S. hegemony and promote South-South cooperation (Serbin, 2012).

However, with the political decline of leftist governments in the 2010s, Cuba recalibrated its regional priorities. Under Díaz-Canel, Havana has focused on strengthening ties with Mexico, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Argentina, while cautiously re-engaging with Brazil and Colombia.

Cuba has also assumed a mediator role in regional crises. Its involvement in facilitating the Colombian peace talks (2016) demonstrates a shift toward constructive diplomacy, showcasing a more cooperative foreign policy posture (Tickner, 2017).

### **3. Relations with Global Powers: Strategic Diversification Amid Sanctions**

As U.S. sanctions persist and Venezuelan support wanes, Cuba has increasingly turned to global powers such as China, Russia, and Iran to diversify its strategic alliances.

Ties with China have deepened across sectors including energy, transportation, and telecommunications. Beijing is now Cuba's top trading partner and provides political support in international institutions (Ellis, 2022).

Russia, aiming to revive Soviet-era ties, has signed agreements with Cuba in military, energy, and educational domains. Recent high-level visits and joint infrastructure projects reflect a mutual strategic interest.

Cuba's relationship with Iran, meanwhile, revolves around scientific cooperation, healthcare, and joint resistance against U.S. sanctions. The two countries share a narrative of anti-imperialism and non-alignment, reinforcing their diplomatic alignment.

### **4. Health Diplomacy: Soft Power through Medical Internationalism**

A distinctive feature of Cuba's foreign policy is its use of health diplomacy as a tool of soft power. Cuba has sent thousands of doctors and health professionals to countries across Africa, Latin America, and even parts of Europe and Asia during health crises such as Ebola and COVID-19 (Feinsilver, 2010).

Initiatives such as "Operation Miracle" and the "Henry Reeve Medical Brigade" have provided free healthcare to underserved populations, creating an image of ethical, humanitarian diplomacy. This practice not only strengthens Cuba's political relationships in the Global South but also serves as a major source of foreign revenue (Kirk, 2009).

Despite critiques that question the economic motivations behind these missions, their impact on Cuba's international legitimacy and soft power is undeniable.

## **5. Institutional Participation in the Global Order**

Despite ongoing sanctions and geopolitical isolation, Cuba has maintained active participation in international institutions. Each year, it successfully mobilizes support at the United Nations General Assembly for a resolution condemning the U.S. embargo—a resolution passed with near-universal backing (UNGA, 2023).

Cuba is also an active member of the Non-Aligned Movement, WHO, and UNESCO, where it advocates for national sovereignty, social justice, and multilateralism.

In recent years, Cuba has expanded its role from defensive diplomacy to proactive contributions on global issues such as climate change, development, and public health. This signals a shift toward participatory diplomacy—where a small state asserts influence through coalitions and moral leadership.

## **Results and Discussion**

Cuba's foreign policy after the era of Fidel Castro has undergone noticeable transformations. While revolutionary discourse remains an inseparable part of the country's diplomatic identity, in practice, a gradual shift toward realism and pragmatism in

international relations is evident. This change does not imply a complete renunciation of the revolutionary legacy, but rather a form of ideological adaptation to the new international structures and Cuba's internal economic and social imperatives. Since the transfer of power to Raúl Castro and subsequently to Miguel Díaz-Canel, Cuban foreign policy has increasingly focused on economic interests, regional balance, and the diversification of strategic alliances.

The relationship with the United States has seen intense fluctuations. The period of détente that began in 2014—with secret negotiations and the reopening of embassies in 2015—raised hopes for economic and political openness within Cuba. This process, more than signaling an ideological transformation in Havana, was a realist response to economic needs and the weakening of financial support from Venezuela. However, with the rise of the Trump administration, this path was reversed, sanctions were reimposed, and economic pressure on Cuba intensified. The Biden administration, despite initial promises to revise policies, largely maintained Trump-era restrictions, leaving bilateral relations fragile and tense.

Regionally, Cuba has continued its efforts to maintain its position as a symbol of resistance to U.S. hegemony. However, it is no longer actively promoting revolutionary export or widespread interventionism. Instead, the government has focused more on diplomatic engagement and playing a mediatory role in regional crises, such as its contribution to the Colombian peace talks. This shift reflects Cuba's willingness to play a constructive role in regional order and reduce tensions, especially with countries that have adopted more moderate positions toward Havana in recent years. In this context, Cuba has rebuilt relations with Mexico, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and more recently Argentina, while cautiously exploring the restoration of ties with Brazil and Colombia.

On the global stage, Cuba has pursued a strategy of diversifying its international partnerships. Economic and political cooperation with China has expanded significantly, making Beijing Cuba's most important trading partner. At the same time, Russia has worked to revive Soviet-era ties by investing in energy, transport, and military sectors in Cuba. Growing cooperation with Iran—especially in scientific, medical, and anti-sanction contexts—has also become part of Cuba's global strategy. Although these relationships may not always produce significant economic benefits, they hold symbolic and diplomatic value, particularly in strengthening Cuba's position among countries critical of U.S.-led global order.

Health diplomacy remains one of the most distinctive features of Cuba's soft power. The deployment of thousands of doctors to developing countries, particularly during humanitarian crises such as earthquakes, the Ebola outbreak, or the COVID-19 pandemic, has earned Cuba international credibility and brought in essential foreign revenue. Despite criticisms that see this policy as an economic exploitation of human resources, the diplomatic effects of these medical missions have been undeniably positive. They have created a global image of Cuba as a responsible and humanitarian actor, especially in African and Latin American countries, thereby building diplomatic capital and goodwill.

Despite facing structural constraints due to sanctions and economic hardship, Cuba has maintained an active presence in international institutions. Its roles in the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and the Non-Aligned Movement indicate a continued commitment to multilateralism. Through these platforms, Cuba seeks to legitimize its political system in the face of U.S. pressure while promoting principles such as the right to development, national sovereignty, and social justice.

A comprehensive analysis of Cuba's diplomatic behavior in the post-Castro era reveals a hybrid model that blends loyalty to revolutionary ideals with pragmatic adaptations to modern geopolitical realities. Cuba aims not to abandon the discourse of resistance, but to

reframe it in new forms—such as regional mediation, South-South cooperation, and engagement with global powers. In this framework, Cuban foreign policy appears as the product of three intersecting logics: the ideological logic of the revolution, the economic logic of survival, and the geopolitical logic of strategic opportunity.

These logics, rather than conflicting, interact to produce a flexible and adaptive foreign policy. Cuba is attempting to maintain its historical legitimacy while adopting new tools for action in the international system. This is especially important in a world moving toward multipolarity and a relative decline in the dominance of the U.S.-led liberal order. In this evolving context, Cuba perceives fresh opportunities to assert itself. It seems the country is moving toward a form of "revolutionary realism"—a realism that does not arise from weakness, but from a clear understanding of the limits and opportunities of a post-Western international system.

### **Conclusion**

Cuba's foreign policy after the era of Fidel Castro can be seen as a fusion between the legacy of revolutionary tradition and the need for pragmatic reconstruction in today's international order. A close examination of Cuba's diplomatic behavior in recent years reveals a determined effort to preserve the core of the 1959 revolution in modern forms suited to both domestic and global transformations. This endeavor does not stem from nostalgia or utopian idealism but rather from a realistic understanding of the necessities for survival and the legitimacy of the political system in the context of globalization, economic pressure, and an emerging multipolar world. In this light, Cuba—despite enduring severe economic hardships, long-term sanctions, and relative isolation—has managed to sustain a distinct foreign policy identity that combines resistance, flexibility, and innovation.

On one hand, Cuba remains committed to anti-hegemonic discourse and support for the sovereignty of Global South nations, emphasizing its differentiation from Western

countries through medical cooperation, education, and technology sharing. On the other hand, what may appear ideologically rigid on the surface has, in practice, adopted strong elements of realism, diversification, and balancing. Rather than relying solely on traditional allies—especially after the decline of Venezuela’s influence—Cuba has expanded its relations with powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and emerging actors like South Africa, Algeria, and Vietnam. These shifts suggest that Cuba’s political system, though relatively rigid at home, has exhibited a capacity for adaptation in foreign policy.

Another major aspect of Cuba’s foreign engagement is its management of the complex relationship with the United States. While Cuba continues to view the U.S. as the source of many pressures, sanctions, and development obstacles, the *détente* during the Obama administration demonstrated Havana’s willingness to engage under conditions of mutual respect and non-interference. The return to hostility during the Trump era and its continuation under Biden taught Cuba not to hinge its entire foreign policy on fluctuations in the White House. As a result, recent years have seen a growing effort to "securitize" the relationship with the U.S. through multilateral institutions, public diplomacy, and mobilizing global public opinion. This approach has not only helped reduce the costs of isolation but also bolstered Cuba’s international legitimacy.

One particularly striking feature of Cuba’s post-Castro diplomacy has been its strategic use of health diplomacy and South-South cooperation. In a world where soft power narratives increasingly replace traditional forms of influence, Cuba has leveraged its highly trained human capital to gain credibility and influence beyond its economic and military weight. The deployment of doctors, humanitarian aid, and the transfer of scientific expertise have placed Cuba in a unique global position—one that, despite criticism from some observers, has created a sustainable network of relations and trust, especially in Africa and Latin America.

Overall, Cuba appears to be navigating a historic duality in its foreign policy: remaining loyal to the revolutionary heritage while renewing its diplomatic instruments and goals. This transition has not occurred through rupture but as a form of evolved continuity. Cuba's foreign policy, especially in today's complex global environment, resembles a form of normative realism in which ideas, interests, and strategic necessities are balanced. The country has shown that even with limited economic resources, relative isolation, and leadership transition, it is possible to maintain a stable, multilayered, and purposeful foreign policy—not merely aimed at regime survival, but oriented toward asserting Cuba's identity and role on the world stage.

Looking to the future, the path appears cautiously optimistic. Continued economic reforms, reducing dependence on specific partners, investing in soft power, and playing an active role in multilateral arrangements could enhance Cuba's position in a transforming international system. Nevertheless, this path is not without challenges. Sanctions, internal economic crises, and growing social dissatisfaction all pose serious threats to the stability and sustainability of Cuban diplomacy. However, strategic flexibility, historical legitimacy, and skill in generating symbolic diplomatic capital remain Cuba's core assets in continuing to engage with the global order.

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