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Cuban-Chinese Relations after the End of the Cold War

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In the relatively short period of twenty years since the end of the Cold War, China has become one of Cuba's main strategic allies. Simultaneously, the Caribbean nation has turned into one of the Middle Kingdom's most significant partners in the Western Hemisphere. From a political standpoint, Cuba and China share two important traits: their political leaders openly proclaim that they are endeavoring to build a socialist economic system with "national characteristics"; and their communist parties have exercised basically unchallenged ideological and political hegemony ever since the victories of their respective revolutions in 1949 and 1959.

Nevertheless, in 1989 few experts would have predicted such an expansion and consolidation of relations between the two countries. Cuba and China are on opposite sides of the planet. They are completely different in terms of population and territory, and their national, political, and cultural identities contrast significantly. Moreover, despite an auspicious beginning to their relations in the 1960s, for the better part of twenty years, from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, Havana and Beijing often found themselves on opposite sides of major international issues.¹

How and why, then, did Cuba and China become such close allies after the end of the Cold War? From my standpoint, answering this question entails approaching the subject from historical and political points of view and dividing the chronology into four periods: a synopsis of relations before 1989; a summary of the main steps taken by both governments to improve their interactions between 1989 and 2001; a presentation of the situation since 2001; and an analysis of the interests and preferences that have determined the present state of Cuban-Chinese connections.

Background: 1959–1989

Historically, the relationships between Cuba and China go back to the nineteenth century, when the Spanish colonial regime started to import Chinese

laborers (coolies) as replacements for the diminishing numbers of African slaves working in the cane fields. Between 1847 and 1874, 150,000 male Chinese laborers were imported into Cuba. At the turn of the century a new wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in Cuba from California. The legacy of a fairly significant population of Chinese immigrants can still be felt today all over Cuba, but especially in Havana's Chinatown. Citizens of Chinese origin were represented in a range of historical and cultural activities. For example, one of the most significant Cuban painters of the twentieth century, Wilfredo Lam, was biracial, born to Chinese and African parents in Sagua la Grande, in central Cuba, a town that had very strong Chinese influences from the mid-nineteenth century.

Although separated by ten years, the victories of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions were part of the same broad historical processes taking place fifty to sixty years ago in the third world. Driven by individual historical trajectories, however, both events were interjected into the context of the Cold War—defined as the ideological and geopolitical conflict between capitalism, led by the United States, and socialism, led by the Soviet Union, that spanned several decades of the twentieth century. That clash was particularly acute in the global South, or underdeveloped world, after the Second World War.²

At the time, revolutionary leaders in both Havana and Beijing proclaimed themselves to be inheritors of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The triumph of the Chinese People's Liberation Army over the Guomindang led by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) and that of the Cuban Rebel Army over the Batista dictatorship relied on similar guerrilla tactics identified with Mao Zedong's and Che Guevara's writings. Both revolutionary processes were confronted immediately by sharply hostile policies from administrations in Washington; in both cases, as it had done with the Soviet Union, the U.S. government withheld diplomatic recognition to deny their legitimacy.³ It is no surprise that both China and Cuba adopted strongly anti-imperialist positions, which Beijing maintained until the 1970s.

From its establishment in 1949 the Chinese People's Republic (PRC) endeavored to develop relationships with Latin America and the Caribbean. Most countries in the region, however, followed the U.S. lead, maintaining diplomatic ties with the Republic of China's Nationalist government in Taipei and refusing to recognize Beijing as the rightful representative of the Chinese people.⁴ The first real breakthrough came on September 1, 1960, in the First Declaration of Havana, a document Jorge Domínguez considers to be Fidel Castro's "first formal call for revolution in the Western Hemisphere."⁵ Speaking at the Plaza de la Revolución, the then prime minister of the Cuban revolutionary government proclaimed, among other things, that Cuba would break its

links with Taiwan and establish ties with the government of the PRC. Shortly thereafter, on September 28, 1960, the two countries established diplomatic relations.

Cuban-Chinese relations developed rapidly from that moment on. Responding to Cuba's recognition, the PRC provided political backing and economic and military aid. For example, the first hundred Cubans trained to pilot the Soviet-supplied MiGs were trained in China. In return, Cuba staunchly supported China's aspiration to replace Taiwan as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This support became more important when Havana joined the Non-Aligned Movement at its inaugural summit in Belgrade in 1961, becoming simultaneously a founding member and the only Latin American member country at the time. That step turned Havana into a key player in third world politics, which would be the natural field of Chinese leadership in the international communist movement.

There is no doubt that, as Simon Shen writes, "leaders from both sides shared a similarly radical approach, such as political voluntarism, mass mobilization, anti-elitism and bureaucracy, and advocating moral incentives, to propel their respective societies towards communism."⁶ In his excellent essay on Cuban-Chinese relations from 1959 to 1966, Cheng Yinghong—quoting from the memoirs of Chinese ambassador to Cuba Wang Youping—points out the intimate relationship that developed between the diplomat and Cuban leaders.⁷ As the quasi-official *China Daily* reported, both countries exchanged high-level visits, with President Osvaldo Dorticós and Che Guevara visiting China.⁸ Groups of young Chinese and Cubans studied abroad in Havana and Beijing, respectively, as did, for example, Professor Xu Shicheng, one of China's foremost Latin American specialists, who took courses at the University of Havana in the 1960s.

As Cheng Yinghong concludes from Chinese sources, "from 1960 to 1964, Sino-Cuban relations were much closer and more intimate than many observers had assumed. The Cuban leaders' frequent unannounced visits to the Chinese embassy, and the personal ties between Chinese diplomats and senior Cuban officials, are indicative of the close relationship. Economic and technological cooperation between the two countries went far beyond mere exchanges of rice for sugar, and the close relationship lasted much longer than has often been suggested."⁹ The close, intimate relations that developed during the early 1960s began to deteriorate as a result of the "Sino-Soviet split," as historians have called the sharp struggle between the Soviet and Chinese communist parties over the direction of the international communist movement.¹⁰ For Cuba, as for Vietnam, which at the time was facing U.S. military aggression, the fact that the two largest socialist countries would spend more time

and effort struggling with each other than against the West had risks as well as benefits. While sympathizing with China's criticism of Soviet *détente* with the United States, and while taking advantage of the split to increase their autonomy, the Cubans saw the domestic dangers of both parties' divisive policies.

Norwegian historian Odd Arne Westad provides an outstanding explanation of the dilemma:

The dynamic of Cold War confrontation in the 1960s and 1970s depended to a high extent on the policies of the new revolutionary states. Cuba and Vietnam challenged not only Washington in defense of their revolutions; they also challenged the course set by the Soviet Union for the development of socialism and for Communist intervention abroad. . . .

The Cuban and Vietnamese challenges to the Cold War would have been impossible without the early 1960s Sino-Soviet split in the international Communist movement. That Mao Zedong—himself, as he was fond of pointing out, the head of a Third World country—could claim to speak of Marxist-Leninist theory with an authority that he denied the Soviets, meant more room to maneuver for Marxists elsewhere. Mao's claim of criticizing Moscow from the *left* was particularly useful for Third World revolutionaries—even if very few of them wanted to adopt Chinese models of development or follow the vagaries of Chinese foreign policy—because it implied that they, too, could claim to have found ways of speeding up socialist construction. The Sino-Soviet split opened up great opportunities and great dangers for Communist parties in the Third World; it made it possible to tack between the two self-proclaimed centers of Communism and get support from both, but it also signaled an internal split in many parties, which in some cases reduced them to political irrelevance (if not infantility).¹¹

Westad quotes Fidel Castro's appeal for socialist unity in a March 13, 1965, speech: "We small countries, which do not entrust ourselves to the strength of armies of millions of men, which do not entrust ourselves to the strength of atomic power—we small countries, like Vietnam and Cuba, have enough instinct to calmly see and understand that no one more than we, who are in a special situation 90 miles from the Yankee empire and attacked by Yankee planes, are affected by these divisions and discords that weaken the strength of the socialist camp."¹² That Havana remained neutral in the Sino-Soviet split produced tensions in Cuban-Chinese relations from 1964–65 on. China feared that the Cuban Communist Party had no other option than to align itself more closely with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as demonstrated by the visits that Fidel Castro made to Moscow in 1963 and 1964, the participation

of Raúl Castro in a meeting of communist parties in Moscow that same year, and Chinese exclusion from a meeting of Latin American communist parties in Havana in 1965.¹³

According to Cheng Yinghong, Mao Zedong was fully aware of the situation, which he explained in a meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1964: "In Cuba they [the Cubans] listen to half and reject half; they listen to half because they can't do otherwise, since they don't produce oil or weapons."¹⁴ China could not offer Cuba the same level of economic and military support as the Soviet Union, and it tried to compensate for its weaker position by using its propaganda machinery. It knew perfectly well that ideologically its Cuban comrades were more sympathetic to the Chinese views. Wang, the Chinese ambassador in those years, put it this way: "China did everything it could to accommodate Cuba, but it could not match the Soviet Union in supplying oil, energy, and major weaponry."¹⁵

The island's leadership wanted to avoid the consequences that the divisions between its allies would have on the Cuban Communist Party, which was founded in 1965 after a difficult process of uniting several revolutionary organizations that had participated in the struggle against Batista: the 26th of July Movement, the Popular Socialist Party (old Communists), and the March 13 Revolutionary Directorate. It could not therefore allow the Chinese tactic of compensating for its lack of resources with a propaganda campaign carried on inside Cuba.

Consequently, the Cubans went beyond maintaining neutrality, striving to mediate in the conflict. On several occasions Fidel Castro himself, Che Guevara, and other high-level party and government leaders made attempts to facilitate reconciliation between their two main allies. But China was not interested. The last attempt took place in February 1965, when Guevara cut short a visit he was making to several countries in Africa, in preparation for his internationalist expedition in the Congo, and joined Emilio Aragonés and Osmani Cienfuegos, two of the most important party leaders at the time, to fly to Beijing.¹⁶ Guevara was obviously chosen because of his close ties with the Chinese leadership. In a statement about the Sino-Soviet split, he had said, "the Sino-Soviet quarrel is, for us, a sad development, but because the dispute is a fact, we tell our people about it, and it is discussed by the party. Our party's attitude is to avoid analyzing who is right and who is not. We have our own position, and as they say in the American films, any resemblance [presumably of Cuba to either contestant] is purely coincidental."¹⁷ Guevara's mission failed. This time, Mao Zedong, who had received him on previous occasions, declined to do so. Guevara met instead with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, head of state and general secretary of the Communist Party, respectively. A month after

the visit, Fidel Castro made his major speech of March 1965. In it he openly criticized the Chinese authorities for trying to distribute propaganda favorable to their positions among officers of the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces.¹⁸

Although there was never a formal rupture of party and government relations, the events described here inevitably led to a freeze, especially after the unleashing of the Cultural Revolution in China and the strong alliance of Cuba with the Soviet Union in the 1970s. In the second half of the 1970s, as China began its rapprochement with Washington, periods of open hostility occurred, as in the case of the interventions of Cuba and China on opposite sides, first in the Angolan conflict and later in the Sino-Vietnamese armed clashes at the end of the decade.

During the Angolan conflict in 1975–76, Cuba sided with Agostinho Neto's MPLA government in Luanda, supporting it militarily against attacks from South Africa and the other two liberation movements, UNITA and FNLA; China directly aided the FNLA and was wooed by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to be more active in defeating Neto and the MPLA. In *Conflicting Missions*, his outstanding and well-researched text about the confrontation between Havana and Washington in Africa, Piero Gleijeses demonstrates that the Chinese withdrew their support for the FNLA as soon as it became evident that Pretoria had invaded Angolan territory from Namibia, and thereafter refused to cooperate with the United States as long as South Africa was involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, when the UN Security Council reprimanded South Africa for its invasion, the Chinese delegate, although refusing to vote, lashed out at "Soviet social imperialism and its [Cuban] mercenaries," accusing them of "towering crimes" against Angola. Gleijeses points out: "His diatribe could not obscure a basic fact: in Angola, Beijing had been on the side of South Africa's clients, and the well-publicized departure of Chinese instructors in late 1975 could not dispel the smell of collusion with the apartheid state."¹⁹

The second incident took place in 1979, when armed conflict broke out between China and Vietnam. Cuba immediately sided with Hanoi, and Fidel Castro condemned Beijing in the harshest terms, blaming Deng Xiaoping personally.²⁰

After these verbal clashes, relations between the two countries were cool but remained normal. Michael Erisman indicates that "these political tensions in the Sino-Cuban relationship generally had little negative impact on trade issues," as demonstrated by the fact that "the island had by the end of 1990 emerged as the PRC's most important trading partner in all of Latin America," with a volume of \$561.9 million in both directions, which made the Chinese position in the Cuban market very similar to that of the Japanese.²¹

The rapprochement process began in 1983, when both parties and governments started to exchange mid-level delegations, but it did not pick up speed until 1989, coinciding with the end of the Cold War between the USSR and the United States. In the first half of the 1980s some of the issues that had separated Cuba and China began to subside, especially the question of support for opposite sides in southwest Africa. The Chinese leadership realized that Cuba's position in the third world was strong. On the other hand, Havana had always considered Beijing a very important economic partner. As relations with the Soviet Union started to deteriorate with the advent of *perestroika*, China became a natural option.

Initial Steps toward Consolidating a Relationship, 1989–2001

The period of consolidation was initiated in 1989 when both foreign ministers visited each other's capitals. These visits are seen as the initial steps toward the full resumption and normalization of relations between the two socialist countries. What is interesting about this period is the intense exchange of high-level visitors that took place immediately afterward and continued for the next ten to twelve years.²²

The meetings began in May–June 1989, with Foreign Minister Qia Qisheng's visit to Cuba as part of a tour of Latin American and Caribbean countries. He was received by President Fidel Castro. Later that year Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca visited China and met with President Jiang Zemin. These two exchanges were relevant at the time not just because China was facing isolation due to the Tiananmen Square incidents but also because of the economic and social crisis taking place in Cuba after the fall of the European socialist regimes.

That initial foray was followed two years later by a delegation of the National People's Congress (the equivalent of Parliament) and the Standing Committee, led by Vice-Chairman Chen Muhua, which visited Cuba at the invitation of the Cuban National Assembly of People's Power (NAPP). They held meetings with Fidel Castro, Vice-President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, and Juan Escalona, president of the NAPP. Then, between July 1, 1991, and April 7, 2001, at least twenty-eight visits of dignitaries took place between the two countries.

Several of these trips were particularly notable. In July 1991 Carlos Rafael Rodríguez made an official visit to China. He was received by Jiang Zemin, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, in the first formal contact between the two political organizations. Then, from August 3 to September 9, 1991, José Naranjo, a minister without portfolio in the Cuban government,

went to China. This visit was important not only because of its duration—more than a month—but also because Naranjo was at the time Fidel Castro's chief of staff and was thus an official who would not normally visit a foreign country by himself unless he was carrying out important tasks in the name of the president. The November 1992 visit to Beijing of Carlos Lage, vice-president in charge of the Cuban economy, signaled the reestablishment of major economic cooperation relations between both governments.

In 1993 and 1995, respectively, both heads of state, Jiang Zemin and Fidel Castro, exchanged official state visits, raising bilateral relations to their highest levels. From then on, practically all sectors of both countries, including the defense and the state security ministries and the communist parties, established direct links and began the practice of conducting bilateral negotiations in each other's capitals every year.

We can draw several conclusions from these continuing exchanges. Obviously, both sides intensified the interactions between their principal officials during the last decade of the twentieth century. Practically all major officials of both countries visited the other, in some cases more than once. These exchanges laid the groundwork for the future. In some cases, such as that of the ministries of foreign affairs, coordination and cooperation talks continued annually.

For the Cuban and Chinese communists the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist countries clearly meant different things. For Cuba's part, the country recognized the need to search for new allies. For China, Cuba continued to be very important politically, as a third world country with which it shared common principles. This was demonstrated in the wake of the Tiananmen events of 1989, when Fidel Castro was one of the major world leaders who expressed understanding for the Chinese government's stance. In those years it was evident that China offered Cuba not only a political alliance but also important economic possibilities due to the manifest success of Chinese reforms. If China welcomed the news that the Cuban leaders would extend the red carpet to their foreign minister in June 1989, when many Latin American and Caribbean countries cancelled his visit, for Cuba it was of paramount importance that President Jiang Zemin decided to make his first official visit to Cuba in 1993, the worst moment after the breakup of Cuba's traditional ties with the Soviet Union, which had been until that time its main economic, political, and military ally.

Relations 2001–2011

The twenty-first century was marked by an unprecedented intensification of economic links and by the continuation of a very intense political rela-

tionship, as demonstrated by three presidential visits made from China to Cuba.²³

Commercial relations have drawn heavily on the precedent established when Cuba established diplomatic relations with China in September 1960. At the time the two countries initiated a “clearing account trade” system, in which the exchange of products was determined by annual quotas. The first Five-Year Trade and Payment Agreement was signed that year and was subsequently renewed every five years. Over three decades bilateral trade remained relatively stable, and in 1990 Cuba was China’s largest Latin American trading partner. The collapse of the Soviet Union had a severe impact on Cuba’s capacity to export sugar and other products, and on January 1, 1996, following the legalization of U.S. dollars in Cuba, the clearing account system was replaced by cash-liquidation trade.

The Cuban government showed remarkable ingenuity and creativity in its response to the crisis, opening a number of sectors to foreign investment while remaining committed to the fundamental structures of a socialist economy. Cuba and China once again became important markets for each other’s products, with bilateral trade exceeding pre-crisis levels. Trade became relatively complementary, with China importing raw sugar and nickel from Cuba and exporting machinery, dry beans, transport equipment, and light industrial products in return. China reported bilateral trade figures of \$2.29 billion in 2007, \$2.27 billion in 2008, \$1.55 billion in 2009, and rising to \$2.43 billion in 2012.

A 2008 state visit by President Hu Jintao came at a critical time for Cuba, as it was a concrete affirmation of the strength of the bilateral relationship. During the visit the two countries signed accords postponing for ten years repayments of unspecified trade debts that Cuba had accumulated through 1995, and extending for five years a \$7.2-million line of credit that China granted in 1998. President Hu also donated \$80 million toward Cuba’s hospital modernization program.²⁴

After 2000, bilateral trade grew to the extent that China became Cuba’s second-largest trading partner. As the Economist Intelligence Unit reported, “China has emerged as an important strategic ally [of Cuba] in recent years, with extensive economic and military cooperation, including substantial credit guarantees that have had a strong impact on the cost and availability of external financing.”²⁵

A number of Chinese enterprises have established branch offices in Cuba. Some of these offices focus on the export of Cuban primary products, such as nickel and sugar, to China, though they are increasingly incorporating medical and biological products into their portfolios. Other offices oversee the import of Chinese products into Cuba and the integration of investments into economic development projects.

Chinese investment in Cuban oil prospecting and production is an important recent development, as alternative energy sources such as coal and hydroelectricity harbor little potential on the island. The termination of Soviet oil supplies after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 forced Cuba to start paying world prices, seriously hampering economic growth and draining foreign purchasing capacity. In 2004 fuel imports cost Cuba \$1.31 billion, a significant figure relative to the size of Cuba's economy.²⁶

Since the early 1990s Cuba has gradually opened petroleum exploration to foreign investors, and the industry has consequently expanded rapidly. Oil and natural gas fields were discovered in a 112,000-square-kilometer marine area under Cuban jurisdiction in the Gulf of Mexico. The area has been divided into fifty blocks, each spanning about two thousand square kilometers. Foreign capital and technology have been introduced through joint venture contracts, which are operating in seventeen blocks, each with an average exploration cost of \$50 million. In March 2004 the Chinese enterprise Sinopec signed the "Memorandum on Blocks No. 1, 2, 3 and 4" with the National Petroleum Company of Cuba (CUPET), and in January 2005 the Shengli Oilfield Administration Bureau (a division of Sinopec) signed with CUPET a "product-sharing contract for prospecting in and exploiting three blocks."

For the Cuban population the impact of Cuban-Chinese trade is quite obvious. Stores throughout the island sell Chinese electric fans, televisions, stoves, and refrigerators at a cost below average world prices, and almost every Cuban family owns more than one Chinese-brand appliance. Stimulated by the government's "Energetic Revolution" campaign, many people have replaced their inefficient Soviet-era refrigerators with energy-efficient appliances from the Chinese manufacturer Haier. Many have also replaced their electricity-intensive lighting with energy-saving Chinese light bulbs. By mid-2009, 1,572 fuel-efficient cars from the Chinese manufacturer Geely had been shipped to Cuba, and more than 1,000 buses from the Chinese company Yutong had replaced the aging retrofitted trucks and trailers known as "camel buses." Demonstrating their linguistic flexibility, many Cubans now use the word *Yutong* interchangeably with "public bus."²⁷

While trade is crucial to Cuban-Chinese relations, exchanges and cooperation in the fields of social research, education, performing arts, science, sports, and tourism have also expanded substantially. In the early 1960s China and Cuba had established several agreements for cooperation in culture and postal services, but the initiative tapered off during the subsequent two decades. A September 1987 agreement on cultural exchange revived interaction in these areas and provided the basis for a more detailed plan signed during Hu Jintao's 2004 visit.

Setting the stage for President Hu's arrival, in September 2004 the president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Chen Kuiyuan, led a delegation to Cuba for the first Cuban-Chinese Forum on Social Science. The event, held in collaboration with the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology, and the Environment (CITMA), focused on the role of the social sciences in advancing more effective socioeconomic development policies and international collaboration. In September 2005 CITMA Vice-Minister Lina Domínguez led a Cuban delegation to a reciprocal forum in Beijing. The participants exchanged opinions on the evolution of socialism in Cuba and in China, a discussion they continued in the third CASS-CITMA forum in Havana in April 2008, and in a consultation meeting in Beijing in December 2010.²⁸

Academic exchange between the two countries dates back to the early 1960s, when 150 Chinese students were sent to Cuba to study Spanish. Suspended in the mid-1960s, the program resumed again in 1984. In November 2004 the two countries established scholarships to support the exchange of thirty Cuban students for twenty Chinese students per year. The program was expanded in 2006 to one hundred scholarships each way, and the Cuban government expressed its willingness to host 1,260 Chinese senior middle-school graduates from central and western China. During his 2008 visit to Cuba, President Hu delivered a speech at Tarará Student City, home to some three thousand Chinese students, in which he confirmed China's intention to send five thousand students to Cuba by 2011 to help create a human platform for sustainable bilateral cooperation. In support of these initiatives, both countries have organized three meetings between Cuban and Chinese university presidents held in Havana (2002), Beijing (2004), and Havana (2006).

State-to-state cooperation has allowed China to build educational exchanges and capacity in priority areas. In 2007 the China Scholarships Council funded twelve thousand young Chinese to study overseas; four hundred of these went to Cuba to study medicine and tourism, and in 2008 that number doubled. As a senior representative of the council explained, the program was strategically designed to maximize human impact: "the Chinese students we send to Cuba to study medicine are overwhelmingly from the western provinces of China, because that is where our central government is trying to develop infrastructure and social programs. So these doctors will return from Cuba to western China and fill an important need. In the meantime, a significant number of Cuban doctors are in western China, filling the need for the short term."²⁹ Medical exchange with Cuba is fresh in the minds of many Chinese in the wake of the Wenchuan earthquake in May 2008. Cuba immediately sent a medical team to assist in the most devastated areas, and on May

24 Premier Wen Jiabao visited the team, stating that its superior level of professional skill would maximize relief to the earthquake victims. The Cuban ambassador to China, Carlos Miguel Pereira Hernández, also praised the efforts of the medical team, stating that it was a “symbol of long-standing friendship between the two nations, and aid to each other in difficult times.”³⁰

In late 2002 the University of Havana established the Center for Chinese Language Training. In September 2004, three teachers were sent from China to the university to supervise a new one-year Chinese-language course through the center, and two more teachers were sent to oversee the second term. Their contracts were extended, and an additional two teachers were sent for a third term. This and other Chinese language and culture programs were reinforced by the establishment of the Confucius Institute in the heart of Havana’s Chinatown, which was presented to a Chinese delegation in conjunction with President Hu’s November 2008 visit.

Cuba and China believe that language training is an important component of broader technological and industrial cooperation, and technicians are usually enrolled in courses to become more familiar with each other’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Language training has therefore been increasingly coordinated with more technical spheres of collaboration, such as scientific and technological programs. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union three such programs had been implemented, and in March 1990 the first Joint Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation was established. Since then this committee has met every two years to draw up a biennial plan; in October 2003 (at the committee’s sixth meeting) a plan for cooperation in health, information, and agriculture was signed. The first Symposium on Sino-Cuban Biotechnology Development and Human Health was convened in February 2004, and a memorandum of understanding promoting cooperation in this field was signed in November of the same year. The Working Group on Biotechnological Cooperation was established in May 2005, coinciding with the seventh meeting of the Joint Committee, resulting in a five-year plan for cooperation in this field. The second and third meetings of the working group were held in October 2006 and September 2008. All of these forums and meetings have promoted cultural understanding as a key component of successful technical cooperation.

Bilateral visits are often timed to coincide with preparations for broader multilateral forums, providing Cuban and Chinese officials with opportunities to preview matters of mutual concern. September 2009, for instance, was a high point of bilateral activity in the lead-up to the UN General Assembly. That month, Vice-President Ricardo Cabrisas arrived in Beijing at the head of a high-level delegation to participate in the Twenty-Second Session of the

Joint Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation. Cabrisas was preceded by Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, who visited Beijing to hold talks with his counterpart, Yang Jiechi. Shortly thereafter, Wu Bangguo, president of China's Permanent Committee of the National People's Assembly, visited Havana to consult with Cuban National People's Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón and with President Raúl Castro himself.

Cuba has the most highly developed biotechnology and pharmaceutical sectors in Latin America, largely because the Cuban government has invested heavily in health programs, with considerable frontline medical staffing and research output. The weakness of the sector lies in its manufacturing capacity, and for this reason Chinese assistance has been important in translating Cuba's research results into products suitable for distribution through state and market channels. Conversely, Cuban technology transfer and investment has resulted in biopharmaceutical factories in Beijing (producing anti-cancer drugs), Changchun (interferon), Shandong (drugs for blood diseases), and Xinjiang—all of them manufacturing products to be sold in both China and Cuba. Cuba has expressed its desire that future Chinese investment in the sector be directed toward the manufacture of drugs in Cuba to meet demand both at home and in other Latin American countries.

Another key area of cooperation is tourism, a sector that has become a prominent driver of Cuba's economic development. In April 2007 a Cuban tourism office was established in Beijing, and in July a memorandum of understanding entitled "Operational Plan for Chinese Tourist Groups Visiting Cuba" was signed, coming into force in November of the same year. This project has permitted a number of Chinese tourist groups to visit Cuba. The numbers are not significant as yet, but could grow if direct flights are established. Owing largely to its unique natural endowments, Cuba attracts more than two million tourists per year, and Cuban tourism enterprises are making efforts to create a more accommodating environment for Chinese tourists.

The Cuban and Chinese governments have worked together to build the tourism market and establish facilities through joint ventures. On February 3, 2010, a jointly owned Cuban-Chinese hotel managed by the Spanish consortium Meliá was inaugurated in Shanghai's Pudong Financial District in the presence of the Cuban minister of tourism. This was a first in many ways: the collaboration of two socialist state enterprises, Xintian (Suntime) and Cubanacán, opened access for a private Spanish company into the Chinese market. The next phase of the project, now underway, is to complete a \$1 billion holiday resort in Havana's Marina Hemingway resort.

Cuban-Chinese joint commercial ventures are often integrated with attempts

to maximize technology transfer, with the aim of progressing from initial sales of Chinese products to their eventual manufacture in Cuba. For instance, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China shipped 500,000 bicycles to Cuba. The success of the initiative led to a similar export-to-production scheme for electric fans, and more recently for household appliances and heavy machinery.

Following the successful sale of Chinese washing machines, televisions, air conditioners, and refrigerators to Cuba, Hu Jintao signed sixteen accords in 2004 pledging Chinese support for the domestic manufacture of these and other goods, a promise that has materialized in a three-story production facility near Havana's Lenin Park. Similarly, the buses sold to Cuba by the Chinese company Yutong arrived together with thirty Chinese technicians, commissioned to teach their Cuban counterparts how to build them. Like the training in electrical appliances, this kind of human capital development will provide a valuable source of specialized talent as Cuba integrates into the world economy.

The world economic crisis that hit at the end of 2008 had an impact in all countries of the world, and Cuba and China were no exceptions. For Cuba the crisis only made a bad situation worse. The annual hurricane season in 2008 (from June to December) was one of the most destructive in twenty years. The storms hit the island at a moment when the country was trying to redesign its economic model, introducing necessary changes of "structures and concepts" as President Raúl Castro announced in July 2007. The process led to the Sixth Party Congress in April 2011 and the adoption of draft guidelines for the government's future economic policy.³¹ This is a moment when the Cuban leadership needs to emphasize its relationships with its key economic allies, China among them.

Although the crisis had an effect on China, most experts concur that it is one of the few countries that was able to minimize the pernicious consequences. Furthermore, China's domestic economic policies in times of crisis have been designed to diminish the social costs. In the period after the crisis, the Chinese economy became the second largest in the world. This and other factors enhance Beijing's influence in the whole world. Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the regions where China has more prospective interests.³² Although the Chinese government avoids clashing directly with the United States in its spheres of influence, and Latin America and the Caribbean have traditionally been defined as Washington's backyard, China has been making important strides and has vital geopolitical objectives in this region.

This context has made it possible for Cuban-Chinese relations not only to continue as before but also to prosper in certain ways. The enhancement of

relations after the beginning of the crisis was underlined almost immediately with the state visit of President Hu Jintao to Cuba at the end of November 2008. During that visit more than ten bilateral agreements were signed between the two countries as part of the accords reached in the Twenty-First Session of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic and Technical Cooperation, which took place in Havana shortly before Hu's arrival. Among the most beneficial of these agreements for Cuba were the postponement of payments on the trade deficit until 2018 and a credit line for \$7 million for another five years. There was also an accord of mutual recognition of titles. China also agreed to give Cuba a \$70 million credit for the repair and refurbishing of the health facilities on the island. The political talks between Hu and former president Fidel Castro and President Raúl Castro were broadly and positively reported on in the Cuban press.

To underline Cuba's favorable attitude toward China, Fidel Castro dedicated his March 29, 2009, *reflexión* to China, calling it "the future great economic power."³³ Referring to the forthcoming London Summit of the G-20, he stated: "As one can appreciate, the influence of the People's Republic of China in the London meeting will be enormous from the point of view of the economic crisis. This had never occurred before when the power of the United States was supreme in this field." He followed up this message the next day with another contribution in the same vein, echoing a DPA (Deutsche Presse Agentur) news dispatch from London, which argued that China would demand a greater role in world economic governance for the developing countries.³⁴

The Future of Cuban-Chinese Relations

The history and contemporary development of China-Cuba relations bode well for the future. The main reasons for the estrangement between the two governments in the 1960s have disappeared. In the years since then, China has become the second-largest economy in the world and now exercises global political influence second only to that of the United States. It can be argued that no major international economic or political problem can be solved without Chinese participation and cooperation.

Cuba has been able to survive as an independent socialist state, very similar to China in many ways and with an unprecedented regional standing in Latin America and the Caribbean. One of the main reasons for Cuba's "soft power" has been its ability to survive while fighting against the U.S. economic blockade. In this light, as Cuba's ambassador to China recently put it, "The relationship between Cuba and China has been and will continue to be of decisive significance. . . . Cuba and China have reached increasing consensus."³⁵

The two countries share similar ideologies and values, and both have pursued socialism with locally adapted characteristics. Each continues to advocate multipolarity in global affairs while opposing hard-power politics and external intervention, providing a strong basis for political cooperation. It is the hope of both countries that their approaches to collaboration and technology transfer will advance a more locally beneficial and reasonable mechanism of international engagement.³⁶ Furthermore, both leaderships have adopted the position of letting bygones be bygones, avoiding references to the fifteen to twenty years of disagreements. On this basis, the firmness of the bilateral political relationship can never be sufficiently underlined.

The intensifying political, cultural, scientific, and commercial dimensions of Cuban-Chinese relations have brought about an important economic transformation as new areas of collaboration, such as medical services and education, emerge. These are now key features of Cuba's export portfolio and were integral to the rapid rise in bilateral trade to \$2.29 billion in 2007.³⁷ The diversification of trade signifies a major change in the relationship, which for many years saw China exporting to Cuba significantly more than it imported, with the deficit financed by Chinese loans.

In early 2008 Raúl Castro formally took office as Cuba's head of state, quickly demonstrating his considerable experience and pragmatic approach to economic restructuring. He has begun to implement reforms that steer certain productive sectors toward a market economy model—in the area, for instance, of agricultural production and in the management of enterprises to encourage economic vitality and efficiency. This process of restructuring will generate business opportunities for Chinese enterprises in numerous sectors. This process was ratified at the Sixth Party Congress, with Hu Jintao warmly congratulating Raúl Castro on his election as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party.

In terms of territory, population, economy, historical traditions, and cultural identity, the differences between Cuba and China are so great that it would be impossible for Cuba to duplicate the Asian giant's development model, as some have suggested it should do.

Nevertheless, several aspects of the reform processes introduced in China are extremely important for Cuba to emulate if it is to achieve Raúl Castro's objectives as articulated in the guidelines adopted at the Sixth Congress.³⁸ Among these are the enhancement of productive forces as a means of achieving socialist goals; the principle that socialism is built according to the specific characteristics of each country; the pragmatic reformulation of economic policy; more effective use of monetary-commercial relations through the socialist market economy; and the monitoring and refinement

of newly introduced measures to address any unintended outcomes of the reform process.

Principles such as these have enabled the Chinese leadership to lift 300 to 500 million people out of poverty in a relatively short time, to create a middle class of some 180 to 200 million, and as a result to endow the country with significant social stability. These achievements have not been free of negative consequences, but it must be acknowledged that there is no perfect society, and that the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party are the first to admit these difficulties.

In the more immediate term, Cuba also has much to offer China. The country's oil industry represents a key opportunity for Chinese firms, which are encouraged by the discovery of potentially large reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. The rapid development of the Chinese economy has dramatically increased its demand for oil, leading the Chinese government to implement strategies to secure multiple supply sources. Because Cuba would benefit from China's demand for oil, there is enormous room for bilateral cooperation in this field. Due to its lack of exploration and production capacities, Cuba needs help in finding and accessing its oil reserves. For some years Sinopec has carried out onshore oil exploration in the west of Cuba, and the Cuban government now wishes to cooperate with Chinese oil enterprises that are capable of ultra-deepwater drilling to explore and exploit offshore oilfields.

Just as China's demand for oil is increasing, so too is its demand for nickel. Cuba is endowed with major nickel deposits and is an important world supplier, creating another significant nexus for mutually beneficial development. The two countries have reached an agreement on strategic cooperation in this field, and further measures to facilitate the export of Cuban nickel ore to China are under exploration.

Significant room exists for boosting bilateral economic and trade relations. As the Cuban ambassador to China stated in September 2008, "today, what is important to Cuba is to push and support the participation of Chinese enterprises in the Cuban market. It means not only increasing joint investment in well-known fields, but also promoting investment and cooperation in modern technology, import substitution, renewable electricity sources, telecommunications, transportation, infrastructure facilities, and other sectors. At the same time, Cuba will increase investment in China, especially in health services and biological products manufacturing."³⁹ One important factor in Havana's new economic policies, which might be very important for its relations with China, is the emphasis that Raúl Castro has placed on the need to control Cuba's external debt.

Following these ideas and principles, relations between Cuba and China will continue to develop and increase in both the economic and political fields. For Cuba, China is a strategic ally, especially because of its world role, but also because of its increasing economic strengths. For China, Cuba is a vital link with Latin America and the Caribbean. Cuba has established a number of alliances in the region—with Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, and other countries—which can only benefit Beijing. The geopolitical and ideological implications of Cuban-Chinese relations can never be sufficiently emphasized. Recent developments have demonstrated that Cuba exercises a very active and influential foreign policy, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region where its interests coincide with those of Beijing.

It is difficult to envisage that the U.S. government could ever pressure China into abandoning Cuba. Furthermore, the normalization of Cuban-U.S. relations would not damage China in any way.

Notes

1. “Sino-Cuba Relations,” *China Daily*, November 11, 2004; website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), ch. 16; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3. Moscow was not able to establish diplomatic relations with the United States from 1917 until 1933, during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration. Washington maintained relations with the Nationalist government in Taiwan after 1949 and did not officially recognize the People’s Republic of China until 1979. The Eisenhower administration broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961 and no administration since has reestablished relations.

4. See Xu Shicheng, “El desarrollo de las relaciones sino-latinoamericanas,” lecture, Higher Institute of International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Havana, Cuba, June 15, 2005.

5. Jorge Domínguez, *To Make the World Safe for Revolution: Cuba’s Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

6. Simon Shen, “Romanticization for Domestic Debate: Online Chinese Perceptions of Cuba and Implications for Cuban-Chinese Relations,” paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Congress, Toronto, October 2010, 2. The author is associate professor in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

7. Cheng Yinghong, “Sino-Cuban Relations during the Early Years of the Castro Regime, 1959–1966,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2007), 78–114; Wang Youping, *My Career as Ambassador in Seven Countries* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Publisher, 1996), 85–87, as cited by Cheng several times (original in Chinese).

8. Cheng, “Sino-Cuban Relations,” 113.

9. *Ibid.*

10. For a brief description of this split, see Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 318–24.

11. Westad, *Global Cold War*, 158.
12. Quoted in Westad, *Global Cold War*, 176.
13. Zhu Wenchi, Mao Xianglin, and Li Keming, *Latin American Communist Movement* (Beijing: Contemporary World Press, 2002), 319 (original in Chinese).
14. Mao, quoted in Stuart Schram, ed., *Chairman Mao Talks to the People* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 198, quoted in Cheng, "Sino-Cuban Relations," 101.
15. Quoted in Cheng, "Sino-Cuban Relations," 88, 101–2.
16. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 104–5.
17. Quoted in Cheng, "Sino-Cuban Relations," 98; from Herbert L. Matthews, *Revolution in Cuba: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 78.
18. Cheng, "Sino-Cuban Relations," 98, 105–6.
19. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 345.
20. Yinghong Sheng, "Sino-Cuban Relations and the Future of Cuba after Fidel Castro," *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007), 729.
21. H. Michael Erisman, *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 139.
22. The compiled data are based on reports in *China Daily*, *Granma* (Havana), and other official media in both countries.
23. The following section draws from (adapting and updating) Mao Xianglin, Liu Weiguang, Carlos Alzugaray Treto, and Adrian H. Hearn, "China and Cuba: Past, Present, and Future," in Adrian H. Hearn and José Luis León Manríquez, eds., *China Engages Latin America: Tracing the Trajectory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011).
24. "Cuba's Repayment of Debt Deferred," *China Daily*, November 20, 2008, www.china-daily.com.cn/cndy/2008-11/20/content_7221725.htm.
25. Economist Intelligence Unit, "Country Profile: Cuba 2008," 16; see store.eiu.com/product/30000203CU.html.
26. *Ibid.*, 50.
27. *Xinhua*, November 17, 2008, news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-11/17/content_10370729.htm.
28. Yuan Dongzhen, "The Third Cuban-Chinese Social Sciences Seminar Convened in Havana," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 3 (2008), 74 (original in Chinese).
29. Interview with the author, July 5, 2007.
30. "Premier Wen Jiabao Visits Cuban and Japanese Medical Teams," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 28, 2008, www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t459401.htm; Carlos Miguel Pereira Hernández (Cuban ambassador to China), Speech on the 48th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Cuba and China, Cuban Embassy in China, September 26, 2008.
31. Raúl Castro Ruz, "Trabajar con sentido crítico, creador, sin anquilosamientos ni esquematismos," Discurso en el acto central por el LIV aniversario del asalto al Cuartel Moncada, Camagüey, July 26, 2007, published in *Granma*, July 27, 2007. For the English translation, see 21stcenturysocialism.com/article/ral_castros_camagey_speech_01517.html. For the Spanish-language version of the guidelines, see: www.cubadebate.cu/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/proyecto-lineamientos-pcc.pdf.

32. Mitch Moxley, "China avanza sobre América Latina," IPS Spanish service, August 24, 2010, reproduced in *Rebelión* digital newspaper, www.ipsnoticias.net/nota.asp?idnews=96200.

33. "China, la futura gran potencia económica," *Reflexiones de Fidel*, March 29, 2009, *Cubadebate* website, www.cubadebate.cu/reflexiones-fidel/2009/03/29/china-futura-gran-potencia-economica/.

34. "China en los cables internacionales," *Reflexiones de Fidel*, March 30, 2009, www.cubadebate.cu/reflexiones-fidel/2009/03/30/china-cables-internacionales/.

35. Carlos Miguel Pereira Hernández, Speech on the Forty-Eighth Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations.

36. Mao Xianglin, *Studies on Cuban Socialism* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005), 320–21.

37. Carlos Miguel Pereira Hernández, "Current Socialist Building in Cuba," *Journal of Latin American Studies* [Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences] 30, no. 2 (2008).

38. For the main documents approved at the Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (Spanish version) see www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2011/05/09/descargue-en-cubadebate-los-lineamientos-de-la-politica-economica-y-social-pdf/.

39. Carlos Miguel Pereira Hernández, Speech on the Forty-Eighth Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations.