

# The Revolution's Result: The Change of Cuban-American Relations During the 1959-1962 Period

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Cuban-American relations have become one of the most attractive bilateral relations since the Cold War era. With historical methods and international relations theory, this paper aims to discuss the Cuban Revolution and the change of Cuban-American relations through two issues. One is the Cuban Revolution and the gradual rupture of traditional Cuban-American ties, demonstrating that since Castro's radical reform of nationalization deeply violated the economic interests of the United States, conflicts and confrontations had already been incurred. At the same time, with Moscow's intervention, the Cuban Revolution gradually became complicated and sensitive to deal with from Washington's perspective. The other one is the evolution of confrontation between the Castro revolutionary regime and the United States government during the 1959-1962 period. The Bay of Pigs Invasion rapidly caused political tensions in Cuban-American relations, and soon, the Cuban Missile Crisis institutionalized the escalating confrontation and deeply worsened bilateral relations. As a result, the Castro regime had no choice but to rely on Soviet assistance to maintain a delicate balance with the United States for several decades, which indicated the tragedy of the small nations' destiny.

*Keywords:* Cuban-American relations, the Cuban Revolution, the Castro regime, the Soviet Union

## Introduction

In the 1950s, the outbreak of the Cuban Revolution was an epoch-making event in Latin American history and significantly impacted the development of Latin America's socialism. The outstanding character of anti-imperialism in this revolution also threatened policymakers in the White House. The American government financially supported and directly led the anti-government exiled groups of Cuba to overthrow the Castro regime with military forces. The consequence was the eventual outbreak and sudden failure of invasion in the Bay of Pigs. The Bay of Pigs invasion was a turning point in the history of Cuban-American relations, which not only consolidated the victory of the Cuban Revolution but also played a decisive role in pushing Cuba to turn to socialism and become a Soviet ally (Wu, 2004). The later Cuban Missile Crisis institutionalized the escalating Cuban-U.S. confrontation and calcified the worsening bilateral relations.

Since the 1980s, with the successive declassification of archives and documentary materials, research on the Cold War history has become increasingly active. The Cuban Revolution was a significant event of the Cold War, representing the weakness and disorder of American hegemony in the Caribbean. Systematical discussions centered on the impact of the Cuban Revolution deepened the research of Cuban-American relations and

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effectively contributed to considering the complicated interactions between small nations and superpowers. Many scholars have done excellent research on the Cuban Revolution and the evolution of Cuban-American relations from different viewpoints.

In terms of the origins of the Revolution, Benjamin (1990) stated that before the Cuban Revolution, Cuba had to rely on the American market to maintain economic prosperity, but the wealth had not been transformed into the improvement of most people's living standards and the majority of Cuban citizens were still struggling with life. The wave of nationalism against the dominance of American capital in the Cuban economy had become more influential and attractive under this situation. In this way, one of the purposes of the Cuban Revolution was to establish an independent nation out of American control. This meant that the revolutionary leaders would not tolerate the past American economic or political privilege. Hence, after the Revolution, the conflict between Cuba and America was an unavoidable time bomb. Focusing on the transformation of the Revolution, Pérez-Stable (1999) emphasized that the revolutionary leaders concentrated on redressing past inequalities and building social justice in economic development, placing social justice in a higher priority when social justice and economic development conflicted. However, the first step to realizing social justice was to eliminate political and economic control of the United States since the American existence was the root of inequalities.

From the perspective of Cuban-American relations, Morley (1988) stressed that from the evolution and influence of the American Cuba policy, it could be seen that the American intervention into third-world nations usually led to intense resistance and revolution under the leadership of nationalists. Cuba is a typical third-world nation that has kept resisting the U.S. government's economic embargo, political intervention, and military threat over several decades while it has experienced a harsh and miserable fight. Concerning the intervention of the Soviet Union, Farber (2006) claimed that at first, the Soviet Union did not ultimately realize the significance of the island republic until the Cuban Revolution, as Cuba had been regarded as an American orbit for several decades and Khrushchev even had no official contacts with the revolutionary leaders. There was a possibility to fix the broken relationship between Cuba and the United States; however, the United States government's aggressive position gave the Castro regime no choice to rebuild the bilateral relations but to choose the Soviet Union as an ally.

These studies used a diversity of original documents and secondary research, which provided a brief framework to look into the Cuban Revolution and the international background of that period. Because the origins, process, and impact of the Cuban Revolution have already been thoroughly discussed in diverse academic works, this paper focuses more on the mainline of the bilateral relations and catches the critical points of the Revolution, which is not aimed at including all the details of this historical period. It attempts to analyse the impact of the Revolution on Cuban-American relations from 1959 to 1962 and introduce the multiple factors that affect bilateral relations with historical methods and international relations theory.

### **The Cuban Revolution and the Gradual Rupture of Cuban-American Relations**

Located between South America, Central America, and the Great Antilles, the Caribbean Sea is connected to the Pacific region through the Panama Canal. For this reason, it is one of the world's significant regions and has an important strategic position. Most countries around this area are highly close to the United States and all similarly small and powerless, so they are inevitably affected by Washington. It can be said that until today, the Caribbean region has been dominated by the United States more intensely than other regions. Washington usually

regards this area as the heart of its national security interests and attempts to prevent all other hostile countries from getting involved (Langley & Bender, 1976).

In February 1898, the United States publicly declared war on Spain due to the pretext of the Maine incident. The United States had become increasingly powerful after the Civil War, so Spain was not an opponent of it. Moreover, the Cuban insurrectionary army had already occupied over two-thirds of Cuba. At the end of the same year, Spain could no longer protect its colonies from the American military, so it had no choice but to announce its surrender. Immediately, the United States and Spain signed a peace treaty without the participation of Cuba, requiring the United States to replace Spain to occupy Cuba (Zhou, 2008). Since then, the United States began a half-century colonial rule in Cuba.

In 1902, the government of the Republic of Cuba was founded, and the United States ended its three-year military occupation in Cuba. The end of the American military occupation recognized Cuba's independence. However, Cuba's independence was purely formal. On the one hand, in 1901, the United States compelled Cuba to incorporate the Pratt Amendment Act into its constitution, thereby designating Cuba as a Protected State under U.S. influence. On the other hand, Cuba's economy was already subject to American control before gaining independence from Spain. After the United States emerged victorious over Spain, a substantial influx of American industrialists, financiers, and assorted speculators gravitated toward Cuba under the protective umbrella of the Pratt Amendment Act. With the influx of American capital assets, Cuba had become a single market heavily reliant on the United States, and its economic development was solely dependent on capital inflows from America (Lamrani, 2022).

Therefore, following the establishment of the Republic of Cuba, power alternated between the Conservative Party, representing plantation owners' interests, and the Liberal Party, representing the northern bourgeoisie's interests, despite being led by Cuban citizens. Still, both of these two parties followed the instructions from Washington and tried their best to sell out Cuban interests in exchange for support and protection. This made the U.S. quickly turn Cuba into a market for exporting capital and selling products, fully controlling Cuba's economy and stabilizing economic hegemony in Cuba (Hybel, 1990). From the perspective of the United States, the manipulation of the Cuban economy was not caused by American colonialism. It was because Cuba had to depend on the United States so that it could survive the stiff international competition. The U.S. government had never thought of treating Cuba as an independent country, regardless of the direct occupation or later indirect rule through capital infiltration and control of the lifeline of the Cuban economy (Zhou, 2008). Hence, the American Cuba policy was full of an intense atmosphere of colonialism. Although the Cuban economy had gradually grown during this period, its development level and ability were fragile, and the economy had been threatened by the possibility of marginalization for a long time.

After the Second World War, America felt direct competition from the Soviet Union and tended to support powerful dictators to maintain its hegemony and resist the influence of spreading communism. Batista, the former president of Cuba and military leader, orchestrated a military coup on the eve of the general election, successfully reclaiming power and establishing an autocratic regime from 1952 to 1958. During the Batista dictatorship, the Cuban economy became more dependent on U.S. capital, and U.S. investment increased from 713 million U.S. dollars to 1.01 billion U.S. dollars from 1951 to 1958 (Zhou, 2008). In April 1952, the Cuban government severed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and declared its support for the American invasion of North Korea at the same time. Under the Batista dictatorship, in terms of politics, economy, and society, Cuba had become crueler and darker day by day. Repressive measures were implemented by Batista, including the dissolution of

political parties and workers' and peasants' organizations, as well as the imposition of restrictions on the right to demonstrate. In short, in the seven years of the Batista dictatorship, the American capital entirely controlled the Cuban economy's lifeline, and tens of thousands of Cuban people who participated in the anti-dictatorship struggle were killed. In the urban areas, the unemployed and underemployed population account for nearly 60% of the labor force. In the rural areas, most farmers lost their land and could only work on the plantation to make a living (Benjamin, 1990). Under this severe situation, domestic contradictions had profoundly intensified, and small-scale armed uprisings had kept breaking out throughout the country. Among them, the 26 July Movement led by Fidel Castro had the most vital strength and outstanding results.

In the early morning of July 26, 1953, the armed uprising led by Castro began. Still, the rebellion failed due to a lack of fighting experience, underestimating expectations, and limited military struggle ability. Castro and others were immediately arrested. On October 16, 1953, Castro defended himself in the trial court. He publicly delivered the famous long-defense speech "History Will Absolve Me". This defense speech made Castro's 26th of July Movement more famous. He came to symbolize the Cuban struggle for anti-dictatorship and national democratization. In May 1955, Castro was released from prison and restarted his revolutionary career. At the time, the 26th of July Movement advocated that it was necessary to restore the democratic constitution of 1940, establish a revolutionary government, build Cuban industrialization, wipe out foreign capital, and reform the education system. These ideas later became Castro's policy after the victory of the anti-dictatorship in 1959 (Smith, 1965). Several years later, under the joint attack of the general strike and the revolutionary army in the capital, Batista was ultimately challenged to maintain his regime. On January 1, 1959, Batista gave up the presidency and fled to the U.S., meaning that the Cuban Revolution led by Castro achieved a preliminary victory.

After the victory of the Revolution, the United States took a wait-and-see attitude at first. There was still a possibility for the upper bourgeoisie to keep the current political system without drastic changes. Considering the economic benefits and strategic significance, Cuba held great importance for the United States; furthermore, it appeared that the new Cuban government did not exhibit a propensity toward embracing left-wing ideology, which the United States vehemently opposed. The members of the 26th of July Movement did not account for the majority of the new government, and only Fidel Castro held the critical position of commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Moreover, Castro publicly stated that the 26th of July Movement had no connection with the Cuban Communist Party and did not treat the United States as an enemy (Pérez-Stable, 1999). This optimistic situation made the United States quickly recognize the new Cuban government on January 7, 1959, and send a new Cuban ambassador to wait for an opportunity to win over the new government.

Nevertheless, before long, Castro's actions caused a fundamental change in the United States' attitude toward the Cuban government, and traditional ties between these two countries also began to break down. After the Revolution's victory, Castro played an essential role in the Cuban anti-Batista movement so that no one could challenge his prestige and power (Wang, 2004). Although Castro's position was not the highest in the newly established government, he had the most significant power—controlling the nation's armed forces and reforming them. The rapid success of the Revolution allowed him and his essential partners, such as Guevara and Raul Castro, to realize the social reforms and establish a new society. Hence, shortly after establishing the new government, Castro asked for radical democratic reforms. However, the President, the Prime Minister, and other cabinet members claimed to carry out moderate social reforms rather than radical reforms advocated by Castro. Castro made full use of the prestige he established in the Revolution, preaching about his proposed reforms and policies almost everywhere. This finally reduced the reputation of the Prime Minister and the President at the

time. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the Revolution's victory, the Cuban people were still highly enthusiastic about the revolutionary ideology, which made them comparatively disgusted with the Western political system. Eventually, under the influence of these factors, the Prime Minister and the President could not perform their functions and resigned one after another (Olcott, Katz, Rosenberg, Grandin, & Joseph, 2010).

In February 1959, Castro became the Prime Minister of Cuba. On May 17, 1959, the Cuban government promulgated the first Land Reform Act, stipulating that the past land system shall be abolished and the government shall collect the land with more than 1,000 acres. The government would compensate the original landowner with a particular bond, and the state-owned land would be allocated to the farmers without land. At the same time, the government announced that the land of supporters and colleagues of the Batista dictatorship would be taken as state-owned. The United States company occupied the largest and best land in Cuba due to the close relationship between the previous Cuban government and the United States government. The implementation of such reforms had a severe impact on the United States' interests in Cuba. Although Castro announced that these policies were not anti-American, the American corporations' benefits were damaged in the movement. It was confusing for Washington to differentiate between communism and nationalism when facing the intricacies of Cuban land reform (Brown, 2017). The policymakers in the White House appeared to oversimplify the land reform as a manifestation of communism and pro-Soviet tendencies due to limited access to reliable information sources and inadequate communication channels.

In July of the same year, Castro appointed Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado, a member of the Cuban Communist Party, to take over as President. In November, Castro appointed Ernesto Guevara as President of the National Bank of Cuba. In the eyes of the United States, Guevara had always been the red dictator hidden behind Castro because the previous Cuban land reform was mainly done under the control of Guevara, not the Castro brothers. After such a change, the Cuban government wholly transformed into a left-wing government. At this point, the United States had concluded that it could not expect to cooperate with Castro (Farber, 2006). Due to Castro's political and economic reforms, the U.S. government's wait-and-see policy ended. Since then, traditional bilateral relations have been filled with mutual hostility.

### **Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Transformation of the Revolution**

While Cuba and the United States announced breaking diplomatic relations, Kennedy became president in January 1961. However, the change of political leadership did not pave the way for a thaw but led the two countries to a military confrontation instead. Soon after Kennedy came to power, Castro expressed that he was willing to negotiate with the U.S. government to improve bilateral relations through back channels. He even clarified that if the U.S. wanted to buy Cuban sugar one day, they could discuss the compensation problem. However, in the sight of Kennedy, who said that he would launch a serious offensive against Cuba during the election campaign, Cuba had become a satellite country and a communist base of the Soviet Union, challenging the U.S. hegemony in Latin America (Colman, 2022). The U.S. could not tolerate the existence of this regime. Consequently, Kennedy declared that the United States would not resume diplomatic relations with Cuba.

As Kennedy was apprehensive that the existence of the Castro regime would cause a domino effect in Latin America and the emergence of another Cuba, he decided to use all available methods to overthrow the Castro government, including public and secret actions (Farber, 2006). In the month when Kennedy took office, he accepted the aggressive plan of his predecessor to train Cuban exiles to attack Cuba. During the Eisenhower administration, the CIA formulated a comprehensive amphibious warfare plan: with several B-26 aircraft piloted

by Cubans as air cover, the Cuban exile soldiers would land on the coast of Cuba, and after the landing, the troops would gather anti-Castro forces in the coastal area to establish an interim government, which would be officially recognized and publicly provided with military and financial assistance by the United States. Although Kennedy was skeptical about the feasibility of this plan at the beginning, it was already on the to-do list of the CIA. In addition, it was no longer a secret that Cuban exiles were trained in Guatemala. Rumors about the invasion plan had made Castro carry out all-around mobilization in Cuba. If Kennedy rejected it, it would be inconsistent with his position of standing against the Castro regime, leading to the possibility of being attacked by the Republicans. Therefore, Kennedy had no choice but to agree to implement the plan. Nonetheless, he proposed that the United States would never participate publicly and directly and neither send ground forces nor air forces to offer assistance. At the same time, for the sake of avoiding criticism from international society, Kennedy also instructed his adviser, Arthur Schlesinger, to prepare a white paper in defense of this action. The white paper on Cuba mainly claimed that the United States was not opposed to the Cuban Revolution but to the Castro regime. It condemned Castro for betraying the Revolution and suppressing the hopes of the Cuban people for democracy and persuaded Castro to cut off all connections with the International Communist Movement. It also attempted to stress that the Cuban people who desire freedom choose to fight for a free Cuba by themselves (Wu, 2004).

On April 15th, 1961, two B-26 aircraft piloted by Cuban exiles bombed three airports in Cuba, Havana, San Antonio, and Santiago, causing several deaths and injuries. In the early morning of April 17th, the Cuban exile brigade began an amphibious landing in the Bay of Pigs. As a result, due to a mistake in combat arrangements, the entire battle became pathetically one-sided, and the Cuban military quickly wiped out the exiles. In the early morning of April 20, Castro announced that Cuba had destroyed the invasion supported by the United States. The American invasion did not overthrow the Castro regime and even prompted Cuba to become the first socialist base in the Caribbean instead of a nation-state that pursued neutralism in the international community. On May 1, 1961, Castro signed and issued a communique, officially proclaiming that the Cuban Revolution was of socialism, and the constitution was also of the socialist revolution (Clayfield, 2019). The turning of the Revolution was not rooted in Marxist-Leninism or other ideological factors but for pragmatic reasons: defending national security and getting indispensable support from the Soviet Union. Since then, Cuba has become the first and the only socialist country in the Western Hemisphere.

Indeed, the failure of The Bay of Pigs did not contribute to a modification in the American policy toward Cuba. After that, the Kennedy administration took two measures against Cuba—secretly carrying out anti-Castro actions and publicly imposing diplomatic isolation and economic blockade of Cuba. Under the escalating tense international environment, the Cuban leaders' sense of crisis over the imminent possibility of military interventions led by the United States and concern for the security of the Cuban revolutionary regime suddenly increased. Ultimately, the aggressive and offensive U.S. policy toward Cuba made the Castro government start to consider the possibility of relying on Soviet missiles to insist on resisting the military threat of the United States (Zhou, 2008).

Due to the economic isolation and military blockade of the United States, Moscow seemed to realize that the Americans were planning some secret actions against Cuba. After frequent negotiations and close dialogues, the leaders of both Cuba and the Soviet Union reached an agreement that the United States would never be reconciled to its failure and would relaunch a more extensive invasion of Cuba. Castro even proposed the hope that Cuba would officially join the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Although Khrushchev cautiously considered the thought and disapproved of it, he still decided to take some decisive steps to defend Cuba. From the

perspective of Khrushchev, it was logical and beneficial to place nuclear missiles in Cuba to deter any future invasion attempt (Colman, 2022). However, this eventually led to the Cuban Missile Crisis. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the survival and safety of Cuba were guaranteed, and the danger of large-scale invasion from the United States was eliminated (Fursenko & Naftali, 1997). However, some small-scale assassinations and sabotage activities still existed (Hybel, 1990). So, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the relationship between Cuba and the United States also began to enter a period of relative stability. The United States forgave military actions but tried to contain the Castro regime through economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and terrorist assassinations (Wang, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Regarding the change of Cuban-American relations from 1959 to 1962, it was apparent that the ideology did not play a significant part in the confrontation. National interests and strategic policy mainly affected Cuban foreign policy toward the United States. The conflict between the two sides originated from the Cuban revolutionary regime's nationalization reform after Castro came to power. Initially, it seemed that the Castro regime attempted to keep the tight economic relationship with the United States. However, after the radical economic reforms, faced with the severe containment policy of the United States, the Castro regime chose to become the Soviet ally and adopt the communist system. The conflict of interests between Cuba and the United States was the extension of the Cold War in Latin America. Under the Cold War environment, Cuba had chosen to rely on the strength of the Soviet Union to fight against the United States. As a result, the Cuban-American confrontation escalated rapidly and became entangled within the realm of Soviet-American conflicts.

At the same time, economic interests and the international environment mainly affected the American policy toward Cuba. Because the Cuban radical democratic Revolution undermined the financial interests of the United States and did not satisfy the American national strategy in the Latin America region, with its global expansion strategy, the United States adopted a containment policy against Cuba. Upon the establishment of the left-wing government in Cuba, the United States implemented a more comprehensive strategy to contain its influence. Particularly, when Cuba was pushed to the Soviet Union, it became a strategic enemy of the United States, and Washington immediately imposed economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and assassinations against the Castro regime. The Revolution dramatically reshaped bilateral relations and surprisingly placed the Soviet Union in a critical position in Cuban-Soviet-American triangle relations, escalating the expansion of the Cold War in Latin America.

Overall, the change of Cuban-American relations illustrated the tragedy of small nations. To get rid of the control of an empire but soon be dominated by another superpower again seems to be the destiny of small countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. After the Revolution, Cuba successfully extricated from the United States' political, economic, and diplomatic control. However, the American pressure pushed the Castro regime to rely on the Soviet Union's assistance and aid to maintain power. For Cuba, independence was a goal within striking distance but challenging to achieve in the whole 20th century, while for other third-world countries. Although Cuba was small and powerless compared to the U.S., it insisted on its unique ideology and kept finding the right path to peace and prosperity through its efforts in the past several decades. Moreover, Cuba successfully expanded the Revolution's international influence to the rest of Latin America in many aspects, especially healthcare, art, and education (Randall, 2017). To some extent, as the American neighborhood, Cuba was

fortunate enough to have a chance to challenge the hegemony to dictate its own destiny in a way that most small nations might never have.

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