UNDERSTANDING THE PLACE OF CUBAN INTERNATIONALISM

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Guest editors

For this issue of the *International Journal of Cuban Studies* we have selected three articles that explore dimensions of Cuba’s unique approach to the international development landscape. The term ‘Cuban internationalism’ encompasses the country’s broad approach to dynamic global relations that intersect economic trade, bilateral diplomacy, and social development. The authors in this issue are all careful to avoid the terminology of diplomacy, outreach or aid as the sole defining characteristics of Cuba’s international relations. To us, this signifies an important recognition in the Cuban studies literature about how Cuba connects to the world. It is a mix between securing the nation’s own interests, while providing valuable cooperation abroad. It follows the idea of soft power, as the ability to hold international influence through constructive engagement rather than military prowess. Cooperation is not purely philanthropic as the internationalisation of health and other sectors such as sport, agriculture and education, has noticeable benefits to the Cuban economy. At the same time Cuba’s outreach to countries like Timor-Leste comes with minimal economic gain. Cuban internationalism encompasses this complex, and at times seemingly contradictory, mix of economic gain, opportunism, outreach, philanthropy, aid, solidarity and cooperation. It is perhaps one of the most uniquely integrated approaches to foreign relations in the world.

The Cuban government has employed a highly distinctive approach to international relations that removes raw market-based incentive structures and incorporates progressive social development. Few nations have dedicated offices to integrate programmes in these related fields into conjoined foreign policy and development ministries. In many countries, especially in the global North, Foreign Affairs is kept quite separate from national health services. Diplomats communicate officially between heads of state, promoting their nation’s political and economic interests abroad. Health workers may volunteer their time for international outreach throughout the year, but for a nation to actively employ its own medical experts for the service of others is quite rare indeed. Technical and professional training in the global North primarily occurs within the realm
of post-secondary education, and often through a mix of public and private sector interests. In Cuba, the government handles it all. Some nations, like the Philippines or India, have a history of developing highly trained human resources for export, and often the personnel leave the country in the hopes of remitting their earnings home. Rarely does the country’s government directly manage the pay scale and savings scheme of offshore workers. Yet in Cuba the state has a hand in all of these areas. What’s more, the international initiatives are often very well coordinated through bilateral cooperation between Cuba and the host government. The articles presented here illustrate Cuba’s unique approach to international development through a focus on sport, health and the remuneration that comes with technical cooperation.

All of the authors in this special issue emphasise the exceptionality of Cuban internationalism. While still in the process of development itself, Cuban internationalism may foster important dialogue as to how diplomacy and aid can be fostered throughout the global South, while fulfilling national interests at home. Realist political scientists argue that nation states will always seek to fulfil their own interests first as there are socially constructed cultural bonds that compel individuals to meet the needs of their compatriots rather than those abroad. The expected result from this assumption is that nations will approach aid as a product of national surplus when it is convenient for them, rather than acting with the same moral authority to that of their own national interests. It is possible to witness this time and time again. Aid efforts are often short-term, do not lay the groundwork for long-term capacity building, and no G8 nation has fulfilled its commitment to dedicate 0.07 per cent of its GDP to foreign aid. Moreover, aid efforts abroad are often positioned as furthering the interests of the donor nation. The United States government requires that food aid be sourced by and shipped from US companies in spite of great economic inefficiencies. Recently, the Canadian International Development Agency announced that it would give preferred treatment to projects that coincided with Canada’s mining interests abroad, which effectively limits the potential for international outreach. Often international aid and outreach becomes short term, costly and intermittent.

Cuba also pursues those international efforts that benefit its own interests. Indeed, no country would pursue international relations that go against its own best interests. Internationalism between Cuba and Venezuela is a case in point of how warm political relations fostered the incredible expansion of Cuban experts working in Venezuela in areas such as sport, health, education, security, and engineering. As is well known, Cuba receives generous supplies of petrol and oil from Venezuela at preferential prices. In this case, the fulfilment of national interests is easy to identify. But Cuba receives no petroleum and few imports from Timor-Leste, and trade with Guatemala is minimal aside from a few basic
commodities such as soft drinks and beer. Yet, Havana has active cooperation programmes with both of these countries in sport and in health. Cuban trainers have engaged in cooperation with Guatemala for assistance in the Pan American Games. Working with Cuban coaches, Guatemalan athletes have excelled beyond Cuban athletes in certain sports. Why, then, does Cuba maintain relations with nations for which there may not be obvious gains?

Cuba’s global outreach of cooperation and solidarity alongside economic opportunities may not be easily answered through the lens of realist diplomacy and foreign relations theory. Rather, Cuban internationalism may well be best understood as a rejection of the sort of foreign relations that entail hegemonic processes of dependency and neo-colonialism. Cuban internationalism makes the same lofty attempts to address world poverty and it facilitates strong international relations, but it does so through the guise of cooperation that does not seek direct interference in another sovereign nation’s approach to governance and does not attempt to develop long-term structural placement within another country. Indeed, the exportation of infrastructure is something for which Cuba is in no position to achieve. Their greatest export at the moment is human resources. This alone represents a tacit rejection of traditional development logic, which tends to emphasise investment in material resources, rather than human resources and looks to facilitate a global culture of cooperation of experts rather than competition. The ability to invest in people, rather than in things, is not only a practical form of international engagement, but also an innovative step in foreign relations aimed at giving other nations the ability to acquire their own expertise rather than interminably relying on others.

But this is not without challenges. The investment in highly trained health workers and coaches comes with the threat of losing these experts to the global North where salaries are higher and prestige seemingly greater. The pressure for highly trained individuals to migrate to the global North is always high, but in medicine and sport, in particular, the pressures are even greater. Still, Cuba maintains a steady level of international collaborators working in over 140 countries.

This special issue seeks to shed light on some of the less-noticed attributes of Cuban internationalism. Cuba’s cooperation in health and medicine is well recognised around the world, even receiving credit by the World Health Organization as an outstanding form of much-needed outreach. Walker and Kirk present an article that further informs the growing literature of Cuban medical internationalism by focusing on Cuba’s efforts in the South Pacific. Although literally on the far side of the world, Cuba is making efforts to assist the small country of Timor-Leste in achieving sustainable health care services. Huish, Carter and Darnell discuss the role of sport in internationalism. Their article illuminates
some of the unique dynamics of Cuba’s approach to sport cooperation at a time when many charities, corporations and non-governmental organisations are seeking to employ sport as a development tool. Although sport cooperation has been less recognised than medical internationalism, the authors argue that the role of sport in Cuba’s outreach contains important lessons for innovative social development and capacity building. Finally, Blue’s article comes down to the brass tacks of remuneration. How does the remuneration associated with internationalism affect Cuban families and Cuban society? Blue looks at the changing nature of Cuba’s remittance culture as something that is no longer entirely dependent upon Miami, and is instead a truly global phenomenon as both permanent and temporary migrants send funds back to the country.

Taken together, the articles in this issue provide students and scholars with unique dimensions of and cases of Cuba’s international outreach. They highlight how Cuba is charting its own unique path of diplomacy and international engagement. The lessons learned from Cuban outreach could do well to advance foreign relations to an era focused on cooperation rather than competition, and solidarity rather than supremacy. As changes continue in Cuba’s domestic economy, Cuban internationalism will undoubtedly increase and evolve as it engages collaborative nations in aid and trade, simultaneously providing much-needed hard currency and strong foreign relations.

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