Capitalizing on Castro: Mexico's Foreign Relations with Cuba, 1959-1969

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In the decade immediately following Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, Mexican leaders consistently distinguished themselves from their Latin American counterparts by acting as outspoken defenders of the Cuban people's right to self-determination. Influential politicians such as Lázaro Cárdenas threw their support behind Castro, and in 1960 Mexican president Adolfo López Mateos welcomed Cuban president Osvaldo Dorticós in a lavish state visit. At the July 1964 meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington, D.C., Mexico was the only Latin American country that refused to adopt the resolution to break diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro's Cuba and impose economic sanctions. Mexico thereafter maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba, which effectively established Mexico as the sole link between Castro and the rest of the hemisphere because none of the other Latin American governments recognized Cuba's revolutionary regime until after 1970.[1]

By maintaining relations with Castro, the Mexican government effectively increased its own role in the Cold War contest between the United States, on one hand, and the Soviet Union and Cuba, on the other. Mexico became the staging ground for

[1] Canada, which did not become a member of the OAS until 1990, maintained relations with Cuba throughout the 1960s. However, trade between Cuba and Canada was negligible, and limited to non-strategic items. See John M. Kirk and Peter McKenna, *Canada-Cuban Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy* (Gainesville: Gainesville University Press of Florida, 1997). Cuba was isolated in the Caribbean community as well; for example, the Jamaican government did not establish diplomatic relations with Castro's government until 1972. See Wendell Bell, "Independent Jamaica Enters World Politics: Foreign Policy in a New State," *Political Science Quarterly*, 92 (1977-1978): 683-703.

many of the non-violent aspects of the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere. Much of the people, money, information, and contraband items originating in or destined for Cuba had to pass through Mexican airports on the way to their final destinations. The Mexican government's tolerance of this exchange network thwarted the United States' efforts to suffocate Castro's regime through isolation. Numerous sectors and members of the U.S. government had invested significant time, effort, and resources in the campaign to isolate Castro, and were ready to use whatever means necessary to achieve their goal. Why, then, did President López Mateos, and his successor Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, risk angering their powerful northern neighbors and open their own national territory to revolutionary and counterrevolutionary infiltration by maintaining relations with Castro?

As long as Presidents López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz successfully walked the diplomatic tightrope between the United States and Cuba, they could use the delicate situation to benefit their regime's reputation both at home and abroad. Mexican policy-makers balanced the competing demands not only of the U.S. and Cuban governments, but also of numerous interest groups and powerful individuals within Mexico that reacted passionately to the Cuban Revolution. López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz led a hegemonic governing coalition called the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that had dominated Mexican politics for three decades, and proved determined to hold the multi-group alliance together. To do so, they had to strike a delicate balance between the right and left wings of their party, and avoid alienating important sectors of the electorate. As Mexico's political stability was of crucial importance to the United States, the Mexican government knew that U.S. leaders would hesitate to take any actions that might weaken the PRI's control. Likewise, Mexican leaders anticipated that by increasing their country's

importance to Cuba as its sole official link to the Americas, they could give Castro a reason to refrain from encouraging any revolutionary activity within Mexico that might upset the status quo.

A closer examination of the potential drawbacks and benefits of maintaining relations with Cuba demonstrates that the Mexican government gained much more than it lost from defending Castro. Scholars of Mexican foreign relations have spent decades debating the motivations behind Mexico's policy toward Castro's Cuba, focusing on various internal and external factors. This presentation draws upon newly released U.S. and Mexican government documents to redress this question, focusing on the effect of domestic politics on foreign policy.[2] I will argue that López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz capitalized upon their country's "special relationship" with Cuba as part of their multi-pronged effort to maintain control over leftist sectors of the Mexican population.

As its name suggests, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional dated its origins to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. President Plutarco Eliás Calles founded the party in 1929 as the National Revolutionary Party, in order to stabilize the country and institutionalize the rule of the group of military leaders and politicians who had governed since 1920.[3] The party brought together groups from the left, right, and center of the political spectrum that had become tired of decades of chaos and violence. Beginning in

[2] In 2002, Mexican President Vicente Fox ordered the release of hundreds of thousands of previously restricted documents pertaining to the government's security operations throughout the twentieth century. These collections are currently housed at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. The National Security Archive's Mexico Project, headed by Kate Doyle, has been enormously helpful in petitioning for the release of secret U.S. government documents pertaining to Mexico, and making those resources readily available to researchers.

[3] Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes, *A History of Latin America, Volume 2* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

1929, every president of Mexico came from this party—which changed its name to the PRI in 1946—giving party officials hegemonic power over Mexican politics. However, since the coalition government operated through consent rather than coercion, it had to keep its constituent groups satisfied enough to stay within the partnership. This need to please significantly limited the government's policy options in the case of Cuba.

One of the greatest threats to the PRI's cohesion and Mexico's political stability came from Lázaro Cárdenas, one of Mexico's most popular ex-presidents thanks to his expropriation of foreign oil companies in 1938 and his land redistribution policies. As leader of the left-leaning sectors of the PRI, Cárdenas distinguished himself early on as one of Fidel Castro's most ardent supporters. On July 26, 1959, Cárdenas traveled to Havana to attend the commemoration of Castro's failed attack on the Moncada Barracks. He apparently saw his own nationalist fervor reflected in Castro's actions, and declared: "Faced with the campaign developed abroad by enemies of Cuba's revolution, authorized voices make themselves heard, asking for comprehension and moral support on her behalf."[4] Cárdenas' enthusiasm for Castro made politicians in Mexico and the United States exceedingly nervous; Cárdenas enjoyed such prestige among workers and campesinos that U.S. ambassador to Mexico Robert C. Hill considered him "the most powerful political personality in Mexico."[5]

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[4] Lázaro Cárdenas, "Discurso con motivo del VI aniversario de la iniciación del movimiento revolucionario '26 de julio,'" in *Palabras y Documentos Públicos de Lázaro Cárdenas, 1928-1970*, ed. Francisco Martínez de la Vega, (Mexico City, siglo veintiuno editores, 1979), 85-88.

[5] "Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration," 11 Aug 1960, 712.00/8-1160, NADS, Mexico 1960-January 1963 [hereafter "Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration"].

Historian Eric Zolov summarizes the situation nicely: "For the government of Mexico, what was at risk was not the containment of communism, but of *cardenismo*." Eric Zolov, "'¡Cuba sí, yanquis no!': el saqueo del Instituto Cultural México-Norteamericano en Morelia, Michoacán, 1961," in *Espejos de la Guerra Fría: México, América Central y el Caribe*, ed Daniela Spenser (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2004), 175-214.

Cárdenas and other leftists used their influence to force the conservative sectors of the PRI to mollify their attitude toward Cuba in order to prevent a severely destabilizing split in the party. According to eminent Mexican historian Daniel Cosío Villegas, Cárdenas was the only person capable of "splitting the PRI into two branches, at the least."[6]

In March 1961, Cárdenas convened the World Peace Movement's Latin American Conference for National Sovereignty, Economic Emancipation, and Peace in Mexico City. He intended the conference to draw international attention to the miserable conditions in Latin America, denounce the pernicious effect of imperialist activities in the region, and defend the Cuban Revolution.[7]

Cárdenas' conference concerned the Mexican government enough to prompt heavy surveillance from the secret intelligence services. The elite police group, the Dirección Federal de Seguridad, monitored the event, submitting detailed reports on the attendance, the membership of the delegations from specific countries, and the content of the speeches.[8] The police reported that Cárdenas collected a significant amount of

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[6] Daniel Cosío Villegas, "México y su izquierda" in *Ensayos y Notas* (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1966).

[7] Lázaro Cárdenas, "Declaraciones sobre la convocatoria a la Conferencia Latinoamericana por la Soberanía Nacional, la Emancipación Económica y la Paz," in *Palabras y Documentos Públicos de Lázaro Cárdenas, 1928-1970*, p.105-106. In his references to "imperialist activities," Cárdenas was chiefly referring to U.S. attempts at hegemonic control over the Americas.

[8] "Memorandum: Conferencia Latinoamericana por la Soberanía Nacional, la Emancipación Económica y la Paz," 5 March 1961, DFS, "Movimiento de Liberación Nacional" Files, File 11-6-61, L2. H309-317, AGN.

funding for the meeting directly from the Cuban government.[9] In a report submitted to President López Mateos, the police stated:

> The Conference, in spite of the silence of the press and the other media, WAS A HUGE SUCCESS. The figure of CÁRDENAS HAS NOW REACHED GIGANTIC PROPORTIONS. (emphasis in original)[10]

This excerpt reveals two important features of the Mexican government's relationship with Cárdenas in the years immediately following the Cuban Revolution: first, that the government intentionally limited press coverage of the former president's conference, and second, that it felt extremely threatened by his popularity.

On April 18, 1961, Cárdenas led a large demonstration against the Bay of Pigs invasion in the Plaza Zócalo in Mexico City. Estimates of attendance ranged from 15,000 to 80,000 people.[11] In addition, he sent a message denouncing the invasion to a wide range of international institutions and leaders, including the United Nations, the presidents of numerous countries, and Walter Lippman of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Cárdenas declared: "Cuba is not alone. The attempts to isolate her have failed."[12]

Cárdenas also led the effort to establish a new, Mexican, leftist organization—the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN) in August 1961.[13] The MLN was a reformist movement with numerous internal and external goals, including defense of the Cuban

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[9] "Memorandum: Conferencia Latinoamericana por la Soberanía Nacional, la Emancipación Económica y la Paz," 9 march 1961, IPS, vol. 1475, file 41, AGN. This document is available on a CD of photographed documentation included with Enrique Condés Lara's *Represión y rebelión en México (1959-1985)* (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2007).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Eric Zolov, "'¡Cuba sí, yanquis no!'" 181.

[12] *Palabras y Documentos Públicos de Lázaro Cárdenas 1928-1970.*

[13] Olga Pellicer de Brody, *México y la Revolución Cubana* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1972).

Revolution. It is important to note that the MLN, although it expressed sympathy with the revolutionary Cuban government, was a *reformist* group, not a revolutionary one seeking to overthrow the government.[14] Leaders of the movement sought to unite the existing leftist groups within Mexico, including independent leftist organizations, the Popular Socialist Party, and the Mexican Communist Party. Leaders of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional presented themselves as an interest group, not a political party—but the possibility remained that the movement could convert into a party and draw away the leftist sectors of the PRI's coalition.

Throughout the 1960s, the Mexican government kept a close watch on Cárdenas and the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional. Federal agents tapped the telephones of both the former president and the offices of the MLN.[15] They compiled reports on the history, leadership, membership, and activities of the movement, noting the states where the MLN was strongest, as well as its connections with communist organizations.[16] In addition, local and state-level politicians and military leaders relayed information to the Secretaría de Gobernación. In July 1962, the governor of Baja California sent a telegram to the Secretaría about one of the movement's recent meetings.[17] That same month, General Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz, also of Baja California, relayed an eight-page report about the MLN's activities with attached examples of propaganda to the Secretaría in

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[14] Pellicer de Brody, *México y la Revolución Cubana*, 106-107.

[15] Aguayo, *La Charola*, 306.

[16] "Informe: Movimiento de Liberación Nacional," 30 March 1965, DFS, "Moviemiento de Liberación Nacional" Files, File 11-6-65, L-14, H-123-128, AGN.

[17] Eligio Esquivel Méndez , Governor of Baja California, to Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Secretary of Governance, 3-4 July 1962, IPS, vol. 2896-B, un-numbered file, AGN. Included in CD from *Represión y rebelión en México*.

Mexico City.[18] The extensive surveillance of Cárdenas and the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional demonstrate that the government felt threatened by the growing power of leftist leaders and organizations.

Cárdenas' popularity and the support that he showed for Castro and the Cuban revolution placed significant pressure on the Mexican government to maintain relations with Cuba. A telegram from the American embassy in Mexico City to the U.S. Department of State summarized the threat that the Cuba question posed to Mexico's internal political stability. On November 30, 1962, the Embassy sent a telegram with the following assessment of President López Mateos' predicament: "A break with Castro would probably precipitate a domestic political crisis, perhaps involving serious public disorders … and might even split the PRI."[19] U.S. government officials described López Mateos' policy toward Cuba as a way to appease Cárdenas and the leftist sectors of the PRI. In a report to the State Department, the secretary of the American embassy in Mexico City, Alberto M. Vazquez, stated: "In order to mollify the left and neutralize the effect of its pressure, PRI and administration leaders have, at least verbally, assumed a leftist posture."[20]

The Cuban issue continued to threaten the stability of the Mexican government in the months leading up to the OAS meeting in Washington in July 1964. A February 1964 U.S. government background paper on the Mexican politico-economic situation observed that "the Mexican Government regards the issue of Cuba as the most serious threat to

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[18] General Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz to Secretaría de Gobernación, 19 July 1962, IPS, vol. 1475, file 27, AGN. Included in CD from *Represión y rebelión en México*.

[19] "Airgram from AmEmbassy Mexico D.F. to Department of State," 30 November 1962, NADS, Mexico 1960-January 1963 , 612.37/11-3062.

[20] "Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration."

national unity."[21] If this assessment of the Mexican government's predicament was correct, then Mexico's refusal to break relations with Cuba was both predictable and practical. Maintaining its connections with Castro was a way for the government to mollify the leftist sectors of Mexican society by taking away their grounds for complaint.

Conclusion

The government of Mexico made a strategic decision when it decided to place itself in the middle of the Cold War battle between Cuba and the United States. Presidents López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz knew that by maintaining diplomatic relations with Cuba, they were establishing Mexico as the default thoroughfare for Castro's quest to spread revolution across the hemisphere, and risking political and economic retaliation from the United States.

The determining factor in the Mexican government's decision to flaunt the OAS resolution and maintain diplomatic relations with Cuba was the internal political situation. The PRI was a coalition-based governing party that claimed to have revolutionary origins, and its leaders were determined to hold the group together. The Cuba issue had the potential to divide the party between the left and the right, and popular leaders like ex-President Lázaro Cárdenas appeared willing to split the coalition if the government ignored their demands. The Mexican government feared that if it cut relations with Cuba, it would lose the liberal wing of the party, and likely receive heavy criticism for bowing to U.S. pressure. The government had to strike a balance, and following an "independent" foreign policy seemed the best way to do it.

[21] "Background Paper on Mexican Politico-Economic Situation," 12 Feb 1964, Country File, NSF, Box 61, LBJ Library.

Presidents López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz took a calculated risk, one that apparently paid off handsomely. The Mexican government was able to hold its coalition together, thereby encouraging internal political stability. By rejecting the OAS resolution, López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz bolstered their reputations for independence and self-determination. The Mexican government's relationship with Castro encouraged the Cuban leader to promote stability, rather than instability, in Mexican territory. Finally, a secret agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments to monitor Castro's activities neutralized the threat of U.S. retaliations. Adolfo López Mateos and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz proved themselves masters of the diplomatic high-wire, using their skills on the international stage to satisfy their audiences at home.

However, the connections between Mexico's domestic politics and its foreign relations with Cuba require further examination. It is still unclear exactly how the government perceived the relationship between leftist unrest at home and the Cuban Revolution. New evidence has revealed that Díaz Ordaz's security forces knew about Cuban involvement in the 1968 student movement, which heretofore has gone unrecognized in the historical record. Did the government have evidence of Cuban meddling in other episodes of unrest, say the railway workers strike of 1959, or the formation of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional in 1961? What exactly was the extent of Cuban involvement in Mexico's domestic turmoil? Further exploration of the Mexican government's perceptions of threat will shed light on the process of domestic and foreign policy formation. It will help explain the paradox of a regime that brutally repressed leftist activism at home while defending the sovereignty of Castro's communist government on the international stage.