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Unusual Alliance: Cuban-Argentine Relations in Geneva, 1976-1983¹

The role of the Soviet Union in Argentina's defense is well-known among human rights experts, who noted the development of an "unholy alliance." Less is understood about the support that Cuba gave the military government in order to block consideration of the Argentine case at the United Nations. This document, based on a chapter of a planned book on Argentine-Cuban relations, attempts to fill that gap based on information from personal interviews, Argentine archival material, and secondary sources.

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Puente Democrático is a program within the area Political Opening and Development of the Center for Opening and Development of Latin America (CADAL) with the objective of the international promotion of civic and political freedoms.

Although their relations were not always marked by agreement, Cuba and the last Argentine military regime became close on the sensitive issue of human rights. For the Argentine junta, it was imperative to counteract international criticism of the repression that followed the 1976 coup. This effort centered on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, where the anticommunist regime ironically found diplomatic backing among its ideological adversaries.²

The role of the Soviet Union in Argentina's defense is well-known among human rights experts, who noted the development of an "unholy alliance" (Tolley, 1983, p. 53). Less is understood about the support that Cuba gave the military government in order to block consideration of the Argentine case at the United Nations. This article attempts to fill that gap based on information from personal interviews, Argentine archival material, and secondary sources.³

The first section provides background on the principal UN human rights bodies and procedures. The subsequent sections detail the nature and significance of Cuban support throughout the period of the military regime. The conclusion analyzes multiple factors that contributed to Cuban cooperation with Argentina, arguing that it largely resulted from a pragmatic assessment of national interest.

United Nations Procedure

A subsidiary body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Commission on Human Rights has met annually in Geneva since 1946. It consists of state representatives, selected for three-year terms according to a formula designed to ensure an equitable regional distribution. Between 1967 and 1980, they numbered 32; with a 1980 reform, Commission membership increased to 43 states.⁴

The developing states dominate the Commission, though they do not form a united bloc, unlike the relatively cohesive Western and Eastern groups during the Cold War. The loose coalition of non-aligned countries frequently protected its members while approving investigations of others, but it also split on decisive issues in its different regions. According to Tolley (1987), the most partisan delegates, whatever their ideological convictions, "alternately profess indignation at gross violations of human rights by their foes, and then defend allies by complaining of selective enforcement, double standards, and unlawful political intervention in domestic matters" (p. 202).

Such political calculations largely account for the disparate treatment of human rights violations cited by critics of the Commission. Indeed, many members are themselves serious abusers of human rights, with a vested interest in not only preventing action on their own internal situations but also in rarely, and selectively, enforcing human rights norms in order to weaken the overall mechanisms and gain political advantage over their adversaries. This is perhaps the

inevitable outcome of an intergovernmental organ whose delegates must promote the national interest over human rights when the two conflict. Nevertheless, a few governments have adopted more impartial policies, and, while cohesive voting coalitions can block proposed resolutions, the passage of an initiative usually requires cooperation from others (Tolley, 1987).⁵ Sincere commitment to opposing human rights principles can also create conflict, as exemplified by the Western emphasis on civil and political rights and the priority given to economic and social rights by the less-developed states (Tolley, 1984).

Unlike the government representatives of the Commission, the 26 members of the Sub-Commission on Prevention and Protection of Minorities, the only subsidiary body of the Commission, serve in a personal capacity.⁶ Critics have argued, however, that they operate under similar political pressures, "in accord with, if not actually under the instructions of, their governments" (Gardeniers, Hannum, & Kruger, 1982, p. 357). The independence of the Sub-Commission is indeed constrained, though indirectly, by the election procedure, which takes place in the Commission on the nomination of governments (Hannum, 1981). Some countries regularly nominate employees of their foreign ministries, while others, such as the Eastern bloc states during the Cold War, openly reject the principle of independent experts (Forsyth, 1985).

The enforcement capabilities of the Commission and Sub-Commission, which initially limited themselves to the mere promotion of human rights, reside in two ECOSOC decisions: resolution 1235, of June 1967, and resolution 1503, of May 1970. Resolution 1235 authorized both the Commission and the Sub-Commission to consult information on violations and to study situations that demonstrate a consistent pattern of gross violations. This procedure is public and does not use confidential communications as evidence. Resolution 1503, on the other hand, provided for a confidential procedure to review communications through a two-step screening process. A five-member Working Group, appointed by the Sub-Commission with one member each from the African, Asian, Latin American, Eastern European, and Western European groups, convenes two weeks before the Sub-Commission sessions in August to identify consistent patterns of gross violations and to refer such situations to the full Sub-Commission. In private sessions, the Sub-Commission then selects situations for referral to the Commission. The Commission, in turn, may maintain a situation under review, conduct an investigation with the cooperation of the target government, or abandon the confidential procedure in favor of the public 1235 process (Tolley, 1987).

Resolution 1503 thus created an international complaint system that allows individual petitioners and nongovernmental organizations to condemn human rights

violations in any country. Western activists initially praised the new mechanism, yet soon found that its confidential nature enabled repressive governments to escape meaningful scrutiny (Tolley, 1984). In practice, regimes such as the Argentine military junta tried to use the slow and secretive procedure as a shield against public censure. Though their natural preference was to avoid review entirely, the second best option was to feign cooperation with the confidential process in order to thwart any public debate.

The Argentine Case

The massive campaign of forced disappearances launched by the Argentine military junta attracted the attention of the United Nations only a few months after the March 1976 coup. At its annual session in August, the Sub-Commission passed a resolution mentioning Argentina by name and expressing concern about the human rights situation and the plight of refugees (Guest, 1990). The resolution represented a setback for the Argentine ambassador to Geneva, Gabriel Martínez, who was determined to prevent both public criticism and confidential investigations, however ineffective the 1503 procedure might be. For the next two years, the Argentine military's strategy, faithfully implemented by Martínez in Geneva, would be to deny the legitimacy of all international pressure over human rights (Sikink, 1993).

Martínez's target during this period was the Sub-Commission due to its position at the first level of the UN hierarchy for the protection of human rights. No Cuban served on the Sub-Commission at this time, but the Soviet member played a crucial role as one of the five Sub-Commissioners on the working group responsible for reviewing communications.⁷ By the following year, hundreds of communications on Argentina had arrived in Geneva, where they were examined by the working group prior to the August session of the Sub-Commission. There, the Soviet, Pakistani, and Nicaraguan members voted in favor of the Argentine government (unlike the U.S. and Ghanaian members), thus preventing any action on the communications for another year (Guest, 1990).

In 1978, however, the working group put Argentina on the preliminary "blacklist" of gross violators; the Soviet and Pakistani members maintained their vote in favor of the military regime, while the U.S., Nigerian, and Columbian members voted against (Guest, 1990). In the full Sub-Commission, Mario Amadeo, the new Argentine Sub-Commissioner elected the previous March, argued that his government needed more time to review all the individual cases contained in the communications. With the decisive votes of the Soviet and non-aligned members, the Sub-Commission decided not to send the Argentine case to the Commission.⁸

This triumph for Martínez and Amadeo impeded any investigation under the private 1503 procedure for another

year, but, at the next meeting of the Commission in February 1979, seven Western delegations publicly issued a draft resolution calling on the UN Secretary General to collect information on disappearances (Guest, 1990). Though Argentina still was not a member of the Commission, Martínez had successfully cultivated close personal contacts with the nonaligned and socialist delegates, which he put to use to block the Western resolution (interview, November 15, 2005). With their support, Martínez employed a typical tactic for defeating critical resolutions: the introduction of a counterproposal charging one's opponents with violations. His amendment to the Western resolution, targeting the United States, was presented by the nonaligned delegates and, following UN rules, put to a vote before the actual resolution. Tense negotiations to find a compromise text collapsed, and, as a result, the issue was postponed for another year.

As one of the most influential, though controversial, nonaligned countries in the Commission, Cuba played an important role in the nonaligned movement's defense of the Argentine regime. The Cuban government maintained an active delegation since gaining Commission membership in 1976 (Tolley, 1983), while its election to the chairmanship of the nonaligned movement in 1979 year raised its profile among developing countries. Coupled with improved relations with the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, this leadership position also established Cuba as a broker between the developing world and the socialist bloc (Erisman, 2000).

For Martínez, as well, Cuba acted as an "interlocutor" between the Argentine and Eastern European delegations (interview, November 15, 2005). When Martínez needed to relay a message to an Eastern bloc country, he would often ask the Cuban ambassador to serve as the messenger. Cuba also helped to convene meetings of the nonaligned delegates on Argentina's behalf. Such favors reflected a relationship between the Cuban and Argentine representatives in Geneva that Martínez described as "optimal" and "extremely close" (interview). Uninhibited by ideological differences, the support was mutual, according to Martínez: "The Cubans always, always supported us, and we supported them" (interview).

This support from Cuba and the other nonaligned and socialist countries on the Commission proved crucial in February 1979. Despite its ideological opposition to nonaligned objectives, the military junta had remained in the movement in order to gain the backing of the numerically important group on issues such as human rights and the Malvinas Islands. Its pragmatism was rewarded in 1979, as a Foreign Ministry report later recognized:

The evolution of Argentine participation in the [nonaligned] Movement demonstrates that, as a result of positive and fertile diplomatic activity, the Republic was able to achieve the necessary support

for a decorous treatment of the Argentine case at the Commission on Human Rights, as a consequence of the decisive action in her favor of the Nonaligned members of the Commission. This became evident at the 35th Session (February 1979), shortly after the attendance of Foreign Minister Viceadmiral Oscar Antonio Montes at the Foreign Ministers Conference conducted in Belgrade in July 1978. (Ministerio, 1982, p. 3)

Change in Strategy

Argentina had once again avoided an investigation of its human rights situation, but Martínez recognized that growing international pressure made a condemnation of the military regime more and more likely. He thus recommended to the junta a 180-degree shift in strategy: cooperation with the 1503 procedure in order to preclude public debate on the disappearances. Since action on the Argentine case appeared imminent, Martínez shrewdly exploited the confidentiality rule as a buffer against a far more embarrassing public condemnation. To do so, he asked Amadeo, the Argentine Sub-Commissioner, to make Argentina lose the vote in the August 1979 session of the Sub-Commission (interview, November 15, 2005). At Amadeo's request, the Soviet member of the working group on communications reversed his vote, sending the communications on Argentina to the full Sub-Commission, where they were, in turn, referred to the Commission.

In the months between the Sub-Commission decision and the next Commission session in February 1980, several changes in the international climate affected both Cuban and Argentine foreign policies. The sixth nonaligned summit, held in Havana in September 1979, helped dispel earlier controversy about the role of Cuba in the movement, strengthening its claims to leadership of the developing world. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, however, had the opposite effect. The Cuban vote against the UN General Assembly condemnation of the invasion distanced the regime from the majority of nonaligned members and exposed Soviet pressure on Cuban policymaking (Domínguez, 1989).⁹

For Argentina, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to improved commercial and political relations with the superpower. When the Argentine government refused to adhere to the grain embargo decreed by the Carter administration, exports to the USSR increased dramatically, solidifying Argentina's position as Moscow's principal trading partner in the region.¹⁰ Although the junta voted in the General Assembly to condemn the Soviet invasion and complied with the boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow, bilateral contacts increased in frequency and cordiality. These new levels of cooperation quickly became evident at the 1980 session of the Commission. In efforts to block a

resolution in support of Russian dissident Andrei Sakharov, Argentina joined Cuba as the sole Latin American states that backed the Soviet Union (Cohen, 1982).

Concerning the issue of disappearances, the preliminary group of five Commission delegates in charge of reviewing the Sub-Commission report requested that the Argentine delegation answer seven questions about the country's human rights record. When this recommendation was discussed in private by the full Commission, Brazil interceded on Argentina's behalf. The final resolution was softened, simply asking for information about disappeared persons (Bartolomei, 1994). Martínez seemed vindicated in his strategy to utilize the private 1503 procedure, but momentum to produce a thematic investigation of disappearances in the public debate continued to grow.

The Western bloc decided to take the initiative in presenting an effective resolution, though it needed some support from developing countries in order to counter the weak Argentine proposal, which essentially postponed any action for at least a year (Guest, 1990). Ultimately, the nonaligned bloc accepted the need to create a working group to investigate disappearances, but it was unprepared to support the strong and open-ended mechanism that the Western draft demanded. As a result, the Western bloc decided to cede leadership on the issue. The Iraqi delegation prepared a new proposal that became the focus of discussion throughout the fourth week.

During the frantic negotiations that ensued on the language of the resolution, Jerome Shestack, the head of the U.S. delegation, met with the Cuban delegates to request their support. Shestack pointed out the contradiction of Cuban and Soviet defense of the anti-communist military junta, yet the Cuban response, according to Shestack, was "lame excuses." "I tried to get them on our side, but, no, they stood by Argentina," Shestack recalled (interview, February 20, 2005).¹¹

Among the nonaligned countries, some reacted in favor to the Iraqi proposal and others neutrally or unfavorably, but most were interested in obtaining a consensus (Kramer & Weissbrodt, 1981). The Cuban government, in particular, was likely anxious to avoid a split of the bloc given its position as chair of the movement and the ongoing criticism of its backing of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In order to preserve an appearance of unanimity, Iraq moved that its resolution be adopted without a vote upon the resumption of the public debate, so that "those countries who might abstain or vote "no" in a roll call vote would not have their position recorded if the measure was passed without a vote" (Kramer & Weissbrodt, 1981, p. 28). Despite Argentine efforts to introduce amendments to weaken the resolution, a delicate agreement was reached, resulting in the passage of the Iraqi proposal without a vote.

The Working Group on Disappearances was thus

established to examine enforced or involuntary disappearances. It consisted of five Commission members acting in their own capacities, appointed for one year. The Argentine delegation had been forced to acquiesce in the creation of a public inquiry, though the investigation did not focus exclusively on Argentina. The Group's report, presented in January 1981, confirmed disappearances in 15 countries. The Commission extended the Working Group for another three years, though Martínez won a concession at the 1981 session with a resolution requiring that all individual communications be handled in private. The Sub-Commission maintained the 1503 examination of the Argentine case until August 1983, when it removed Argentina from the confidential blacklist in view of the forthcoming democratic transition.

Explaining Cuban Support

Cuba and Argentina cooperated in the Commission on Human Rights despite their conspicuous ideological differences. Why did a communist regime support a fervently anti-communist military junta whose chief goal was to eliminate left-wing subversion? The most obvious explanation is that both governments violated the human rights of their citizens and thus sought to protect themselves from criticism and resist any expansion of UN enforcement mechanisms. This shared interest was certainly a necessary condition for collaboration, but it was not, by itself, a sufficient cause. During this period, in fact, the Cuban government was at little risk of investigation given the favorable balance of power in the Commission, which prevented debate on Cuba until 1987.

The multiple sources of Cuban-Argentine cooperation are better understood by examining the contrast with Cuban policy towards Chile. The Chilean military regime became a pariah at the United Nations, subject to country-specific investigations and several public condemnations. Cuba, along with the rest of the socialist bloc and the majority of the nonaligned countries, consistently voted for these condemnatory resolutions. The distinction with Argentina did not relate to the human rights records of the two countries, for repression in Argentina was even more extensive (though better hidden) than in Chile. Yet other differences between the two military regimes explain the inconsistency, showing that Cuban support for Argentina was due to more than a common interest in defending the principle of non-intervention on human rights issues.

First, the predecessors of the military rulers in each country differed considerably. The 1973 coup in Chile overthrew a Marxist government that had developed warm relations with Cuba, whereas the 1976 coup in Argentina ousted a government in which rightist sectors had initiated repression against leftist groups. For Fidel Castro, there was clearly more cause for hostility towards the successors

of Salvador Allende than towards those of Isabel Perón. The Argentine communist party, which maintained close ties with the Cuban government, even justified the intervention of the armed forces as a necessary response to the chaotic political and economic conditions at the time (Vacs, 1984).

Second, the Argentine and Chilean regimes adopted very different policies towards Cuba. Upon seizing power, Pinochet quickly broke off diplomatic relations with Havana and outlawed the Chilean communist party. The Argentine junta, on the other hand, avoided confrontation, preferring correct political relations and limited trade with the island. It also spared the Argentine communist leaders from persecution and allowed the party to retain its offices and operate in the same state of semi-legality that applied to parties of the right and center. In response, Cuba ceased support for guerrilla groups in Argentina but continued to back the overthrow of the Pinochet regime.

Relations with the Soviet Union constituted a third difference between the Chilean and Argentine regimes. The USSR never became an important market for Chile, and the two countries refused to establish diplomatic relations. Argentina, however, maintained a high volume of trade with the Soviet Union, which became its single most important customer in 1980. The Soviet demand for agricultural imports also provided the basis for some collaboration in the political sphere, as illustrated by military exchanges and cooperation on nuclear power issues (Blazier, 1987).

These key differences between the Chilean and Argentine regimes account for the divergence in Cuban policy towards the two countries in the Commission on Human Rights. Argentina's conciliatory approach was probably the most important factor given Cuba's goal of normalizing state-to-state relations within the hemisphere.¹² While the third variable may have influenced Cuban decisionmaking, it is unlikely that Cuban support of Argentina resulted directly from Soviet pressure. Academic specialists on Cuba generally reject the view that the Kremlin dictated policy to Havana; despite its reliance on Soviet economic aid, the Cuban government acted more as an autonomous actor than a Soviet satellite (Duncan, 1985; Domínguez, 1989). It is quite possible, however, that the two regimes coordinated their policies towards Argentina, particularly during the late 1970s, when Cuban strategy called for closer alignment with Moscow.¹³

From the Argentine perspective, it would have made little political sense to eschew Cuban support. In fact, the military regime actively sought allies such as Cuba in order to avoid the international isolation experienced by Chile. In the face of criticism from European governments and the Carter administration, typical alliances become inverted in Geneva, with the anti-communist, pro-Western junta turning to the socialist and developing countries for protection on human rights issues.¹⁴ Cuba's simultaneous membership in

the Latin American bloc, the socialist camp, and the nonaligned movement placed it a particularly influential position for Argentine interests.

Although the two regimes occupied opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, the personality of the Argentine ambassador in Geneva may have helped to mitigate this constraint on the relationship. A self-described technocrat and trade specialist without political affiliation, Martínez had developed friendly contacts with Cuba while working on the negotiation of the Argentine loan to Havana in 1973 (interview, December 1, 2005). After his appointment to the United Nations by Perón, Martínez cultivated a close personal relationship with Carlos Lechuga Hevíá, the Cuban ambassador. Indeed, for the nationalistic Martínez, the protection of Argentine interests mattered much more than

ideological distinctions. Following the 1976 coup, according to former foreign minister Oscar Camilión, Martínez was given considerable discretion to solicit support wherever he could find it for the defense of the regime (interview, Sept. 6, 2005).

That Martínez's search met with an affirmative response from the Cuban delegation was, in the end, not so surprising. A basic convergence of interests made Cuba willing to condone Argentine human rights violations, though other pragmatic motivations that had little to do with human rights determined its disparate treatment of Argentina and Chile. These incentives have been analyzed separately here, but in the Cuban foreign policy calculus they merged to produce an unusual alliance in the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Footnotes

¹ I would like to thank Fernando Petrella and Jorge Domínguez for their suggestions and encouragement. I am particularly grateful to Cristina Giordano at the United Nations Library in Geneva locating and sending me UN documentation. This document is based on a chapter of a planned book on Argentine-Cuban relations.

² The Organization of American States was the other main international forum that addressed human rights violations in Argentina. It is not discussed here because Cuba was not a member state.

³ This research faces several limitations, however. Most importantly, Cuban archives are not open to the public. Although the archives of the Argentine Foreign Ministry are open to researchers, there are, unfortunately, significant gaps. I was able to consult cables and memorandums written on the nonaligned movement, but the archives of the Argentine ministry in Geneva are mysteriously unavailable. They were sent to Buenos Aires in 1985 for use by the prosecution in the trial of the former military commanders; despite repeated requests for information from various government ministries, I have not learned what happened to the documents after the trial. Finally, the United Nations has made public the 1503 documents pertaining to Argentina between 1980 and 1984, but all 1503 documents on Argentina prior to 1980 are still restricted.

⁴ Prior to the 1980 increase, the Economic and Social Council elected members according to the following geographical allocation: Africa – eight; Asia – six; Eastern Europe – four; Latin America – six; and Western Europe and others – eight. With the increase to 43 states, the five regions had the following allocation of seats: Africa – eleven; Asia – eight; Eastern Europe – five; Latin America – eight; and Western Europe and others – ten. Currently, the total number of Commission members is 53.

⁵ Tolley (1984) writes: “Partisan competition by Commission members has produced inconsistent decision-making, but political compromise has also advanced the cause of international human rights” (p. 57).

⁶ Since 1999, the Sub-Commission has been called the Sub-Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

⁷ Nor did an Argentine sit on the Sub-Commission until 1978, though Martínez attended the meetings of the full Sub-Commission as an observer.

⁸ These deliberations were confidential, but Isabelle Vichniac, a reporter for the French newspaper *Le Monde*, exposed the Soviet vote in an article published September 13, 1970. Sergei Smirnov, the Soviet Sub-Commissioner, promptly demanded an investigation into the source of her information.

⁹ Cuba's resulting loss of prestige was reflected in its failure to secure a seat on the UN Security Council, though its election had previously seemed assured.

¹⁰ Meanwhile, international pressure concerning the human rights situation continued to grow with the visit of the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States in September 1979.

¹¹ Shestack received criticism from the State Department for the meeting with the Cuban delegation. Martínez complained to Washington about his “lobbying” with Cuba, alarming officials at the American Republics Area (ARA) bureau at the State Department (Shestack, interview, February 20, 2005).

¹² Beginning in the early 1970s, Havana prioritized ties with governments willing to offer a rapprochement over aid to revolutionary movements (Domínguez, 1989).

¹³ As Duncan (1985) put it, “the record indicates less a case of Cuba under direct Soviet power over all domestic and foreign policy issues, that is, Cuba modifying its behavior to suit Soviet priorities as a result of Soviet pressure, than one of both the Soviets and the Cubans adapting their policies in pursuit of perceived mutually beneficial outcomes” (p. 86).

¹⁴ Argentine-Cuban cooperation did not escape the attention of the U.S. government, as one recently declassified State Department report proves: “Human rights will remain the central issue in bilateral relations with the U.S. and the driving force behind efforts to obtain support from such otherwise unlikely partners such as Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the non-aligned movement” (Department of State, 1980, p. 3).

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