THE ODD PARTNERS

by W. Raymond Duncan

That the Soviet Union should find its most enduring overseas ally in the Caribbean tropics is one of the great ironies of this century.

In Moscow, Latin America was for decades rather a mystery. Vladimir Lenin knew little of the area. Josef Stalin suffered a rebuff in Mexico when the government responded to Comintern meddling by breaking off diplomatic relations (1930) and offering a welcome to his exiled arch rival, Leon Trotsky. And during the 1950s, when Nikita Khrushchev spoke of the Third World as a "zone of peace" where Soviet influence might readily be extended, he really meant Asia and Africa—where he gained his first ally-client, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, in 1955.

To the men in the Kremlin, the Latins were distant folk in a vast alien region of Hispano-Catholic culture, hot weather, huge estates, and military juntas. It was a scene they viewed with great ignorance and some contempt.

Even Khrushchev might be astonished that today Cuba is receiving more than half the total assistance extended by Moscow to all foreign nations, including Vietnam. Besides its contributions to Castro's treasury, Moscow pays above-market prices for Cuba's sugar, and ships oil to the island at below-market rates; Havana sells some of it at a profit. Castro gets his Soviet MIG jets, T-62 tanks, and other weaponry (more than $13 billion worth since 1960) free.

All told, the Soviets probably spend $4-5 billion a year on Cuba. That is roughly what the United States spends on its leading aid recipient, Israel, and more than it contributes to Egypt. But the Soviet-Cuban relationship is unique. As University of Pittsburgh Sovietologist Cole Blaiser has observed, "there has never been anything quite like it, not in the experience of the developing countries in the Third World, nor of the socialist countries, most particularly the USSR."

When Castro found himself in power in 1959, there were no cheers from Moscow. To Khrushchev, the Cuban may have seemed a Caribbean Don Quixote, tilting at windmills. His record as a guerrilla was uneven. And he had said he was "not a communist" but sought only "a democratic Cuba and an end to the dictatorship." Considering that Cuba was in the Americans' strategic backyard—and that Washington had recently ousted a pro-Soviet regime in Guatemala—Moscow had told Cuba's communists to back Batista, not Castro, during the late 1950s.

At the time of Castro's triumph, however, the Soviets were waging a post-Sputnik diplomatic offensive in Latin America. So at Castro's invitation, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan was pleased to visit

Havana in early 1960. Results: a Soviet agreement to buy up to a million tons of Cuban sugar annually over four years, and a $100 million loan.

Then came Castro's joust with the Eisenhower administration over oil refineries and the sugar quota. That July, Khrushchev vowed to "defend Cuba with rockets" if the United States attacked (a purely "symbolic" pledge, he said later). And, oddly, Khrushchev's rhetoric began to sound like Castro's: Communism, he said in January 1961, would be spread by "national liberation wars" in the "centers of revolutionary struggle against imperialism"—Asia, Africa, *and* Latin America.

A Revolutionary's Duty

It was after Castro both survived the Bay of Pigs invasion and declared himself a Marxist-Leninist that Moscow decided that he was safe physically (i.e. the Americans could not take direct action to oust him) and ideologically. Yet, in his memoirs, Khrushchev claimed he sent the Soviet rockets that led to the October 1962 Missile Crisis just "to protect Cuba's existence as a socialist country."

Scholars still debate whether Castro was, like his brother Raúl, a communist *before* Batista quit Cuba. What *is* certain is that after he embraced Marxism-Leninism, he could ingratiate himself with Moscow and adapt Cuba's Moscow-line Communist Party to his needs. The *Fidelistas* in his 26th of July Movement could be grafted onto the communist political framework. By adopting Marxism-Leninism, Castro gained all at once a *Fidelista*-controlled political organization, a useful adversary (Washington), and a ready-made ideology around which to rally the Cuban masses.

Many Western scholars, such as Luis Aguilar, argue that Cuba is no longer sovereign, but a vassal state dominated by its superpower patron. Indeed, Castro conceded at the Cuban Communist Party's first congress in 1975 that "without Soviet aid, our country could not have survived the confrontation with imperialism." Then again, there are analysts who believe that the Cuban tail often wags the Soviet dog: Castro seduced Khrushchev, and has set the Moscow-Havana agenda ever since.

Actually, as I see it, the relationship is best viewed in terms of converging interests. Moscow is the chief material benefactor, Cuba, the recipient. Yet the more Soviet leaders needed Cuban help in their Third World pursuits, the more leverage Castro gained to pry aid out of them.

Cuba provides Moscow with a secure outpost, close to Florida, that

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Leonid Brezhnev, Castro, and Premier Nikita Khrushchev near Moscow in May 1963. At their first meeting (New York, 1960), Khrushchev dubbed Fidel a "heroic man," sealing an alliance that has endured to this day.

is a kind of counter to NATO listening posts in Turkey and Norway, near the Soviet Union. Soviet warships can call at the Cienfuegos navy base, and the largest Soviet electronic intelligence facility on foreign territory is located near Havana. But something else that Castro supplies—assistance to Moscow in furthering its global ambitions—has served as a kind of barometer of Soviet-Cuban relations.

Since Khrushchev's day, Moscow has viewed the Third World* (unlike Europe) as an arena where it could vie with the West without direct military confrontation. At stake, Soviet analysts reckoned, were two-thirds of the globe's population, raw materials, markets, and "chokepoints" where shipping could be blocked in wartime. Khrushchev began seeking Third World allies in 1954–55 (Egypt, as noted above, was his first catch).

Castro's larger ambitions emerged during the early 1960s. He backed leftist guerrillas in Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia, sent weapons and medical supplies to Algeria's National Liberation Front

*The French journalists who coined the term during the early 1950s defined the *Tiers Monde* (Third World) simply as all the underdeveloped countries that were outside both the capitalist West and the communism of the Eastern Bloc. Eventually, leaders who claimed to speak for the large and heterogeneous group decided that it was a bloc of its own, and gave its members a new, if misleading, name: the "nonaligned" nations.

(FLN), and set up a military mission in Ghana. Before he finally left Cuba to "export the Revolution" to Bolivia, Che Guevara toured Africa. He found it "one of the most important, if not *the* most important, battlefields against all forms of exploitation in the world."

Castro's passion for armed uprisings ("The duty of every revolutionary is to make a revolution") beguiled Khrushchev. But it worried the pragmatic men who ousted him in 1964, notably Leonid Brezhnev.

The Brezhnev group blamed Khrushchev's "hare-brained" ideas for the Missile Crisis. They sought good relations with existing governments, especially in Latin America.* Soviet diplomats courted right-wing leaders who wished to show their independence of Washington (such as Panama's dictator, Omar Torrijos). And in other countries (notably Peru, Bolivia, and Chile) they sought to merge communists and left-wing nationalists into "united fronts" that might gain legitimate political power.

Rendezvous in Africa

Castro's persistence in arming Latin rebels nearly led to a Moscow-Havana split during 1966–68. But no break occurred. As it happened, Cuba's adventures were curbed by the diplomatic isolation imposed on Havana by Lyndon Johnson's administration and by the Organization of American States. And Moscow pressured Castro (via reduced oil shipments, for example) to toe the Kremlin line. Among other things, in August 1968—to the dismay of many Western communists—Castro dutifully blessed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as "a bitter necessity" to keep Prague out of "the arms of imperialism."

Castro's responsiveness was rewarded. After the 1970 sugar harvest failed, Soviet-Cuban economic agreements were revised on terms highly favorable to Havana (e.g., all payments on credits were to be deferred until 1986, and then extended over 25 years). And Cuba was admitted to Comecon, the Soviet trade bloc. But Brezhnev's conservatism persisted. He avoided getting close to any Third World regime except those of Cuba, North Vietnam, and Syria. Leaders backed earlier by Khrushchev in Guinea, Ghana, Mali, and Indonesia did not last long.

Where Brezhnev and Castro finally became partners was in Africa.

Among the anticolonial groups that Castro had aided during the 1960s was the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a Marxist-Leninist organization led by Castro's friend Augustinho Neto. After Portugal's April 1975 revolution, Castro sent troops to back the MPLA in a post-independence civil war among rival African factions.

Neto had not received much encouragement from Moscow. But

*There, the Soviets have had striking, if belated, success. Most Latin American governments denied recognition to the men who ended the rule of the tsars in the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. And most again broke diplomatic relations with Moscow as the Cold War began during the late 1940s. As recently as 1960, the Soviets had relations with only Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay. Today, they have such ties with almost all the region's governments.

Brezhnev was aware that Neto's rivals were then getting Chinese (and U.S.) backing. He decided to buttress Cuba's "fraternal assistance" with shipments of aging T-34 and T-54 tanks and MIG-21 fighter-bombers (flown by Cuban pilots). By 1976, perhaps 15,000-20,000 Cubans were shoring up the lackluster MPLA forces. Without Soviet aid, it is doubtful that Cuba could have provided many troops. Without Castro, however, it is unlikely that Brezhnev would have moved so boldly in Africa.

So began a new development in Soviet-Cuban relations: joint aid to Marxist-oriented liberation movements. And from Moscow's perspective, the United States' exit from Vietnam and the advent of détente probably seemed to invite some Soviet advances in the Third World.

The backing of local Marxists—first in Angola, later in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Grenada, and Nicaragua—began at an opportune time. Following their 1972 expulsion from Egypt by Anwar Sadat, the Soviets needed a visible success in Africa. And Castro's eagerness to commit his own countrymen appealed to Brezhnev's desire to limit Soviet risks. (Cuban troops would also be less obtrusive than Soviets in Africa.)

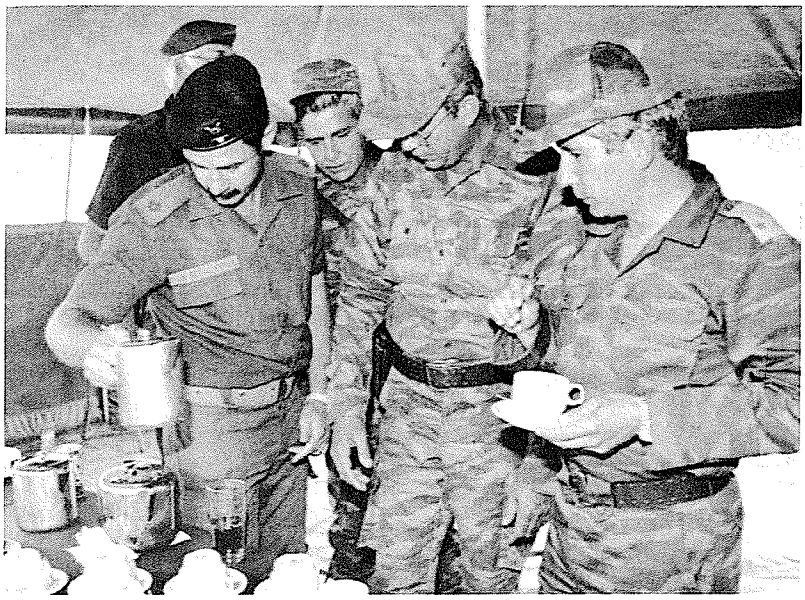
Angola gave Castro a new cause around which to rally his tired people, renewed his claim to leadership among the underdeveloped nations, and bolstered his (successful) demands for still more Soviet aid. With Brezhnev backing Castro, and Cuban troops carrying their nation's flag far from home in Ethiopia and Mozambique as well as in Angola, one could envision the Cuban leaning back with a Havana cigar, sighing, à la Jackie Gleason, "How sweet it is."

Snubbing Chernenko

By 1982, after Moscow had joined Havana in arming and advising Nicaragua's Sandinistas, many senior Soviets were hailing Castro's zest for "armed struggle." The Cubans did all the work. By 1984, the number of Soviet Bloc military personnel in the Third World (outside Afghanistan) was still far exceeded by the 39,600 troops that Cuba had deployed. Last summer, the Cuban expeditionary force in Angola alone totaled more than 50,000 men.

Yet creating a Third World empire (of sorts) is one thing, managing it, quite another. By the mid-1980s, all of the regimes supported by both Moscow and Havana—in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Grenada—were beset by civil strife and economic crises. And adversity did not always enhance Soviet-Cuban solidarity.

Take little Grenada. The 1983 struggle within its ruling Marxist New Jewel Movement led to the murder of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, U.S. military intervention, and the first direct combat between U.S. and Cuban forces. After 600 of an estimated 800 Cuban soldiers and airfield engineers were quickly captured (24 were killed and 59 wounded), some of the others continued to fire on the invading U.S. troops; by contrast, the 50 Soviets on the island offered no resistance, to



Photographed at a South African army post in Namibia last summer, the jungle-suited Cuban officers at right traveled from Angola to observe the withdrawal of South African troops under an international truce agreement.

the Cubans' distress. Castro was also angry that Moscow hardly protested the U.S. landing.

Castro has also occasionally been at odds with the Soviets over Nicaragua, whose Sandinistas he helped put into power in 1979 with arms shipped via Panama.* For instance, when in 1984 a Soviet tanker was damaged by a U.S. mine in a Nicaraguan port, Castro sought a "*muy macho*" (very strong) Kremlin response, such as the dispatch of a fleet to the Caribbean. But Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko did not wish to give Washington a pretext for armed intervention. Pointedly, Castro did not attend Chernenko's funeral in Moscow in 1985.

Following Mikhail Gorbachev's elevation to general secretary that year, Soviet-Cuban relations entered yet another phase. New differences have developed.

Gorbachev, seeking time to revive the stagnant Soviet economy, has sought to reduce some East-West tensions, in part by settling old

*As journalist Shirley Christian reported, in 1978 Panama's dictator, Omar Torrijos, sent a top aide, Manuel Noriega, to Havana to seek arms for the Nicaraguan rebels. Torrijos later became jealous after Castro's emergence as the Sandinista regime's foreign godfather. But Castro has remained close to Gen. Noriega, who came to power in Panama after Torrijos died in a 1981 plane crash. Panama has helped Cuba deal with the U.S. trade embargo by serving as a transshipment point for imported goods. And Castro has provided Noriega with propaganda support in his struggles with Washington.

regional conflicts swirling around Angola and Kampuchea. But Castro has continued to support liberation movements—lately in Chile and Colombia as well as El Salvador. ("As long as the Salvadoran patriots struggle," he told NBC-TV, "they will receive our sympathy and support.") Thus, even if Castro makes good on his promise of a "gradual and total" troop withdrawal in Angola—as part of a truce worked out this summer by U.S. officials (with Soviet concurrence)—he will try to remain in the armed-struggle business elsewhere. Meanwhile, he diverges in other small ways from the Moscow line (e.g., boycotting the 1988 Olympic Games in South Korea, maintaining close ties with Iran).

Unwelcome Ideas

But will Castro adjust to Soviet shifts in foreign policy?

He has good reason to. A recent Cuban defector, Gen. Rafael del Pino, has spoken of lowered morale among both Cuba's armed forces and its civilians, resulting from the high casualties (including perhaps 10,000 deaths) suffered over 13 years of stalemate in Angola. And Gorbachev's apparent desire to cut back on Third World activities could diminish Castro's value to Moscow. For all of Castro's orthodoxy, his island is no Marxist-Leninist showcase, as Soviet officials are aware: In October 1987, when Castro was in Moscow, the journal *Novoye Vremya* (New Leader) published a pointed critique of Cuba's lack of economic progress despite 20 years of Soviet aid. Castro, for his part, makes no secret of his distaste for Gorbachev's economic reforms. In a speech last July, he vowed to guard his revolution's "ideological purity" against anything "that smells of capitalism." He would not "slavishly" copy "prescriptions for someone else's problems." Havana's situation was unique. "We are not located on the Black Sea. We are on the Caribbean Sea. We are not 90 miles from Odessa. We are 90 miles from [Florida]."

Castro is out of step with Soviet Bloc regimes (even in Vietnam) that are now experimenting with market-oriented reforms. Cuban National Bank statistics suggest that Gorbachev may be pressing Castro to follow suit: Until 1987, Soviet trade with Cuba was rising by about 10 percent annually; that year, imports from the Soviet Union during the first nine months fell for the first time in nearly three decades. Deliveries of Soviet oil were more than halved between 1985 and 1987.

If, as some specialists believe, Moscow has cut its subsidy for Cuban sugar,* Castro's difficulties may grow. In addition to its debt of perhaps $8 billion to the Soviets, Cuba owes about $2.4 billion to Spain, France, Britain, West Germany, and Japan. Counting another $3.1 billion owed to

*The Soviets took over the U.S. role as the main buyer of Cuban sugar. In 1960, before the Eisenhower administration slashed Cuba's quota, U.S. imports from the island were to total some 3.1 million tons at a price of five cents a pound, about two cents above the world rate. The Soviets also pay generously. Indeed, although Moscow has apparently cut the rate from 45 cents a pound to 36 cents, that is still more than three times the prevailing world price—a handsome bonus, especially considering that the Soviet Union produces its own beet sugar.

Western banks and suppliers, the island's external debt is, on a per capita basis, half again as high as Brazil's—about $1,300 for every Cuban.

Especially during the Brezhnev-Andropov-Chernenko years, Castro looked like a vigorous young innovator in comparison to his Soviet patrons. But now Fidel is the aging leader, a kind of Old Guard figure opposing Soviet (or Chinese) innovations. And his fellow Cubans now seem fascinated by changes in the Soviet Union. The Spanish-language Soviet weekly *Novedades de Moscu* (*Moscow News*) sells out rapidly on Havana newsstands. Like their counterparts in East Germany, senior Cuban officials appear slightly worried, perhaps anticipating that the tens of thousands of Cubans studying or working in the Soviet Union will bring home unwelcome ideas—notably *glasnost* ("openness"), an import that Castro seems to suspect would undermine his authority.

Seeking Nehru's Mantle

Nevertheless, Moscow and Havana have been striving of late to present an image of the marriage of an odd couple surviving the ravages of time. In truth, despite the occasional strains, the image is plausible enough. Soviet direct financial and military aid remains at a high level despite some shifts on sugar, and Gorbachev is unlikely to forfeit a Soviet presence on the island, if only because of its strategic location. And Castro, despite his grumping, knows where to draw the line in asserting his independence. He negotiated the future of his troops in Angola—"the Gurkhas of the Soviet empire," Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D.-N.Y.) has called them—without consulting Moscow. But, at home, he stoutly hails the Soviets, arguing that while their presence in Cuba is substantial, they are not "imperialist"; there are no Soviet-owned industries on the island. And he is now following the Kremlin's lead in courting established governments in Latin America's larger democracies (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay) and seeking to settle regional conflicts, even if it means supporting the Arias peace plan in Central America.

Speaking at Havana's Karl Marx Theater on the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Raúl Castro insisted that there is not "the slightest breach in the community of principles between Cuba and the USSR.... There are no cracks or splits and there never will be."

There is a certain advantage for the West in the Moscow-Havana partnership: It is so costly to Moscow financially that the Soviets cannot afford "another Cuba." That much was signaled in 1983, when Yuri Andropov declared in a Moscow speech that nations espousing socialism can expect Soviet aid "to the extent of our ability," but their progress "can be, of course, only the result of their leadership."

Of course, Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union exists in the larger context of the two nations' relationships with the Third World. Those relationships—and the Third World itself—have been changing.

When Khrushchev became interested in the Third World during the

1950s, its acknowledged leader was India's Jawaharlal Nehru. His successors also came from large nations—Indonesia's Sukarno, host of the 29-nation Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955, and Egypt's Nasser. Castro, although his island was small, and tucked away in the Western Hemisphere, also sought the mantle. It was the troops he sent to Africa during the 1970s that finally won it for him. At the Sixth Conference of Nonaligned Nations, in Havana in 1979, delegates from 92 countries elected him chairman of the Nonaligned Movement for 1979–82.

Castro sharpened the movement's leftward turn. If Western "imperialism" was the enemy of the nonaligned, he maintained, Moscow was their "natural ally."

But today, a decade later, Castro's highly personal autocracy and Cuba's petrified economy are not widely regarded as models—particularly not in Latin America. During the early 1970s, there was worry in Washington that, somehow, the region, as President Richard Nixon put it, had become enveloped by "a red sandwich"—the halves being Castro's Cuba and Salvador Allende's Chile. Yet the reign of Chile's Marxist president was brief (1970–73). And so far, the only Latins who have tried to imitate Castro's 30-year-old revolution are the Sandinistas in troubled Nicaragua.

The Third World, in all its variety, has not turned out to be very fertile ground for the Soviets, either. Today, Gorbachev may simply be cutting his country's losses (Afghanistan, Angola) rather than beginning a general retreat. And his mild words on socialism's inevitability—"...we do not impose our convictions.... Let everyone choose for himself"—may be disingenuous. But the men in Moscow have come a long way from the days when Nikita Khrushchev—like Castro—was envisioning "centers of revolutionary struggle" all over the globe.