

Mexican officials to remind their U.S. neighbours that the Cuban card can always be played in a variety of ways.

Nothing sums up better the ambiguity of Mexico's official stand on the Cuban revolution as much as the official reaction to the U.S.-sponsored abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. Mexico, fearful of the precedent that might be set in Latin America by a U.S. invasion of a nation Washington deemed undemocratic (and mindful too of its own barely democratic system, as well as the loss of approximately one-half of its territory to the United States the previous century), denounced the U.S. invasion. At the same time Mexico was increasingly preoccupied by the radical reforms being enacted in Cuba. The attitude of Manuel Tello, Mexico's Foreign Minister at the time, illustrates this ambivalence starkly. He has recounted that he was convinced that the U.S. invasion would succeed. Accordingly he had prepared a statement condemning the intervention by Washington—"Then I was going to church to offer up a prayer of thanksgiving to the United States for delivering us from the dangers of Castro".⁵

In sum, there were (and are) greater divisions between Mexico and Cuba than is generally thought, largely because of the complicated intricacies of Mexican politics—and in particular its relationship with the United States. That said, there has always been a tacit agreement between Cuba and Mexico to maintain cordial relations, in essence because in the last analysis it behooved both parties to maintain the status quo. The PRI, which ruled Mexico for some seven decades, was determined to hold on to power at all costs, and if that meant making a deal with Cuba—in many ways the embodiment of its own revolutionary aspirations of "land and freedom" of the 1910-20 period—by developing a solid diplomatic friendship, then so be it. Cuba for its part agreed not to support guerrilla factions in Mexico—and went out of its way to emphasize that point to Mexico. In sum, both countries have traditionally respected a policy of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of the other.

It was also a useful pact for Cuba, since it allowed Havana access to North American goods by way of Mexico. And it was important in terms of international prestige to have a good working relationship with one of the major trading partners of its longstanding foe, the United States—a comment which was equally applicable to the Canadian situation. Caught up (still) in revolutionary rhetoric, and mindful of the basic tenet of non-intervention in domestic politics, Mexico maintained a studied, formal relationship of distant respect, and correct relations. The marriage of convenience worked well—until the implosion of the Soviet Union, after which nothing in Cuba was ever the same.

Prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the demise of the Soviet Union two years later, Cuba offered Moscow an extraordinarily valuable piece of real estate, located just 90 miles from its traditional Cold War enemy. After 1991 its strategic importance was non-existent, and Cuba sank into a horrible economic (and psychological) depression. Almost overnight Cuba lost 85% of its trade, and GDP slumped by an estimated 35%. The "Special Period" started, leaving Cuba in survival mode. It was a time for audacious actions, since only by acting boldly, and in truly innovative fashion—even when this led to gross contradictions and severe social