problems–could the substantial gains of the revolution be protected.

Cuba found itself in the early 1990s with an overwhelming commercial dependence upon the countries of the socialist bloc and the COMECON organization. Unfortunately for Havana, these countries now insisted on an end to special socialist arrangements and wanted payment for their goods in dollars. Ties of socialist solidarity thus soon evaporated. Cuba now had to develop its own economy (after being kept dependent by design upon COMECON for three decades), discover new trading partners, and new investors. In all three areas Mexico soon took on a leading role, and rapidly became one of the principal sources of investment, as well as the leading trade partner in the Americas.

The arrival to the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988 marked a watershed in the relationship, and caused a major challenge for the Cuban government. It appears clear to many observers that the winner of the presidential election in that year was the PRD led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, whose father had done so much to strengthen bilateral relations with Cuba during his presidency (1934-40), and who in later life expressed strong support for the Castro government. The dilemma for the Castro government in 1988 was whether to attend the presidential inauguration, thereby validating government corruption, and in fact a travesty of democracy–or whether to respect the ties of friendship and ideology with the Cárdenas family, and decline the invitation. After much debate in Havana, the Cuban president did attend, and in so doing voted for pragmatism over principle (ultimately to seek a resolution to Cuba´s dire economic straits). In so doing, Havana subordinated making a (justifiable) moral political statement to the needs of economic survival.

The Salinas presidency was to prove a six-year period that was useful for both Mexico and Cuba. Salinas was well aware that the "Cuba card" would, as always, be a useful bargaining in dealing with the United States, while the Cuban government was delighted to have Mexico contribute to its re-insertion into the Western hemisphere. Its substantial foreign investment and generous trade credits were also much appreciated by revolutionary Cuba. Both governments worked hard to improve commercial ties and Mexican investment in Cuba. For Mexicans this was largely a case of strategic investment, taking advantage of the absence of U.S. investments on the island, and dreaming of the future when they would have a privileged position precisely because they had staked out territory first.

The early 1990s saw a flood of Mexican capital come to the island. Bilateral trade rose to $US 400 million (largely in Mexico´s favour), as Mexico quickly became the major trading partner of Cuba in Latin America. A number of high profile investments were also made by Mexican companies. Pemex started oil exploration ventures and also considered modernizing the Cienfuegos oil refinery; Cemex took over the cement factory in the port of Mariel; and, most important of all, the Grupo Domos came to Cuba determined to modernize the pre-revolutionary telephone system. Until the Helms-Burton legislation was passed, it appeared to be a wise, and profitable, long-term business trend.