

Sources of Argentine Policy towards Cuba¹

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Argentine policy towards Cuba attracts considerably more attention than economic interests or strategic considerations would suggest. It is the symbolic value of the lone communist state in the Western hemisphere that has frequently generated controversy in redemocratized Argentina. For some Argentines, Cuba represents a litmus test of their government's commitment to human rights and democracy in foreign policy, while for many others it is a measure of the degree of independence from the United States. This dynamic is not unique to Argentina, but the shifts in governmental policy have been particularly dramatic in comparison to other Latin American countries.

In explaining these shifts, I identify a variety of interests and ideas that have shaped the foreign policy calculus of successive Argentine presidential administrations. My goal is to disentangle the strands of causality, specifying when the variables become important and how they interact to produce outcomes. The common thread, I argue, relates to the central role of the United States. Given the incentives to cooperate with Washington, for which Cuba is a highly sensitive issue, and the historically strong desire for independence, for which Cuba embodies a model of resistance, Argentine presidents have faced a basic trade-off in designing policy towards the island: between domestic rewards at international costs and international rewards at domestic cost. Their choices have depended on the relative weight they assign to each as well as their views concerning such basic principles as autonomy, non-intervention, democracy, and human rights.

This case study draws upon theories of foreign policy as a two-level game in which internal and external pressures combine to produce a given policy (Putnam, 1988; Evans, Jacobson, & Putnam, 1993). According to this model, leaders must balance their perceived national interest with domestic political constraints. The linkage between domestic and international politics is inherently complex, however.

¹ I would like to thank Peter Siavelis, Jorge Domínguez, Francisco Corigliano, and Roberto Russell for their suggestions and encouragement. I am also grateful to Tom Phillips and the Richter Scholarship Program at Wake Forest University, which funded my research in Argentina. Prepared to be delivered at the 2006 Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, San Juan, Puerto Rico, March 15 – 18, 2006

The United States is not the only external actor of interest to Argentina; Cuba itself represented an important actor until the end of the Cold War, and other regional powers have at times influenced Argentine policy towards Cuba. Similarly, as shown by Hagan's (1993) examination of patterns of opposition, decision-makers cope with not one, but two, internal political games: building policy coalitions and retaining political power. Though Argentine presidents enjoy minimal constraints on their foreign policymaking authority, they usually seek to build a coalition of supporters in the political arena. They are also sensitive to the long-term domestic consequences of their foreign policy decisions, working to maintain and enhance the political support required for staying in office. Recognition of these dual imperatives provides insights about the constraints of both divisions within the leadership and those of the wider political environment.

Though the "second generation" of foreign policy analysis has recognized the importance of domestic politics (Neack, Hey, & Haney, 1995), Cuba specialists have generally stressed external sources of policy towards the island, except in the oft-cited case of the influential Cuban-American exile community in the United States (e.g., LeoGrande, 1998). Less is understood about the effects of domestic political phenomena on the policies of Latin American countries, a gap this study seeks to redress.² In addition, I hope to contribute to a growing literature on state foreign policy and human rights in comparative perspective (e.g., Forsythe, 2000). This literature has focused on hegemonic powers and certain middle powers that protect global human rights, while neglecting the foreign policies of peripheral states that were once the subject of international criticism for their human rights records.

This paper begins with discussion of Argentine views of Cuba and the United States, which create the conditions for foreign policy behavior. The subsequent sections analyze the determinants of policy towards Cuba in each presidential administration since the return to democracy in 1983. I adopt this structure because Argentina's presidential system concentrates foreign policymaking power in the executive. The influence of Congress and non-state actors is limited, permitting radical changes in foreign policy quite easily (Norden & Russell, 2002). In fact, policy towards Cuba has been a policy of particular presidential administrations, not a policy of the state.

² An exception is Covarrubias (1997), who highlighted domestic interests in the maintenance of a Mexican policy based on nonintervention and self-determination during the 1960s.

Conditions

A broad scholarly consensus exists regarding the United States as a major conditioning factor in Latin American foreign relations (Muñoz, 1996; Smith, 2000). Since the nineteenth century, Argentina has typically rejected U.S. ambitions in the region, defining its foreign policy in terms of autonomy (Tulchin, 1990). The level of anti-U.S. sentiment has varied, but clearly persists today. In a 2005 study by Latinobarómetro, Argentina registered the worst opinion of the United States in the region ("Democracy's ten-year rut," 2005). In this context, the Cuban revolution continues to be an attractive symbol of national liberation and resistance, exerting a "seductive power" for many sympathetic to those ideals (Domínguez, 2003, p. 547). Despite the regional spread of democratic norms, the allure of the Cuban model seems particularly potent in Argentina. According to the findings of a 2001 poll, conducted in seven Latin American countries, only in Argentina did a majority express a positive view of Fidel Castro (Martin, 2001).

Argentine society is hardly monochrome, however. Another study found that nearly 40 percent of the adult population sees Cuba in an unfavorable light, with negative opinions decreasing with lower socioeconomic status (Mora y Araujo, Di Rado, & Montoya, 1992). Policy towards Cuba, whether cordial or condemnatory, stimulates a range of support and opposition. For example, the two principal political parties, the Peronists and the Radicals, are internally divided on the issue; tellingly, presidents from the same party have implemented radically different policies. Yet the domestic incentive for Argentine policymakers is to maintain at least rhetorical sympathy towards Cuba because, by playing on nationalist sensibilities, the revolution appeals to a broader sector than just the political left. This has not prevented Argentine criticism of Cuba's internal practices but has made it more difficult because criticism is equated by many as subordination to U.S. imperialism.

At the same time, few public figures link Cuba with concern for human rights. Argentina's most well-known human rights group, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, openly praises the Cuban government (Guzmán Bouvard, 1994).³ Human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Adolfo Pérez Esquivel has published articles defending the Cuban regime. Another activist, and the current Secretary for Human Rights in the Argentine government, Eduardo Luis Duhalde, has publicly declared that there are no systematic violations of human rights in Cuba ("Nombran a Duhalde,"

³ The irony is that Cuba supported the Argentine military junta in its efforts to prevent United Nations investigations of human rights abuses and in the Falklands/Malvinas war (Sebreli, 2002).

2003). Celebrities such as soccer star Maradona, a friend of Castro, have also embraced the regime.

Jacobo Timerman, a journalist and victim of repression during the Argentine military's "Dirty War," became an exception to this trend when he extended his analysis of Cuba to the human rights situation: "If I had to sum up my long relationship with the Cuban revolution, I'd say that I have always supported its right to defend itself from United States aggression—diplomatic, political, and economic—while I have at the same time criticized the violation of human rights and of freedom of expression that has characterized the Castro regime," he wrote in the opening paragraph of his book on Cuba (1990). Those public figures who do condemn the Cuban human rights record often link it to Argentina's own history. For example, former deputy foreign minister Andrés Cisneros (2004) argued in an editorial about Cuba that Argentina, as a country that has suffered in the past from human rights violations, should adopt a foreign policy that promotes human rights abroad.

Such debates demonstrate the high domestic salience of policy towards Cuba. The contours of Argentine discourses about the Cuban regime, formed in a society characterized by the "intermingling between the political and intellectual domains" (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999), structure the environment in which decision-makers operate. If Donnelly (2000) is correct in asserting that the significance of human rights in foreign policy is primarily based on national identity, Argentine political culture, though a broad category, is an important explanatory factor that sets parameters and influences belief systems. Yet it is clearly insufficient in accounting for divergences in policy, a task that requires analysis of the complex interplay of interests and ideas that have determined the policy choices of each presidential administration.

Alfonsín

Raúl Alfonsín, Argentina's president from 1983 to 1989, won a surprise electoral victory for the Radical party on a banner of punishing domestic human rights violations and consolidating democracy after the collapse of the military regime. A central challenge for the new democratic government was to define a role for Argentina in the international system: Alfonsín declared a firm foreign policy stand in favor of democracy, pluralism, and human rights while emphasizing the nation's autonomy and non-alignment (Tulchin, 1990). Committed to facilitating cooperation among Latin American countries, he prioritized efforts to resolve the Central American conflicts and

to encourage democratization in Chile and Brazil (Alconada Sempé, Interview, July 12, 2004).

These regional goals, as well as the administration's endorsement of the principle of non-intervention, shaped policy towards Cuba. Alfonsín sought cooperation from Castro and refrained from publicly calling for democratization or respect for human rights on the island. According to Raúl Alconada Sempé, former deputy foreign minister, the Argentine government deliberately sought a rapprochement with Cuba, a decision that seems inconsistent with its promotion of democracy in other countries. For Alfonsín, however, pragmatic considerations subordinated Cuba's internal affairs to its international activities, for Cuban support of guerrilla activities in Central America and the Southern Cone endangered Argentina's strategy of improving the regional environment for its own redemocratization effort (Fournier, 1999).⁴ In particular, Radical policymakers viewed the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, the armed wing of the Chilean Communist Party, as a threat not only to their efforts to encourage a political opening in Chile, but also to Argentina's own nascent democratic institutions (Alconada Sempé, Interview, July 12, 2004).

These concerns prompted frequent contact with the Cuban government. As part of his mediation in the Chilean transition, Alfonsín aimed to secure Castro's cooperation to deactivate Chile's resurging guerilla movement (Russell, 1994). Only a few hours after Alfonsín's inauguration, foreign minister Dante Caputo told Cuban vice president Carlos Rafael Rodríguez that Argentina would respect the Cuban regime in exchange for its removal of support for South American guerrillas. In 1986, Alfonsín visited Havana to ask Castro to stop financing guerrilla activities in Chile, making clear that Argentina supported Cuban integration into the hemispheric system and opposed the U.S. embargo. Castro responded that his influence was limited, but that he would be on Alfonsín's side (Morales Solá, 1990). According to Alconada Sempé, meetings with Cuban diplomats about the Chilean situation continued for some time, fostering a close relationship between the two governments (Interview, July 12, 2004).

Though Tulchin (1990) and Escudé (1997) have criticized the visit to Cuba as a counterproductive example of an Argentine legacy of capricious behavior, Alfonsín appeared to not only be pursuing his agenda of an end to armed insurgency, but also augmenting his international contacts. Through most of the 1980s, before the disintegration of Soviet communism, Cuba enjoyed a prominent international profile as

⁴ Fournier (1999) argues that the Alfonsín government pursued a policy of democracy promotion partly out of fear for its own perpetuation. Argentina launched its democratic transition when most neighboring countries were still ruled by military regimes.

an influential player in the Third World (Nazario, 1996; del Aguila, 1996). Of course, friendly relations with Cuba carried a cost in the context of the Cold War. However, the Alfonsín government valued autonomy more than the benefits that could be attained from a more conciliatory approach to the United States (Norden & Russell, 2002). The Argentines suffered criticism in the U.S. press and from State Department officials for the trip to Havana, but they achieved their goal of obtaining Castro's cooperation. From one point of view, the visit could be seen as part of an Argentine tradition of defiance of the United States (Tulchin, 1996), and it certainly helped Alfonsín cultivate an independent image. Yet his chief purpose was to protect Argentine interests, perceived to be threatened by Cuban-financed activities.

Such a blend of pragmatism and principled adherence to autonomy and non-intervention also determined Argentine policy towards Cuba at the multilateral level. In 1987, the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva discussed the Cuban situation for the first time. The United States introduced a resolution directly condemning the Castro regime, without calling first for an investigation of its human rights record. For Argentina and other Latin American countries that claimed an equidistant position between Washington and Havana, the resolution placed them in a difficult position (Cisneros & Escudé, 2000). Ultimately, a motion presented by India and supported by Argentina blocked the U.S. resolution on a question of procedure: a condemnation of Cuba should take place only after an investigation proving the accuracy of allegations of human rights abuses.

According to Caputo, the Argentine government opposed the U.S. initiative primarily because it did not want "to be included in the East-West conflict" ("Justificó el gobierno," 1987). Alconada Sempé charged that the U.S. was using the issue of human rights for political ends and contributing to the politicization of the UN by focusing exclusively on a long-time rival (Interview, July 12, 2004). Though the administration did not doubt that human rights violations were taking place in Cuba, it believed that they were not the topic being discussed in Geneva. For Caputo, Argentina was maintaining "a coherent position with respect to human rights" ("Justificó el gobierno," 1987). This claim testifies to the influence of an idea that would propel Alfonsín to become a prominent voice during future presidential administrations in favor of Argentine abstention in the annual UN vote. Again, ideas coincided with interests; part of the rationale for voting against the U.S. resolution in 1987 was likely a diplomatic quid pro quo for Cuban assistance in Chile and Central America (Fournier, 1999).

The government's decision, however, provoked foreign criticism. The impact on U.S.-Argentine relations is a subject of scholarly debate, though numerous examples of U.S. disapproval appeared in the local press.⁵ The U.S. ambassador to Buenos Aires, Theodore Gilfred, stated that the Argentine vote "hurt us," while Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams warned that the failure to follow the U.S. would have effects on the bilateral relationship ("Abrams dijo," 1987). The controversy repeated itself the following two years, when the Alfonsín administration again opted to oppose the U.S. resolution on Cuba, despite intensified pressure from the State Department (Bone & Onello, 1989).

The nature of the political relationship between Argentina and Cuba during the Alfonsín years favored the improvement of economic relations. In 1984 Argentina provided Cuba an annual credit of \$200 million for three years, and in 1986 Cuba awarded a contract for \$120 million dollars to Argentine firms to build hotels on Varadero Beach. Shortly after Alfonsín's visit, the two countries signed an agreement to cooperate on the development of nuclear energy (Domínguez, 1989). The first commercial flight between Buenos Aires and Havana in 1984 and the reestablishment of regular maritime traffic, interrupted since 1979, were other significant steps (Cisneros & Escudé, 2000). However, Cuba's sizable debt to Argentina, which was established in 1973 and today makes the country Cuba's second largest creditor, has slowed the growth of commercial relations due to Cuba's inability to repay (Winkler, Interview, June 30, 2004).

In sum, Alfonsín's policy reflected a mix of internal and external concerns that developed into a certain *modus vivendi* with Cuba. So long as the Argentine government did not threaten or criticize Cuba, Castro was willing to cooperate on issues important to Alfonsín, preferring relations with the government over support for revolutionary movements. The Alfonsín administration chose to engage Cuba to secure its cooperation on international affairs, while refusing to demand changes in its domestic politics. This position cohered with his desire to maximize Argentina's autonomy and to maintain contacts with as many states as possible, with the additional benefit of appealing to most sectors of Argentine public opinion; especially in the context of the Cold War, Cuba was a symbol for Argentina and other Latin

⁵ According to Cisneros and Escudé (2000), there was no doubt about the negative impact of the administration's position; they place its opposition to the U.S. initiative on the list of acts of political confrontation that did not grant any concrete benefit for Argentine interests. Russell (1989) has pointed out, however, that White House anger about the Argentine vote did not affect its support for the Argentine government in debt negotiations or in the military uprising of Easter 1987.

American states of their independence vis-à-vis the United States.⁶ The Alfonsín case, then, represents a partial exception to the basic trade-off presented earlier. In a different international setting that that faced by future presidents, Alfonsín was able to gain both some international and domestic rewards with his policy towards Cuba.

Menem

Carlos Menem took office in 1989 in the midst of sweeping changes in the global order. The end of the Cold War, which discredited Marxist ideology and renewed U.S. hegemony in the region, had far-reaching implications for both Argentina and Cuba. Menem chose to abandon Argentina's highly valued autonomy and align the country closely with the United States, leading his foreign minister to famously proclaim "carnal relations" with the world's remaining superpower. This dramatic policy shift emanated, according to Norden and Russell (2002), from "the country's overwhelming need to address its profound economic crisis, and the government's pragmatic assessment of the strategic options available to do so" (p. 2). In an international setting defined by the principles of political democracy and economic liberalism, with the U.S. dominating international institutions, the Menem administration emphasized the elimination of every possible area of conflict and the embrace of the major post-Cold War postures of the United States.

For Cuba, the consequences of the changed configuration of global power likewise dictated a radical transformation of foreign policy. The implosion of the Soviet Union devastated the Cuban economy, bringing its international activism and support of guerrilla groups to an end. The regime also suffered the loss of its international stature and the stigmatization of its political image. With the security threat eliminated, Latin American governments ceased demands for changes in Cuba's international activities and instead began to call for internal reforms (Nazario, 1996; del Aguila, 1996). This shift was a result of not only the end to Cold War hostilities, but also the emergence of democratic governance following the collapse of military dictatorships in several countries in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷ Furthermore, it was

⁶ Alfonsín's policy fit the regional pattern; for example, of the eight Latin American members of the UN Human Rights Commission in 1987, only Costa Rica voted with the United States to condemn human rights violations in Cuba.

⁷ As del Aguila (1996) put it, "If in the past Cuba appealed to Latin America's sense of solidarity, to historical bonds of culture and friendship, or even to the need for unity in the face of hegemonic intrusions by stronger powers, such appeals no longer carry much weight. Latin America's discourse is about democracy, rights, constitutional government, orderly electoral

abetted by the growth of an international discourse on human rights and the concurrent modification of the concept of state sovereignty to make a country's domestic human rights practices a legitimate topic of foreign policy (Sikkink, 1993).

In this context, Menem established a clear break with past policy towards Cuba, becoming the region's most vociferous critic of the Cuban human rights record and failure to enact democratic reform. External incentives proved decisive; given the importance of Cuba to the United States, anti-Castro rhetoric was a clear way to display allegiance. The first signal of change occurred during the visit of U.S. vice president Dan Quayle to Argentina in 1990 (Cisneros & Escudé, 2000). Quayle conveyed the White House wish that Menem and other democratic presidents speak with the Cuban government about a democratic opening. Menem's response—that he was personally interested in dialogue with Castro—was awarded with a letter from George Bush thanking him for the gesture of support. In 1991, Menem met several Cuban exile leaders in both Buenos Aires and New York, thus disregarding the practice of non-intervention ("Reunión con anticastristas," 1991). He promised that he would call for the immediate democratization of Cuba at the next meetings of the Rio Group ("Volando en nube propia," 1991).

Menem would continue to base policy towards Cuba on verbal criticism and symbolic action. During his ten years in power, Argentina voted in favor of the annual UN resolution calling for the visit of a UN representative to Cuba, breaking ranks with most other Latin American countries. At the regional level, Menem exerted diplomatic pressure to include Cuba in the pro-democracy declarations of the Rio Group and Ibero-American Summits, where his confrontations with Castro became legendary. Sometimes his rhetoric took on a particularly combative tone. He declared on government radio, for example, that Castro had become "one of the biggest privatizers in the world; he privatized the state for him; Cuba is his property and this cannot continue" ("Según el Presidente," 1993). In a meeting with the U.S. ambassador to Buenos Aires, James Cheek, Menem expressed his repugnance at having to participate in regional gatherings with Castro. Cheek congratulated him on his constant verbal hostility ("Cheek elogió a Menem," 1993). In 1997, U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright personally thanked foreign minister Guido Di Tella for Argentine efforts to democratize Cuba ("Albright le agradeció"). Instead of the criticism that the Alfonsín

change, accountability, and other values antithetical to Cuba's monolithic communism" (p. 95-96).

administration received, the U.S. showered praise on Menem for his cooperation on the Cuba issue.

In the Peronist administration's second term, what appeared as a shift—or at least a relaxation—of the hard-line approach towards Cuba actually proved the salience of U.S. pressure. In 1997, Menem sought to mediate between Clinton and Castro, though the State Department declined his offer (O'Donnell, 1997). After the Pope's visit to Cuba in 1998, Menem ordered a resumption of the debt negotiations, which had been paralyzed for several years for political reasons, and the visit of several foreign ministry officials to Havana. He even confessed to a *Miami Herald* reporter that he would consider an invitation to visit Cuba himself if it arrived, fueling speculation in the Argentine press about an end to the policy of isolating the Cuban government ("Cuba, entre los objetivos"). The United States reacted sharply to these conciliatory gestures, with the topic of Cuba dominating meetings between Clinton and Menem and between Albright and Di Tella at the 1998 Summit of the Americas in Santiago.⁸ After Clinton asked the Argentine leader to clarify his position on Cuba, Menem announced that the U.S. and Argentine policies were in "full agreement" and denied ever having considered a visit to Cuba (O'Donnell, 1998b). He also ceased any mention of a desire to mediate between the two governments, and Di Tella warned the Argentine ambassador in Havana to refrain from encouraging a rapprochement (Bellando, 1998). Furthermore, Menem refused to go to the 1999 Ibero-American Summit, held in Havana, though he had previously declared his intention to attend ("Señales negativas," 1999).

These examples show that Menem's formulation of policy towards Cuba was based on his assessment of national interests. His decision to become an outspoken critic of the Cuban regime was a deliberate choice but one that reacted to the transformation in the international setting. Given the redefinition of U.S.-Argentine relations in favor of alignment, a hard-line policy directed at Cuba's internal politics fit the administration's foreign policy objectives and orientation. Therefore, exogenous factors—and Menem's subjective interpretation of the new incentives presented—best account for the dramatic change in policy towards Cuba.

This is not to say that conviction played no role, but pragmatism clearly outweighed other motivations. Concern for human rights and democracy happened to coordinate rather than compete with chief foreign policy interests in the Cuban case.

⁸ One anonymous official told the newspaper *La Nación*: "Before Menem had prominence for his clash with Castro. Now he wants prominence in the solution to the Cuban problem. The problem is that the change brought him problems with the United States" (O'Donnell, 1998a).

Andrés Cisneros, deputy foreign minister under Menem, explained the UN vote on Cuba as a strategy to accompany the United States on every topic where there was no direct Argentine interest. Because the government also believed that there were human rights violations, based on evidence from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, it was “a free vote” (Interview, July 12, 2004). Ironically though, Menem pursued a regressive domestic policy in human rights, granting a comprehensive amnesty to military officers responsible for repression under the military junta. Concerning democratic principles, he frustrated the deepening of Argentine democracy through his extensive use of decree laws and efforts to change the constitution to allow his reelection.

Menem’s pressure on Cuba carried a cost domestically, generating criticism that the policy confirmed his unconditional alignment with the United States. After his meeting with Jorge Mas Canosa, then head of the Cuban American National Foundation, legislators and civil society groups mobilized in protest with a “Festival of Solidarity” with the Cuban people (“Cuba,” 1991). Menem’s departure from orthodox Peronist principles of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and social justice also produced division within his own party, with Cuba again serving as a symbol of the government’s degree of independence.⁹ Perhaps the most telling instance of this criticism came from Menem’s brother, Peronist senator Eduardo Menem, who visited Castro several times and publicly lambasted the president for voting in the UN to condemn Cuban human rights violations (O’Donnell, 1998c). In a direct contradiction of his brother’s statements, Senator Menem once declared that “Castro is a very venerated man by his people, very loved, and I do not have sufficient information to say that he is a dictator” (“Elogios,” 1997).¹⁰ Though Marxist ideology lost much of its panache following the end of the Cold War, sympathy with Cuba and suspicion of the United States clearly persisted. As Cisneros acknowledged, internal incentives conflicted with international incentives, but Menem’s foreign policy behavior was driven by the latter (Interview, July 12, 2004).

Despite the open confrontation between Cuba and Argentina, however, some collaboration continued. Menem supported Cuba’s incorporation in the Latin American

⁹ During his campaign for president in 1989, however, Menem declared that with the revolution Cuba gained its liberty and independence. “Nobody can deny that Cuba became one of the most important states of Latin America,” he said, without any reference to the island’s human rights record or regime type (“Ponderó Menem,” 1989). Throughout the campaign, Menem projected a traditional Peronist image, promising redistributive policies and other populist themes—only to reverse course once in office (Horowitz, 1999).

¹⁰ The inconsistency between the two brothers’ remarks on Cuba even caused some U.S. State Department officials to question the president’s commitment to pressuring Castro (Monti, 1997).

Integration Association, and Argentine commercial missions to Cuba increased considerably (Califano, 1999). Scientific and technical cooperation also grew (Leitmin, Interview, June 30, 2004). Curiously, Menem and Castro maintained a friendly personal relationship, exchanging gifts of wine and cigars on occasion.

Most importantly, Menem supported Cuba in its campaign against the U.S. embargo. From 1995 to 1999, his administration voted for the annual UN General Assembly resolution against the sanctions, and Menem was a signatory of Rio Group and Ibero-American Summit agreements that condemned the tightening of the U.S. embargo with the Helms-Burton law. This position may have been partly due to the success of Cuban foreign policy, which aimed to isolate the United States and replace its intransigent image with one of victimization (Nazario, 1996). It also reflected the widely disliked extraterritorial provisions of the Cuban Democracy Act and Helms-Burton, which generated tremendous opposition from the international community. In this respect, then, Menem aligned himself with other Latin American countries and against the United States, retaining at least one element of continuity from the Alfonsín administration.

Nevertheless, Menem effected a radical change in Argentine policy towards Cuba. Reversing the principle of non-intervention, he became an outspoken critic of Cuban internal affairs. Such a shift in emphasis from security concerns was made possible by the transformations in the international order; concrete national interests no longer dictated cooperation with the Cuban government because it lacked the resources to sustain an activist foreign policy. Still, other post-Cold War Latin American governments maintained traditional approaches to Cuba, or at least were much less assertive about advancing democracy and human rights in Cuba. Menem's policy was the result of deliberate design geared towards the United States, for he believed that national interests required accommodation with most U.S. positions. In his condemnation of the Castro regime, Menem stood out not only in the history of Argentine-Cuban relations, but also in the history of Cuban-Latin American relations, leading one scholar to argue that his meetings with Cuban exiles and other "exaggerated gestures" constituted a capricious desire to seek a high international profile (Tulchin, 1996).

De la Rúa

In 1999, Fernando de la Rúa won the presidential election for the Alliance, an electoral front of Radicalism and a center-left group known as Frepaso. His victory

produced widespread expectation of a change in policy towards Cuba and a return to Alfonsín's refusal to condemn the human rights situation. However, on the 2000 resolution in the UN Human Rights Commission, De la Rúa maintained Menem's condemnatory vote after coordinating policy with Chilean president Ricardo Lagos.¹¹

This decision provoked severe dissension within the Alliance and De la Rúa's cabinet, exposing significant splits with regard to Cuba. Alfonsín, still the main leader of the Radical party and an important actor in debate about Cuba, was the principal exponent of abstention—a position shared by several ministers in the government, including the minister of the interior, Federico Storani, who publicly criticized the president's vote. Dozens of congressmen also wrote letters of apology to Castro lamenting De la Rúa's failure to alter Menem's vote (Centeno, 2000). It was continuity in the face of expectations for change that prompted this disaffection from public officials either sympathetic to the Cuban regime or committed to autonomy from the United States.

De la Rúa's resolve to ignore internal demands stemmed from a combination of external interests and principled defense of human rights. Unlike many members of the Alliance, the president and foreign minister Rodríguez Giavarini viewed the domestic actions of the Cuban regime as a legitimate subject of foreign policy. According to Giavarini, human rights are "a central topic for a country like ours that has suffered human rights violations" (Interview, July 22, 2004). Crucially, De la Rúa also opted to maintain the place that the United States occupied in the external priorities of the Menem government. Within this framework, the importance of the bilateral relationship with the U.S. overshadowed the domestic risks of sustaining the Menem vote; indeed, the former ambassador to Cuba under De la Rúa speculated that at heart the president feared bothering Washington (Torres Ávalos, Interview, July 1, 2004). Willing to pay the cost of internal division, De la Rúa preserved the substance of Menem's critical policy towards Cuba, but carried it out in a more discreet style. In his short term in office, he rarely mentioned Cuba and never reached the aggressive tone of Menem, as "audacious gestures were not characteristic" of this president (Norden & Russell, 2002, p. 123).

The De la Rúa administration faced not only domestic protest for its policy towards Cuba, but also a vitriolic reaction from Castro. Following the April 2000 vote

¹¹ Argentina and Chile agreed to coordinate their votes in international fora. Giavarini also discussed Cuba with Argentina's principal Mercosur partner, Brazil, but failed to reach an agreement (Interview, July 22, 2004). Brazil retained its tradition of abstaining on the Cuba vote.

in the UN, Cuba recalled its ambassador from Buenos Aires for eight months (Carbone, 2000). In February 2001, Castro provoked a major diplomatic incident when he proclaimed that another Argentine vote against Cuba would be “to lick the yankee boot.” The Argentine government immediately ordered its ambassador to return to Buenos Aires and canceled a commercial mission to Havana that left the debt negotiations paralyzed (“Revisarán las relaciones,” 2001). Giavarini’s verbal response was also swift, stating that Castro’s comments were “unjust, incorrect, and contemptuous” (“Fuerte réplica,” 2001). The conflict escalated even further with the publication of Castro’s speech in the government newspaper *Granma*, which revealed the extent of his attack on Argentina; he declared that the obelisk of Buenos Aires should be converted into a monument to the United States because “everything is sold, even the land” (“Una aclaración,” 2001). The Cuban ambassador to Argentina then aggravated the situation by denying that Castro had anything to justify (“Se agravó,” 2001).¹²

The diplomatic crisis, coupled with continued internal demands for abstention in the approaching UN vote, threatened the image of a government already crippled by declining political support and a deepening recession. Though they denounced Castro’s attack, Alfonsín and Carlos Alvarez, head of Frepaso, clamored for a change in the vote in Geneva in order to avoid, in Alvarez’s words, an obsequious demonstration of “automatic alignment” with the United States (“Reaccionaremos racionalmente,” 2001). The two party leaders made a written pronouncement that called for a debate on the issue, arguing that Cuba’s lack of political freedoms is not what is analyzed in Geneva (Mochkofsky, 2001). Though De la Rúa had left Giavarini the job of handling the conflict and kept himself at the margins, he declared that “the president of the Republic will make the final decision” (“De la Rúa,” 2001). The Foreign Ministry emphasized that the vote was not yet fixed, but the Alfonsín-Alvarez alliance clearly represented an irritating encroachment on the president’s foreign policymaking powers.

The De la Rúa administration chose to censure the Cuban regime in April. Multiple factors entered into the president’s policy calculus, though an effort to avoid a show of weakness probably took precedence: both Castro’s virulence and internal pressure obviated the possibility of ceding on the vote. The willingness of De la Rúa and Giavarini to remain isolated within their government and within the region also

¹² Castro’s motivation for such scathing criticism of Argentina is puzzling but fits a recent pattern of attacks on foreign leaders. As Domínguez (2003) observed, Cuba is willing to sacrifice political and economic relations to impede international pressure in favor of democratization.

indicated a greater personal commitment to the defense of human rights than Menem demonstrated. De la Rúa explained the vote as a response to the lack of change in Cuba and as a defense of human rights (Centeno, 2001). According to Giavarini, the annual report of the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights determined the decision to vote “with much love for Cuba,” denying the influence of either the confrontation with Castro or of De la Rúa’s visit to the United States the same month (“A la Argentina,” 2001). Nevertheless, the need for U.S. support to deal with Argentina’s economic woes could not have failed to affect the decision.

Duhalde

Following De la Rúa’s resignation and the overthrow of two successors amid political turmoil and economic meltdown, Eduardo Duhalde assumed the presidency in January 2002 to serve the remaining two years of De la Rúa’s term. A Peronist from the populist tradition, Duhalde faced the challenge of halting the economic decline and overcoming the institutional crisis. Needing U.S. support to secure a deal with the IMF, foreign minister Carlos Ruckauf traveled to Washington to meet with U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell. One of the topics discussed was Argentine policy towards Cuba: how would Duhalde vote in Geneva? Ruckauf declared after the meeting that there was “total agreement” with respect to Cuba (“Coincidencia,” 2002), and the State Department even asked Argentina to sponsor the UN resolution on the Cuban human rights situation (Morales Solá, 2002). Though the Duhalde administration ultimately refused the U.S. request due to domestic pressure, Argentina once again voted in favor of the resolution.¹³ Despite criticism from Alfonsín and motions from both houses of Congress pushing for abstention, economic necessity compelled the government to cooperate with the United States.

The following year, however, witnessed an about-face; after 13 consecutive votes by Argentina in favor of the resolution, Duhalde returned to the Alfonsín position of abstention. It was a surprising time to change course because it coincided with the harshest act of political repression by the Cuban government in decades. Between March 18 and April 1, 2003, more than 100 dissidents were arrested, and 75 of them were sentenced, after secret trials, to prison terms averaging 20 years. The government then executed three hijackers of a Havana ferry who had made an

¹³ 2002 marked the “Latin Americanization” of the vote, as Erikson (2004) put it. Uruguay introduced the resolution, which passed with the support of seven Latin American countries. For the first time, Mexico departed from its defense of non-intervention in Cuba to denounce the country’s repressive policies.

abortive bid to reach Florida. The crackdown marked a watershed in Cuba's relations with many countries, provoking particularly sharp criticism and pressure from the European Union. In addition, many intellectuals and artists condemned the Castro regime for the first time and called for the immediate release of the political prisoners.

Yet other trends help explain Duhalde's decision. Washington's neglect of Latin America following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the highly unpopular invasion of Iraq led to rising anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the region (Hakim, 2004). In Argentina, this was exacerbated by the Bush administration's slow response to the financial crisis and by cavalier remarks from treasury secretary Paul O'Neil.¹⁴ In this context, abstaining from the vote on Cuba despite U.S. appeals to the contrary was a useful way to project an image of independence and to establish left-wing bona fides. Duhalde's justification of abstention was telling: "Argentina is not going to condemn Cuba, a small blockaded country. We consider it very untimely, considering this unnatural war in violation of human rights" ("El Gobierno," 2003). His references to the embargo and military action in Iraq revealed the ongoing linkage of U.S. policy with the stance towards Cuba—a linkage intensified by the resurgence of anti-U.S. feeling in political discourse. Duhalde also defended the vote as an effort to coordinate with Brazil, within the framework of a greater diversification in foreign relations and an increase in the relative strategic importance of Mercosur.

More concrete domestic incentives determined the shift, however. The UN vote occurred ten days before the presidential election, in which Menem and the government's candidate, Néstor Kirchner, were locked in a close battle. It is clear that Kirchner, who pressured for abstention, influenced more than Brazil's Lula. In a contest where every vote counted to qualify for the second round, refusing to condemn Cuba was a politically popular symbol of autonomy that would help Kirchner distinguish himself from Menem, who was seeking to regain the presidency. One Brazilian official even explained the decision as "300,000 votes" for Kirchner ("Kirchner habría," 2003). Despite the foreign minister's opposition and the importance of U.S. support in negotiations with the IMF, Duhalde chose to privilege his candidate, incurring the "disappointment" of the Bush administration, as expressed in a press release from the U.S. embassy ("EE.UU.," 2003). His changing policy is perhaps the clearest example

¹⁴ Various sources of public opinion data confirm the poor state of the U.S. image in Argentina. The Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Exteriores found that the percentage of Argentines who believed that the relationship with the United States hurt Argentina grew from 32 percent in 1998 to 50 percent in 2002 ("La Opinión Pública," 2002). According to a 2002 poll by Gallup Argentina, 65 percent of Argentines held a negative opinion of the impact of U.S. foreign policy ("Rechazo," 2002).

of competition between internal and external pressures; in just over one year in government, Duhalde shifted from a preference for international rewards at domestic cost to the reverse.

Kirchner

Taking office in May 2003, Kirchner has completed the rapprochement with Cuba that Duhalde initiated. Castro's visit to Buenos Aires for the inauguration began the process of normalization of relations and revealed the degree to which the Cuban regime retains a positive image in Argentina. He received a standing ovation from Congress and was greeted by several thousand people at his address at the University of Buenos Aires, leading one analyst to argue that his presence eclipsed the entire event (Fraga, 2003). Later that year, Kirchner appointed an ambassador to the embassy in Cuba on orders to strengthen the bilateral relationship, thus filling the vacancy left since 2001.

In October 2003, foreign minister Rafael Bielsa visited Havana, where he discussed the renegotiation of the Cuban debt and signed several agreements to enhance cultural exchange and economic cooperation. What he did *not* do, however, attracted the attention of the U.S. government. Despite requests from prominent Cuban dissidents, Bielsa refused to meet any members of the opposition, telling the press that he did not want to interfere in internal affairs, especially following the announcement of steps to tighten enforcement of the U.S. embargo ("Bielsa no confirmó," 2003). A few days later, U.S. assistant secretary of state for western hemispheric affairs, Roger Noriega, criticized Bielsa's trip and his failure to condemn Cuban government repression ("Criticó Noriega," 2003). When in January 2004 Noriega again expressed his disapproval of warming Argentine-Cuban relations and bemoaned a "leftist drift" in Argentina, the Kirchner administration reacted with nationalist rhetoric and announced that it would abstain in the vote on human rights in Geneva ("Ratifica el gobierno," 2004). Ties with Cuba continued to improve following the visit of Cuban foreign minister Felipe Pérez Roque to Buenos Aires. The Argentine government promised to present to its trade partners the Cuban proposal to join Mercosur and recently supported a Brazilian initiative to incorporate Cuba into the Rio Group.

Like the period of the Alfonsín administration, the favorable political climate has bolstered commercial exchange between the two countries. Argentine exports to Cuba grew by almost 300% between 2003 and 2004 (Latin American Integration

Association), though imports from Cuba continue at their traditionally low level, making the trade balance highly favorable for Argentina (see Appendix). Despite this asymmetrical growth, however, economic interests continue to be of little importance in the formulation of policy towards Cuba. Exports to the small Cuban economy have always been a relatively insignificant proportion of total trade, and prospects for further growth are limited by the countries' economic difficulties and the lack of credit to finance business operations (Winkler, Interview, June 30, 2004). Nevertheless, negotiations on Cuba's debt to Argentina continue at the technical level, and mutual commercial preferences established in 2004 are likely to expand the commercial relationship. In addition, the Cuban government opened its market to the importation of Argentine meat in 2004, while a series of commercial missions has demonstrated increasing Argentine interest in Cuba (Winkler, Interview, June 30, 2004).

Yet for every example of friendship with Cuba there has been an example of caution. Bielsa met with five intellectuals critical of Argentine policy and promised them that the government would consider inviting Cuban dissidents to events at the embassy in Havana ("Bielsa recibió," 2004). Kirchner has repeatedly postponed accepting Castro's invitation to Havana, and a visit became even less likely after the refusal of the Cuban government to allow the prominent Cuban surgeon Hilda Molina to visit her son and grandchildren in Argentina. This long-standing humanitarian case reached crisis point in December 2004, when Kirchner's firm letter to Castro failed to gain the desired permission, prompting a plea from Molina for asylum and the subsequent resignation of the Argentine ambassador in Havana and of Bielsa's chief of staff. According to the director for Latin America at the foreign ministry, the still-unresolved conflict over Molina represents the only strain on an otherwise excellent relationship (Gutiérrez Maxwell, Interview, Nov. 21, 2005).

Relations between Cuba and Argentina have indeed improved dramatically, but they have not approached, for example, the degree of alignment between Cuba and Venezuela. The Kirchner administration does not consider Cuba enough of a foreign policy priority to endanger U.S. support in negotiations with the IMF. It does, however, want cordial relations with Havana for internal reasons. Without leadership of his own party, Kirchner has built his political strength on the basis of public opinion. Particularly in a period of high levels of anti-U.S. sentiment, rapprochement with Cuba, coupled with assertiveness towards the United States and the IMF, boosts the president's popularity. Kirchner has capitalized on sympathy towards Cuba to reinforce his political standing, a tactic that is evident in his justification of abstention in the UN:

“This is an issue that the Argentine people have very clear and the government doesn't do more than interpret the will of the Argentines” (“La Argentina,” 2004).

Kirchner has not simply seized on the symbolic value of Cuba to benefit his own interests, however. Views of Cuba have themselves played a causal role. In the 1970s, both Kirchner and Bielsa were active in the leftist Peronist Youth movement, which professed admiration of revolutionary Cuba. As the first member of this generation to reach the presidency, Kirchner surely retains some measure of personal loyalty to Castro—or at least respect for the role Castro has played historically. Interestingly, Kirchner has made a serious effort to address the legacy of domestic human rights violations but has not pushed for respect for human rights in Cuba. In sum, his policy towards Cuba is guided by both pragmatism and ideology and directed towards internal rewards.

Conclusion

This paper has applied the model of a two-level game to analyze the interaction of internal and external variables in the formation of Argentine policy towards Cuba. In both domains, the United States plays a central role. Individual presidents have usually chosen to favor one over the other, depending on their interpretation of national and personal interests and on their own views, but all have attempted to “win” both games by securing the best possible scenario for both his country and his political future. Their decisions have oscillated between the two extremes presented by Menem, who prioritized international rewards at the cost of domestic support, and Kirchner, who has so far done the reverse.

Of course, it is difficult to measure these rewards and costs, and they are likely quite subtle amidst broader domestic and international concerns. Since the end of the Cold War, verbal and symbolic actions, such as the annual UN vote, lie at the heart of policy towards Cuba. Nevertheless, “although words may be cheap, rarely are they free, especially in the world of diplomacy,” as Donnelly (2000) put it. Indeed, decisions concerning Cuba, according to this paper, have assumed a magnified importance in Argentine politics and in relations with the United States.

For those concerned about influencing Cuba's political process, perhaps what is most striking about the evolution of Argentine policy towards Cuba is the lack of effort to examine Cuba independently. The distorting effects of U.S. policy towards the region have created a dynamic in which anticastrismo equals proamericanismo and procastrismo equals antiamericanismo. In this situation, it is very difficult, for

outsiders and insiders alike, not to transmogrify the country. As one Argentine scholar put it, “se mira hacia Cuba sin mirar a Cuba” (Centro, 2003).

Appendix I



Argentine exports to Cuba in millions of U.S. dollars, 1980-2005, interpolated between years. Missing data for 1993 and 1994. Sources: *Anuario Estadístico de la República Argentina* (1993); Latin American Integration Association. NOTE: Imports from Cuba to Argentina are not shown because they vary little in the 25 year period and average only two million dollars annually.

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