

Between Gorbachev and Chávez: Cuba and Venezuela after the fall of the Soviet Union¹²
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Panel 26: *Cuba's Foreign Relations: New Archival Sources and New Approaches*

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Abstract:

The experience of the crisis marked the foreign policy of Cuba and Venezuela and, within it, their own bilateral relationship. The crisis meant that achieving the survival of both political regimes became their main objective. For this reason, a large part of the foreign policy of the two countries was dedicated to that objective, leaving the rest of the issues in the background.

The fall of the Soviet Union generated an economic collapse in Cuba that ended in the so-called Special Period, but it would be the end of political experiences in Eastern Europe and other regions such as Central Asia, which would exert strong pressure on Cuba, about the urgent need of political and economic changes. In this context of double difficulty, the Cuban regime sought to save time and achieve its own survival. To do this, the regime interchangeably used timid reformist strategies along with reminders of its role as a heroic island fighting against the powerful United States, in short, allegations of continuity.

This post-Soviet reality was reflected in Latin American dynamics. Within the region, there were countries that defended the US position of strangling the Cuban regime until it fell (for example, Menem's Argentina), while other countries argued that the change should be transitional and peaceful. The Venezuela of Carlos Andrés Pérez was located in this second group of countries. When Pérez returned to power in 1989, he continued to maintain an ambitious vision of the role Venezuela should play at the regional and international level. Although adapted to the new political and economic reality of his country, his new project wants to convey the transition period in Cuba. This softer position is the one that triumphed in inter-American institutions, although the duality was constant and the United States continued to maintain its hard position. In turn, this division in the positions was taken advantage of by Castro to play his own cards and help his regime emerge unscathed from this problem.

This model of foreign policy was tempered by internal events in Venezuela. Failed coups d'état and corruption allegations against Pérez made the government begin to look inward. When the impeachment occurred, the profile of foreign policy changed.

The period of "interim" that led to the new elections was marked by the urgent need of the new president, Ramón José Velásquez (1993-1994), to calm the situation in the country and stabilize its economy. This made Velásquez abandon major political projects abroad and focus on issues such as debt.

Rafael Caldera's second presidency (1994-1999) also had a lower profile than Pérez's, at least in foreign policy. Both the internal situation and the heterogeneous coalition that supported him (almost all the Venezuelan left supported his candidacy), hindered an aggressive policy towards Cuba. Aggression in which, at the time, he did not believe too much. This reality marked the first part of Caldera's presidency, the second would be dominated by a Cuba that

leaves the Special Period behind and that managed to fully insert itself in Latin American reality. That was possible due to a masterful diplomacy.

As for the bilateral relationship, the tone was cordial. Caldera had less appreciation for Castro than Pérez, but there were only small friction that did not cloud the overall relationship. The most striking was the "sponsorship" of Hugo Chávez by Fidel Castro, which was due to a matter of retaliation. Caldera's reception of Jorge Mas Canosa in Caracas led to Castro's reception with honors of Chávez, finally knowing himself and granting a leftist letter to a coup military man. The rest is history.

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