

What Was the Role of Ideology in Cuba's Foreign Policy in the Angolan Civil War?

Written by Rita Deliperi

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RITA DELIPERI, AUG 26 2017

Cuba's mission in Angola epitomizes the largest military and civilian operation ever launched by the country in its entire history. In November 1975, as an immediate response to the synchronous US-backed aggressions by South Africa and Zaire, Fidel Castro deployed 36,000 troops in Angola, hence siding with the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) forces in the struggle against the other independence movements within the country – UNITA and the FNLA – and their foreign allies (Rognoni, 2009; Wolfers, 2006). To this point, Angola had been merely a secluded land buried into oblivion. Yet, almost overnight, the vibrant entrance of the Cubans 'catapulted it in the main currents of international politics' (Ogunbadejo, 1981, p.4). Ultimately, a decade of asymmetrical co-operation between Cuba and the MPLA culminated into a major involvement of the island's military and civilian forces in Angola, which became the bull's eye of Cuban foreign policy for almost two decades (Hatzky, 2013). As its most intriguing facet, the Cuban intervention in Angola was backed by profound and diverse ideological motives. Arguably, it is only through a deep understanding of such that one might chase a holistic scrutiny of the Cold War in the world's periphery and, more in particular, its developments in Angola; these events – often positioned within the Cold War conceptual categories – developed well beyond the paradigm of West versus East, and the Capitalism-Communism dichotomy.

It is exactly the purpose of this essay to comprehend the ideological discourses behind the Cuban intervention in one of the most complex and multi-layered conflicts occurred within the Sub-Saharan region, and, secondly, to analyse the extent to which such discourses were decisive in Cuba's foreign policy decision making. This project is founded on an interpretation of the Cuban foreign policy manoeuvres in Angola as not solely dry political schemes, but also as a question of principles – which should be contextualized within the original rhetoric and self-perception of Cuba and its revolutionary experience (Rognoni, 2009).

In order to achieve its aims, the essay will firstly consider the notions of internationalism and international solidarity, which stand as the backbone of the Cuban rationale for its support of the MPLA in Angola (Eckstein, 1982). More specifically, the analysis will focus on how the Cuban variation of the internationalist discourse incorporated a strongly revolutionary soul – translated into a call against the neo-colonial tendencies of the world's great powers that echoed within a peculiar South-South environment (Grabendorff, 1980). The essay will follow by offering an account of another major ideological push towards intervention in Angola, i.e. the creation of a shared identity between Africa and the Caribbean (Hatzky, 2013). Such rhetoric mainly built on the memory of a past slavery experience and thus on the historical ties connecting the two countries (ibid). After an exploration of these ideological factors, the essay will consider the arguments according to which Cuba's ideological discourses solely formed a veil behind which to hide a purely pragmatic and even opportunistic foreign policy (Wolfers, 2006). Finally, the essay will conclude by offering a balanced perspective, claiming that even if ideology and identity discourses do not stand as a sufficient explanation for Havana's involvement in Angola, yet they are a *condicio sine qua non* for fully comprehending the conflict and its dynamics.

Ideological seed and fruit of the revolutionary years, Cuban unusual declination of the concept of 'internationalism' stands fundamentally as the product of the encounter between two exceptional minds: Fidel Castro and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (Wolfers, 2006). Inspired by Marx's and Engels' Communist Manifesto, Cuba's revolutionary leaders

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deeply assimilated the ideal of 'proletarian internationalism', as well as the Leninist elaboration of such doctrine – hence the strongly anti-imperialistic character of the envisioned class struggle (ibid). Eventually, in Cuba, the orthodox Marxist-Leninist doctrine evolved, merging with the insular original conceptual tradition. In particular, it flourished under the influence of the nationalist ideals of Cuban revolutionary hero José Martí, and his elaborate understanding of the nation as one 'that encompassed the whole continent of Latin America' (Hatzky, 2013, p.148). These polygonal, multi-layered ideological structures passionately echo in the statement made by Castro, when claiming that 'Humanity's blood is our blood! Our ideas go beyond chauvinism or narrow nationalism. Our ideas extend beyond all borders' (Fidel Castro cited in Rognoni, 2009). Ultimately, it is crucial to recognise that internationalism and internationalist solidarity were embedded in Cuba's very own revolutionary practise (Valdés & Peña, 1979). Hence, the island's role in Africa is to be appreciated within the analytical frame of Cuba's historical, political and sociological conditions as powerfully shaped by the country's experiences of a revolutionary past (Saney, 2006).

It is vital to observe that the Cuban military and civilian operations in Angola 'signified both the culmination and the turning point of Cuba's revolutionary internationalism' (Hatzky, 2015, p.64). The weight of the internationalist discourse as the ideological spine for the intervention in Angola is of central significance, to the extent that it is conceivable to read the operation in this land as the most revealing and noteworthy instance of Cuban internationalism (Rognoni, 2009). Strikingly, in a time span of fifteen years (1975-1991), 430,000 soldiers, teachers, doctors, construction workers, volunteered to participate in the internationalist mission in the African country, which became a collective experience for a deeply indoctrinated generation of Cubans (Wolfers, 2006; Hatzky, 2005). Internationalism proved to be a powerful channel through which the vigour of the Cuban youth could be politicised, especially following the promulgation by the Cuban authorities of a solid and prominent volunteer ethic (Wolfers, 2006; Hatzky, 2013), which is essentially reflected in Guevara's legendary words 'impossible' (cited in Hatzky, 2013) 'seamos realistas y hagamos lo: the impossible is realistic. As a matter of fact, while it could be argued that many Cuban volunteers left their homeland to participate in the operations in Angola driven by the most diverse personal motives, meticulous researches on diverse primary sources demonstrated that the international solidarity discourse represented a fundamental impulse for the population to actively embrace the foreign struggle (Wolfers, 2006).

Furthermore, for a comprehensive analysis, it is necessary to consider another key aspect. Cuba's epopee in Angola occurred within a categorization of North-South rather than East-West opposition, and ultimately as the result of a unique transatlantic South-South cooperation (Hatzky, 2005). To appreciate the significance of such facet, it is necessary to realise that Cuba's connection with the MPLA was based on a condition best expressed by Piero Gleijeses (2002, p.377):

Cuba was non-white, poor, threatened by a powerful enemy, and culturally Latin American and African. It was, therefore, a special hybrid: a socialist country with a Third World sensitivity in a world dominated –according to Castro – by the conflict between privileged and unprivileged, humanity against imperialism, and where the major fault line was not between socialist and capitalist states but developed and underdeveloped countries.

The political and conceptual results of this status were two-folded; on one side, Cuba identified itself as inherently a member of the third world, with the mission of playing an exceptional role on its behalf (Fidel Castro in Waters, 2013; Gleijeses, 2002). On the other hand, the liaison between Cuba and its African ally was characterized by a mutual feeling of trust and confidence (Grabendorff, 1980). Surely, such atmosphere was partly the product of a long dated support of Cuba for the MPLA, as well as of a close personal affiliation between Fidel Castro and Agostinho Neto. Nevertheless, it was mainly the fruit of a perceived correspondence between Cuban intentions and African expectations: the MPLA was aware that Cuba not only lacked a power base from which to threaten Angola's sovereignty, but also that it was not motivated by imperialistic ambitions (ibid). Furthermore, Cuba's familiarity with the paternalistic character of the Soviet Union rendered the country well conscious of Angola's fears regarding the protection of its autonomy against foreign actors. As a result, it seemed that Cuba was willing to intervene in Angola with no intent of creating a relationship of dependence (ibid). As claimed by Grabendorff (1980, p.6), 'this special relationship with Cuba could not be duplicated by an type of cooperation offered by European powers, China, the Soviet Union or the United States'. Ultimately, it was Cuba's anti-imperialist *modus operandi* within the South-South context that inspired and made the military and civilian intervention in Angola feasible and sustainable.

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As it appears manifest, Cuba's very own internationalism and its leading position within the Third World were fundamental factors in shaping the island's foreign policy towards Angola. Nonetheless, such ideological discourse was not the only one in place. At the dawn of the mission in Angola, the Cuban leadership promoted an innovative, transatlantic Latin American-African identity, largely used as a legitimizing and founding principle for the Cuban presence in the region (Hatzky, 2008; 2013). De facto, Cuba 'attempted to erase geo-political borders drawn by European imperialism, and aggravated by Cold War politics, in order to reconstruct non-geographic ideologically based borders' (Almer, 2011, p.73). By doing so, it created a transnational space for interaction (Hatzky, 2008) within which to position and promote the legacy of a shared 'Africanness' between the Cuban people and the Angolans (Almer, 2011). Ultimately, Castro was capable of using identity as a driving ideological dynamic to sustain the operation in Angola.

The construction of this shared identity was principally rooted in the memory of the transatlantic slave trade that shaped African and Caribbean histories from the 16th to the 19th century (Hatzky, 2013). With more than one third of the Cuban population descending from African slaves, the country's leadership succeeded in grounding Cuban foreign policy not only on internationalist principles, but also on the blood relationship between its people and their Angolan counterpart (Hatzky, 2005). By claiming that 'the blood of Africa flows abundantly through our veins', Castro (cited in Peters, 2012) uniquely merged the practice of foreign policy-making with the universe of mythology and allegories. In particular, by drawing on the powerful image of blood, he invoked a profoundly symbolic element, especially within Latin American and African societies (ibid). Indeed, as explained by Australian anthropologist Michael Taussing (cited in Peters, 2012, p.87), within these social environments 'blood is not sorcery substance, but the spirit of a dead human through which notions of insideness and outsideness are staged'. Thus, the quasi-mythological vision of the sacrificed blood poured by the dead slave ancestor, brutally traded to the Americas from the African continent, had the socio-political function of tracing a shared bloodline, potent enough to render all Cubans Africa's brothers – regardless of their individual demographic and cultural backgrounds (ibid). Moreover, the past sacrifice of the African slaves for Cuba's freedom stood as a powerful emotional element in the hands of the Cuban leadership: 'by assigning the function of sacrificial victims to slaves and their descendants, Fidel both facilitated the trope of fraternity (insideness) and, by use of third person plural they are, removed any inference of an Afrocentric Cuban identity (outsideness)' (Peters, 2012, p.22).

The Cuban call of blood to blood not only operated as an harmonizing force within the Cuban society, but also created a historical linkage between Africa and Cuba on several levels; on one hand, recalling the shared bloodline initiated with the trade of slaves; on the other, evoking the African blood spared on the battlefields during Cuba's struggles for freedom and independence (Almer, 2011). These multidimensional linkages implied Cuba's ultimate responsibility to repay its 'historical debt' owed to Africa, its people, and their sacrifice for liberty (Wolfers, 2006; Saney, 2009). This sense of historical obligation towards Africa and eventually Angola was reflected in the emblematic name of Operation Carlota – which initiated the intervention in the country (Saney, 2006). The Operation drew its name from an African slave sold in the Caribbean. In 1843 – on the same date Cubans left for Angola, according to the official narrative – the woman captained a slave insurrection to liberate fellow rebels who had been imprisoned during a previous uprising, but was soon captured and finally executed (ibid). The image of La Negra Carlota stands as a case in point when exploring the role played by iconology in Cuba's intervention in Angola: the solidarity she embodies and her genuine commitment to her brothers' freedom were still capable of inspiring the Cuban intervention in Angola, ultimately symbolizing the Africanness within Cuba and its re-discovered transatlantic identity (Peters, 2012).

This rhetoric was powerfully enriched by the use of several parallelisms between Angola and Cuba. Considering the colonial past of both countries, Castro openly compared MPLA's leader Agostinho Neto to Cuba's aforementioned national hero Jose Martí: the similarity of their backgrounds, their outstanding intellectual potentials[1], and the ability to intensify the revolutionary spirit in their people (Almer, 2011). Concluding a passionate speech on July 1976, Castro (cited in Peters, 2012, p. 99) claimed that 'Martí and Neto have been the makers of our countries'. De facto, as argued by Almer (2011, p. 82) 'these similarities are emblematic intersections that piece together Cuban independence, the Cuban revolution, Cuban internationalism, and Angolan independence and struggles'.

Nevertheless, the major role played by ideology in the foreign policy of Cuba towards Angola has been challenged

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and criticized. For a number of scholars, Cuba's commitment to internationalism, as well as the need to repay its historical debt towards Africa, were masks behind which to hide a pragmatic, opportunistic, and chaotic foreign policy (Eckstein, 1982; Wolfers, 2006; Fernández, 1987). Therefore, Cuba was acting mainly through a rationale based on cost and benefits rather than on genuine principles (Fernández, 1987). According to this line of thought, Cuba's intervention in Angola was the result of numerous changes inherent to external conditions: in those years, Cuba had improved its security and managed to professionalize its armed forces, had grown economically and could therefore afford to commit itself to foreign missions (Eckstein, 1982). At the same time, the United States were undergoing a crisis of credibility after Vietnam, Watergate, economic recession, and therefore could not counter Cuba's actions with ease. Furthermore, some argue that Cuba was motivated in its actions by foreseeable opportunities for investments (ibid). Finally, an innovative analysis of the launch of Operation Carlota claims that the initiative was far from being a selfless internationalist act, but stood rather as 'a last ditch gamble to avert military disaster' (Wolfers, 2006, p.3), triggered by the fear that the forces headed by General Argüelles could be soon defeated by the enemy. Ultimately, it seems that Havana was driven more by self-serving political, economic and social interests rather than by genuine ideological zeal (Hatzky, 2008).

These controversial views on Cuba's foreign policy are grounded on hard facts that essentially give substance to otherwise hypothetical suppositions. To begin with, historians such as Susan Eckstein (1982) have claimed that, until Operation Carlota, Cuba's involvement in Africa questioned the foundation of Cuban foreign policy of prioritizing international solidarity over national benefits. In the past, Cuba had offered aid to some repressive regimes, such as Equatorial Guinea and Libya (ibid). Moreover, Cuba had supported Ethiopia, while turning its back against the Marxist Leninist government of Somalia: as argued by Jorge Domínguez (cited in Eckstein, 1982, p.102), the language in use here was clearly 'one of high diplomacy, not of revolutionary solidarity'. Also, documents have proven that until 1983 Angola paid to partly maintain the Cuban civilian mission (Hatzky, 2008); while this aspect might be seen as admissible considering the proportions of the operation, it highlights that Cuba's foreign policy in the region 'cannot be viewed as entirely self-sacrificing and unmotivated by material concerns' (Eckstein, 1982, p.102). Furthermore, the aforementioned theses are supported by the fact that, had Cuban been genuinely concerned with its historical debt towards Africa, it would have intervened in the Biafra War, so to support the Yoruba ethnic group from which one-fifth of slaves traded to Cuba belonged to (Wolfers, 2006). Instead, the Cuban leadership chose to concentrate its resources in Guinea-Bissau, aiding the PAIGC in its struggle for independence (ibid). Similarly, being Cuba driven solely by its sense of historical guilt, it would have supported the MPLA in desperate times – 1961, 1972 and 1974 (ibid). Finally, it can be argued that Cuba's internationalism predominantly fulfilled pragmatic objectives if considering that, after the collapse of the USSR and the beginning of the 'Special Period', Cuba promptly withdrew from Angola, replacing its internationalist motives with the pragmatic mind-set that had characterized the 1960s; in a decade, Angola ultimately disappeared from Cuba's political agenda (ibid).

Undoubtedly, these arguments are grounded on overall solid bases. Yet, this essay maintains that Cuba's objectives were driven by both practical and ideological motives; as also argued by Gleijeses, (2002, p.376), 'idealism and pragmatism were the engines behind Cuba's activism in the Third World'. For a comprehensive understanding of the Cuban intervention in Angola, it is thus necessary to consider both ideological and materialistic dynamics, as, taken separately, they stand as necessary but not sufficient factors for an efficient investigation on the matter. Analysing Cuba's foreign policy as determined by singular variables rather than interplaying elements would be fundamentally restrictive (Valdés & Peña, 1979). Indeed, in the case of Cuba, its revolutionary foreign policy necessarily implied a pragmatic evaluation of external factors, so to achieve successful aims (ibid). In particular, as best expressed by Peters (2012, p.112), 'for Cubans to re-cross the unfathomable waters of the black Atlantic without the succour of unifying myths, the fortifying example set by gods and icons, and the moral legitimization of a poetics, would have been extremely treacherous'.

In conclusion, this essay attempted to comprehend the role of ideology in Cuba's foreign policy decision to intervene in Angola in favour of the MPLA. In order to achieve such aim, the essay has focused on two key aspects of Cuba's ideological rationale for the intervention; on one side, the principles of internationalism and internationalist solidarity – in particular interpreted within a South-South context rather than the orthodox Cold War East-West paradigm. On the other side, the innovative construction of a Latin American – African identity, which stressed on the historical and blood ties between the Cuban people and the people of Angola. The essay offered a deep analysis of both aspects,

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attempting to systematize discourses that are often intertwined and hidden in public speeches and propaganda mechanisms. Finally, the essay has offered another understanding of the Cuba's intervention in Angola, based on the controversial notion that Cuba's foreign policy was based on political, economic, sociological interests rather than its ideological commitments. Ultimately, the essay makes the claim that for an astute analysis of an intricate and multi faceted event such as Havana's presence in Angola, it would be simplistic to adopt a narrow, one-dimensional perspective. Both ideological and materialistic factors should be considered to understand the course of events and the rationales behind them. Ideology alone is not sufficient to offer a justification for the intervention; nonetheless, it is a necessary, vital element to comprehend a political move that would be otherwise emptied of its conceptual substance.

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Notes

[1] Just to month before this speech, Neto's poetry was published in *Casa de las Americas*, Cuban literary periodical. This publication made his status as poet official and ultimately linked the two revolutionary figures (Almer, 2011).

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Written for: Professor Flavia Gasbarri
Date written: 06/2016