

## **Cuban Public Diplomacy**

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The enigmatic example of Cuba's projection of public diplomacy and soft power on various fronts to manage its external relations and challenges offers a fascinating case study of a small power exerting influence seemingly beyond its capacity. Cuba has deftly played on its use of public diplomacy and soft power, not only as means to protect its revolutionary regime, but also as a mechanism to allow Cuba to hit far above its weight in the global arena. Two key components of Cuban public diplomacy that will be analyzed in this paper are the successful use of imagery and branding of Cuba's leader Fidel Castro, and the ability for Cuba to popularly frame its struggle as that of the "underdog" vis-à-vis its larger neighbor to the north. Specifically related to the last point, the "victimization narrative" and use of "solidarity diplomacy" will also be addressed. Moreover, in this paper, the author will examine and assess the foundations of Cuban public diplomacy and soft power, which has traditionally rested on: a) educational diplomacy, b) medical diplomacy, and c) development aid. These components will also be analyzed with regard to the key course concept of "socialization" to better understand the role of public diplomacy as means of regime survival in Cuba.

In addressing Cuban public diplomacy and soft power projection, it is necessary to examine the "Fidel" brand. Intrinsicly tied to the Cuban Revolution and subsequent Cuban public diplomacy efforts is the iconic status of Fidel Castro. In terms of image

projection, Castro has often been able to manipulate Western media outlets to serve as a public diplomacy force multiplier. From his early days fighting against the Batista regime, Castro had a tremendous grasp of the role of images in public diplomacy, and he adroitly managed the projection of his own image in the Western press. Beginning first with the famous Herbert Mathews interview in the *New York Times*, Castro in essence manipulated the veteran journalist to be a projector of his own public diplomacy, “a conduit for his ideas, a public address system with a pen who would relay an important message to the world. (DePalma 80).”

From the historic Mathews interview onward, Castro continued to manipulate his image, and the image of the revolution he fostered, until long after it was apparent that his projections didn't square with reality. Citing Peter Bourne, journalist John Wallach notes, “this adroit use of the media- and particularly democratic-sounding reassurances- was a calculated effort to buy time so as to prevent the United States from intervening in Cuba's internal affairs (Wallach 135).” Castro would continue this pattern of image crafting, most notably in later interviews with Western journalists such as Frank Mankiewicz and Kirby Jones for their 1974 book With Fidel, and in the 1977 television interview carried out with reporter Barbara Walters. In both cases, the Cuban leader dexterously projected an image that belied the notions of Castro as an autocrat but rather in line with “political hero worship,” in which he was framed as “a combination political James Bond and Renaissance man (Wallach 153).”

Beyond his own fabled image projection, Castro and the Cuban regime have proven adept at donning the mantle of victim, either in light of various CIA attempts to undermine or overthrow the regime (Wallach 139), or as a means to gain greater

international legitimacy and solidarity, especially in regard to the U.S. embargo placed upon the island nation (Bustamante & Sweig 225). The long-standing economic embargo has served as public diplomacy fodder for the Castro regime, creating sympathy and giving credibility for Cuban victimhood; as such, common imagery prevalent in the week's various readings noted Cuba cast as "David" standing up to its "Goliath" neighbor to the north. More importantly, Cuba has managed to frame its revolution in an aura of countercultural mystique and more recently as the focal point of resistance to US global hegemony.

By the close of the 1960s, Cuba found itself in hemispheric isolation borne out of failed attempts to sponsor armed insurrections (Bustamante & Sweig 226). To break free from such isolation, Cuba turned to public diplomacy initiatives to create international solidarity in the developing world with Cuban revolution. One such initiative was the Organization for Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL). Via promotional campaigns, political posters, informational material, and even a "Day of Solidarity with Cuba," the Cuban regime conducted public diplomacy through OSPAAAL to foster ties national liberation movements in the developing world (Bustamante & Sweig 227). Meanwhile, Havana sponsored solidarity brigades, visit diplomacy endeavors and international broadcasting outlets (Radio Habana Cuba and Prensa Latina).

More importantly, Cuba has carried out serious and robust "public diplomacy of the deed" in the form of educational exchange, development aid, and medical assistance. In the form of cultural diplomacy through educational exchange, Cuba embarked on serious efforts to serve as an educational hub for students from the developing world. In

the mid 1980s, Cuba played host to an estimated thirty thousand foreign students, of which more than half were attending the Isle of Youth education project that was designed to educate foreign nationals in Cuba (Erisman 172).

Although development aid served as key component of Cuban public diplomacy during the Cold War, this feature has largely been abandoned given Cuba's loss of its Cold War patron. However, Cuba has continued to make medical diplomacy a centerpiece of its public diplomacy outreach, both in terms of long-term medical assistance and exchange and short-term disaster relief projects. Since the early 1960s, Cuba has deployed legions of medical personnel to the developing world to offer medical care and education, and has donated equipment, medicine and supplies; these exchanges have been carried out both bilaterally and on multilateral levels (Feinsilver 157). Today, Cuba deploys tens of thousands of doctors, nurses and medical personnel in nearly seventy countries around the globe—numbers that represent a ten-fold increase from the mid-1980s (Bustamante & Sweig 227). Meanwhile, in a synthesis of medical aid and educational exchange, Cuba hosts the Latin American School of Medicine. Founded in 1999, the medical school provides free tuition and board for over ten thousand medical students from throughout the hemisphere, while another twenty to thirty thousand foreign students receive medical training (Bustamante & Sweig 236).

Beyond the simple focus on the public diplomacy boon that medical diplomacy offers Cuba, Feinsilver (24), notes the relationship between Cuban medical diplomacy to that of hard power, focusing on the conversion of symbolic capital to material capital while Bustamante and Sweig (237-8) and Erisman (147-8) note the export of Cuban medical services as an important source of capital for the cash-strapped island. Altruism

notwithstanding, the reality of on-the-ground Cuban medical personnel has been a positive force for Cuban public diplomacy outreach.

Through the various channels of Cuban public diplomacy and soft power, Cuba carried out its own version of a socializing mission centered on Third World solidarity, anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, and more recently, anti-globalization. Related to the Ikenberry concept of socialization, where foreign elites internalize norms of the hegemonic power and accept the structural natures of the international system (53), Cuba's public diplomacy can be viewed as its own attempts to fashion an alternative socialization project. In projecting its influence through forms of educational and development assistance, Cuba's public diplomacy initiatives can be viewed through the socialization prism.

Overall, Cuban public diplomacy outreach and Cuba's soft power capabilities have served as tools to shore up the regime's survival, increase the tiny Caribbean island's influence on the global stage and have, alternately, gained the nation hard power capital (currency and material commodities) in exchange for soft power resources. Castro has proven skillful at stage-managing his image through various channels, and Cuba has taken advantage of its own image-based public diplomacy to sell the island as a victim, sell its revolution as a counter-cultural symbol, and create its alternative socialization mission via its tools of public diplomacy.

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