

Unique Feature of Cuba's Public Diplomacy

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Abstract: This paper examines Cuba's public diplomacy, initiated in the 1960s under Fidel Castro, to reshape its international image following the U.S. embargo. Key strategies included medical diplomacy, disaster relief, and the establishment of medical education systems like ELAM. Cuba's unique position as a small, non-threatening nation under U.S. sanctions generated global sympathy, reflected in international support, such as the U.N. vote in 2018. However, Cuba's public diplomacy is not easily replicable due to its distinctive political and economic conditions.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy; Cuba; History; Soft Power.

1. Introduction

On November 1, 2018, the U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly voted (189-2) to condemn the U.S. embargo against Cuba, highlighting international support for Cuba's sovereignty [1]. Though this vote had no legal binding, it symbolized the culmination of Cuba's fifty-year effort to reshape its global image through public diplomacy.

After gaining independence in 1959, Cuba, under Fidel Castro, declared itself a socialist state. In response, the U.S. imposed a strict embargo in 1962, aimed at isolating Cuba politically, economically, and culturally. Despite these challenges, Castro implemented significant domestic reforms and used public diplomacy as a tool to secure Cuba's autonomy and build international solidarity [2].

This paper focuses on the medical diplomacy initiated by Castro in the 1960s, which has provided disaster relief to over 100 countries and established medical education systems, such as ELAM. Despite some limitations, Cuba's public diplomacy has been instrumental in enhancing its global reputation. However, its success is unique and not replicable by other nations due to Cuba's particular political and economic conditions.

2. Cuba's Public Diplomacy

2.1. Cuba's Objectives

The objective can be divided into two main parts, which are domestic and international. For domestic goals, first, Cuban sovereignty was made available to the world. Cuba can operate on the international stage as an independent country. Second, more foreign economic support was obtained. As Dominguez mentions in his article: "the gaining of foreign support for economic development has all along been the second objective of Cuban foreign policy." [3] And the third point of being a domestic goal is to increase national confidence. The biggest problem facing Cuba is that it is an island country that has just emerged from the colonial state. The Cuban people had a certain national confidence base under the propaganda of Castro. But this confidence requires external recognition to enhance and confirm.

There are two main aspects to the objective level at the international level. First, Cuba needs to use public diplomacy to get rid of the Soviet control. Since the Soviet Union began implementing sugar subsidies in 1960, restrictions on Cuba's international diplomacy, economic structure, and political

system have gradually been imposed. And the Soviet Union gradually reduced its help to Cuba. Second, through public diplomacy, Cuba shows the world the unequal treatment of the United States and tries to change the power of the left wing of other countries. The establishment of Cuba further demonstrates the opposite of capitalism - socialism can survive and develop.

2.2. Cuba's Target Audiences

There were two main target audiences of Cuba's public diplomacy. The first one was developing countries. Developing countries always need to cooperate with other countries or support from other countries to pulling countries' development. Besides, developing countries make up the highest proportion of all countries around the world. Developing countries always have same situations, such as lower GDP, less financial support, lower per capita income, or lower standard of living. Developing countries can have more common words when they are cooperating with each other.

The second targeting audiences are Cuban-American living in the United States. Operation Pedro Pan happened from December 1960 to October 1962, through which over 14,000 unaccompanied minors fled from Cuba to the United States. [4] In the Peter Pan movement, Cuba lost a lot of young and strong power. Martínez-Fernández mentions in his book that children came from Cuba had written letters, which expressed their worries about culture conflict, and their homeland situations: "Another Pedro Pan, F. González, writing from Matquette, Michigan, described the places as 'wonderful,' adding that they lived at the monsignor's house, where, believe it or not, 'we are considered members of the high life here.' Changing Cuban -- American's impression to Cuba was also another objective for Cuba's public diplomacy.

2.3. Cuba's Messages

The main message that Cuba wanted to convey to the world through public diplomacy is that even under the pressure and sanctions from the United States, Cuba could still move on with bravery, youth and courage.

First, in the case of "being bullied", Cuba still insists on helping countries and regions in need through medical and educational means. This not only conveyed the kindness character of Cuba, but also established the image of Cuba's perseverance in the minds of other countries.

Second, Cuba also wants to use public diplomacy to convey

messages to the outside world that Cuba is a kind and brave nation. Although Cuba had experienced centuries of colonial history, Cuba still has not given up its struggle for independence and freedom. Cuba has expressed its attitude of still striving to survive despite the means of hunger strikes in the United States.

Third, at the same time, Cuba vigorously promoted the courageous and passionate image of leaders such as Castro and Guevara, which also conveyed to the world the young and active attitude of Cuba.

3. Main Program

3.1. Cuba's International Disaster Relief

Cuba provided international assistance in the event of disasters happened in other countries. There are two main aspects of Cuba's disaster relief. First, Cuba will provide emergency medical materials as temporarily assistance. Second, as for long-term solution, Cuba will provide medical trainings for thousands of doctors from these regions with no charge. After six years program, Cuba hope these trainees can return to their countries to exchange the Cuban medical staff.

Cuba has helped a lot of regions that were affected by catastrophic natural disaster. In 1998, Hurricane Georges damaged Haiti. Cuba was the first country to send medical assistance to Haiti. Besides immediate disaster relief, Cuba also provided free medical care to Haitian people for a long-term program, which can help Haitian people to build a complete Comprehensive Health Program. What's more, Cuba offered scholarship to Haitian student to study in Cuba. [5] After twelve years, when Haiti suffered from earthquake, Cuba was the first country again to send medical aid. And this time, besides sixty Cuban doctors, more than five hundred Haitian students who graduated from Cuban medical schools also participated in the rescue activities. Besides the disaster relief action, Cuban doctors who have been assisting overseas in Haiti since 1998 have played a bigger role in the 2010 earthquake relief. During three weeks, Cuba's medical rescue team had saved more than 50,000 people; conducted 3,000 surgeries; delivered 280 babies; vaccinated 20,000 people against tetanus; and established 9 rehabilitation wards. [6]

In October 8, 2005, the serious earthquake destroyed the northeastern part of Pakistan in the Himalayan foothills. According to a roughly estimation, the earthquake killed 73,000 people and left 3.5 million homeless. [7] After the disaster happened, many world organizations such as Red Cross/Red Crescent to Oxfam, the UN children's fund (UNICEF) and the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which relies on wealthy imperialist countries have been providing disaster relief movement in Pakistan. However, Cuba was the only developing country that still tried its best to help Pakistan. Seventeen field hospitals were taken into action at the beginning. Bruno Rodríguez, who was Cuba's deputy minister of foreign affairs said 789 doctors were working in the hospitals and half of them were good at dealing with natural disasters. Besides, there were 315 paramedics, who were university graduates or technicians. 128 staffs were always ready for providing help. What should be noticed is that all the Cuban medical staff were living in the same conditions as patients. [7]

"UNICEF's director of operations in Pakistan, Indiana Gonzalez Mairena, told the Cuban newspaper Vanguardia, 'I recognize this as valuable humanitarian aid which we would not expect from other countries possessing much more

resources than Cuba. It's just a matter of will.'" [7]

Besides, in May 2008, Cuba sent 35-member medical team and 4.5 tons of rescue resources to Chengdu, China after the devastating earthquake and subsequent flood happened. [8] Bush administration refused the offer from Cuba, but the benefits of medical public diplomacy had shown up. "Regional Health Coordinator Dr Ronny Rockito told the BBC that "the Cuban hospitals are fully complete and it's free, with no financial support from our government. We give our special thanks to Fidel Castro.....We felt very surprised about doctors coming from a poor country, a country so far away that we know little about." [8]

In addition to the above cases, Cuba had many overseas disaster assistances. According to Kirk's article, "Bolivia (602 personnel, including 601 doctors, following massive flooding in February 2006), Indonesia in May 2006 after a major earthquake (135, including 78 doctors), Peru in August 2007 after an earthquake (76, including 43 doctors) and Mexico after flooding in November 2007 (54, including 39 doctors)." [9]

Cuba's post-disaster assistance has two main successful features. First, it provides just the right type of people and technical assistance. Cuba offered doctors with extensive experience and medical skills and provided the medical herbs and equipment needed. In addition, Cuba also provides professional technicians to operate medical machines, providing good medical conditions for the affected areas. Second, Cuba has provided long-lasting and effective measures to guarantee the medical level and the capacity of medical personnel in the affected areas. Cuba's long-term bailout program fully demonstrates its willingness to help other countries. It also shows the friendship, kindness and wisdom of Cuba. Cuban team cultivates talent for other countries instead of own development, and the entire premise is free of charge. Cuba's behavior is sure to be recognized and respected by other countries.

3.2. Cuba's International Medical Education

In the early 1950s, three university were offering higher education in Cuba, which were the University of Cuba, the University of Oriente, and the Central University of Villas. [10] In 1962, all the universities in Cuba began to conduct reform, which expanded students' knowledge fields, strengthened faculties' qualities, and increased pathway for students to apply. [10] Besides, when Fidel Castro came to power, Cuba's education system was run by state and it was subsidized by the government completely. In other words, Cuban's students can attend to school for free at all levels. [11] As shown in Table 1, Cuba had a number of higher education institutions in 2002.

Table 1. Number and Type of Institutions of Higher Education in Cuba, 2001-02 [10, 12].

Type of Institution	Number
University	11
Higher education institute	28
Technical college	1
School and academy	7
Independent faculty of medical sciences	9
Latin American and international school	2
Total	58

With a not bad foundation, Cuba has been trying to

complete its education system gradually. During 2000, there were 129,000 students, enrolled in Cuba's higher education system. [10] In the 1960s, Cuba began providing free medical education to adolescents in developing countries. At the same time, Cuba provides scholarships for international students, thus reducing the financial pressure on students. In the foreign scholarship program, Cuba's universities teach students to study medicine, dentistry, nursing, and medical technicians.

According to the weekly review of Granma in 1985, there were 22,000 students from eighty-two developing countries to study in Cuba. [13] And in 1990, there were 25,000 studied in Cuba at various levels. [14] What's more, all the international students received a scholarship from Cuba. Figure 1 illustrates that the number of students who applying for Cuba's foreign scholarship increased from 1997 to 2002.

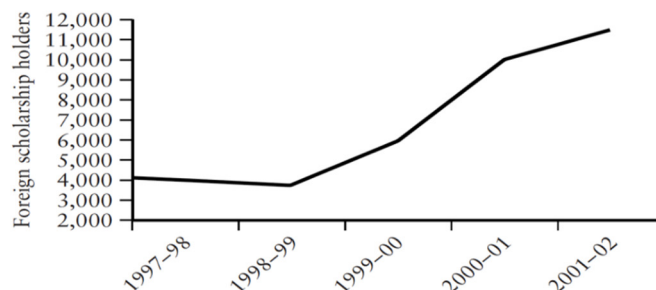


Fig 1. Enrollment of Foreign Scholarship Holders [10, 15]

Cuba created Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina (ELAM) in 1999 (Latin American School of Medicine in English), which provides medical education for international students. ELAM provides six-year free medical education for

low-income students who promise that they will serve for their home countries after their graduation. [5] Figure 2 shows the number of people from different countries and regions who benefited from the ELAM program in 2003.

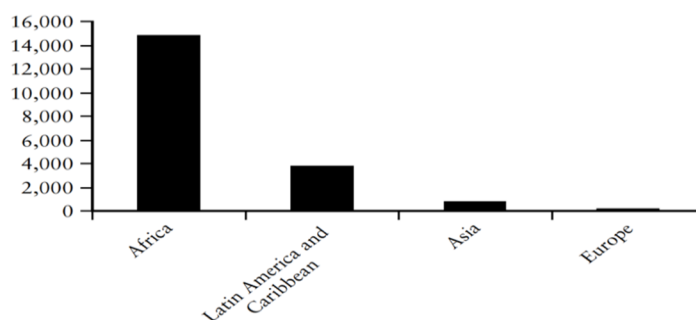


Fig 2. Number of Graduate of Foreign Scholarship Recipients in 2003 [10, 15]

With the establishment of ELAM, which is Cuba's international medical assistance program, Cuba provided much more comprehensive education to more countries. Cuba offered Bolivia more than five thousand full scholarships, which covers almost all the expenses including tuition and living costs. [5]

In addition to providing medical education in Havana, Cuba also helped other developing countries improve their medical education and establish schools. In August 2005, Venezuela and Cuba have established another ELAM or Latin American Medical School. Twelve thousand Cuban doctors who served in Barrio Adentro Program in Venezuela became tutors for ten thousand Venezuelan medical students. [5] According to the official website Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba (MEDICC): "Since its first class of 2005, the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) has graduated tens of thousands of physicians from low-income communities in Africa, Asia and the Americas, including the USA. Thousands more are enrolled in the program, thanks to the full scholarships offered by Cuba." [16] In addition to this, Cuba has organized international teams of medical personnel to provide treatment for AIDS patients in less developed areas. [5] As of 2010, the fifth year of the joint project in ELAM, according to the personal talk between Julie Feinsilver and Dr. Francisco Rojas Ochoa, "today, some of the 50,000 foreign scholarship students who trained in Cuban universities since 1961 (11,811 as doctors) are now in positions of authority and

increasing responsibility." [5] By 2017, ELAM had graduated over 28,500 medical students from 103 countries, showcasing Cuba's long- term commitment to international medical education.

What is even more noteworthy is that compared to two-thirds or even three-quarters of international students who stay in the United States after completing their studies, Cuba requires all international students to return to their home country after graduation. [17] [18]

Cuba's medical education has not only enhanced Cuba's international image and status, but also helped the health and education of the developing countries in the Caribbean and the world at large. Cuba is helping other countries solve social problems in an acceptable way.

3.3. Outcomes

Cuba's comprehensive and proactive public diplomatic policy has rapidly strengthened diplomatic relations between Cuba and developing countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and other parts of the world. It has won unanimous praise from other countries and has established a good national image for itself. According to Sarah A. Blue, "The massive expansion of international missions highlights the challenges faced by Cuban policy makers to exploit its human capital and promote positive international diplomacy while also providing sustainable economic options for Cuban professionals at home..."

At the international level, international missions have had three principle outcomes. They have garnered good will and solidarity for the Cuban government, exported socialist principles abroad and consolidated them at home, and, recently, have earned hard currency for the Cuban state and increased economic security for many professional workers in key sectors at home. At the ground level, since 2003 Venezuelan funding has led to an amplification of Cuban international missions that have given tens of thousands of Cuban health workers the opportunity to earn hard currency through two-year missions abroad.” [19] Michael J. Bustamante and Sweig said: “Still, in a period where basic democratic practices remain a litmus test of a country's acceptance in the international community, it is remarkable that Cuba's one-party government continues to be seen as a trusted and valued partner in many international arenas and institutions, including the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Health Organization, the Non-aligned Movement, and others.” [20]

3.4. Shortcomings of Cuba’s Public Diplomacy

There is no doubt that Cuba’s medical diplomacy bring good national image and financial revenue to Cuba. However, due to Cuba’s political and economic system, its Medical Diplomacy is always hindered or not implemented well.

First, overseas cooperation projects have potentially unstable factors. Because of political system, other countries always criticized Cuba for depriving human rights. And these countries are not willing to accept medical aid from Cuba. Cuba’s public diplomacy faces challenges, particularly in its medical diplomacy, where issues of doctor compensation and human rights have strained relationships with some host countries, such as Brazil. Brazil has refused humanitarian aid from Cuba because of the Cuban government's withholding of doctors' salaries, its refusal to allow doctors to give birth in a foreign country, and many other restrictions.

Second, Cuba itself is an island country with scarce resources. The Medical Diplomacy has cost a large part of Cuba’s financial, human and material resources. According to the report published by the Observatory of Economic Complexity, “In 2017, Cuba exported \$1.41B and imported \$6.21B, resulting in a negative trade balance of \$4.8B.” [21] Under negative trade situation, Cuban government should pay a huge amount of the Medical Diplomacy, which is undoubtedly worse the economy.

4. Conclusion

Since the 1960s, Cuba has used medical diplomacy to build its international image and gain support despite the U.S. embargo. By providing both immediate medical assistance and long-term educational programs, Cuba has helped developing countries without seeking personal gain, enhancing its global standing.

Cuba’s success in public diplomacy is due to unique factors: its vulnerable position as a small island nation, its timely and targeted aid, and the sympathy it garners from its historical struggles. However, this model is not easily replicable by other countries. While Cuba’s medical diplomacy has brought political and economic benefits, it also faces challenges, particularly in the areas of human rights and resource allocation.

Ultimately, Cuba’s unique conditions have enabled it to achieve significant diplomatic success, but these same conditions also highlight the contradictions between political power and individual rights.

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