

The International Reaction to 11-J

John M. Kirk, Dalhousie University

Abstract: This article examines the international reaction to the events in Cuba of July 11. It shows that, with few exceptions, many countries were concerned at the Cuban security forces' reaction to the protests but refused to accept the position of the U.S. government. Particularly noteworthy were the reactions of the Latin American and Caribbean nations.

While most media attention understandably focused on the stunning domestic events of July 11, 2021 in Cuba, the international reaction was also noteworthy—in part because of some unexpected developments. The United States reaction was one of condemnation of the Cuban government, and support for those protesting. The nature of the Biden administration's position is summarized well by the president's official statement of July 12: "We stand with the Cuban people and their clarion call for freedom and relief from the tragic grip of the pandemic and from the decades of repression and economic suffering to which they have been subjected by Cuba's authoritarian regime" (Biden 2021).

But how did the international community react? Did it support the "clarion call for freedom," and accept the revolutionary government's defense of its actions, or stand on the ideological sidelines and await the outcome of the street protests? Were there any surprises in the reactions of any countries, or did they basically follow their traditional politically aligned positions? This chapter seeks to analyze the international response to the events of July 11 and its aftermath.

The protests of July 11 took place during one of the worst periods of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing medical emergency was clearly one factor in the widespread disturbances which erupted that day. Cubans were frustrated by the high numbers of people affected, a situation that had only deteriorated in recent months. The international response to the pandemic in Cuba was therefore a response to the humanitarian crisis as well as (in some cases) a reflection of political support for the government. Unsurprisingly, therefore, much of the aid which was donated to Cuba came from countries with similar political views.

Planeloads of medical supplies came from China, Russia, Bolivia and Argentina, for example. Nicaragua sent two shiploads of food, while Venezuela sent 20 tons of rice and 30 shipping containers of food. Vietnam sent 12,000 tons of rice. Mexico sent three navy ships with food supplies and fuel. Japan sent 25 lung ventilators and 157,000 syringes. Italy, Jamaica and Thailand sent personal protective equipment, while the Dominican Republic shipped 12 tons of medical supplies, and further medical support came from several Caribbean countries (St. Kitts and Nevis, Barbados, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and St. Lucia). Associations of Cuban

residents in several countries, solidarity organizations in many others, unions and nongovernmental organizations also shipped medical supplies and food.

While this humanitarian aid was an indication of support for the Cuban government it had little to do with the broader issue of how the international community regarded the dramatic events of 11-J. As mentioned, Washington strongly condemned the reaction of the Cuban government to the popular protests and called on its allies to follow suit. Its July 25th “Joint Statement on Cuba” ended with a dire warning: “The international community will not waver in its support for the Cuban people and all those who stand up for basic freedoms all people deserve” (United States Department of State 2021). Significantly US allies, including Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Italy and Portugal declined to support this U.S. initiative. European countries, most of which had condemned the US embargo of Cuba several months earlier at the UN General Assembly, were largely disinterested in taking sides. This can be illustrated by the limited European support for the statement--particularly among the continent’s leading powers. The European countries which supported it were generally the smallest and least wealthy--Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland and the Ukraine.

That said, the European Union as an organization did not hesitate in supporting the position taken by Washington. Four days after the “Joint Statement” the EU leadership issued a press release noting that the demonstrations reflected “legitimate grievances in the population about the lack of food, medicines, water and power, as well as freedoms of expression and freedom of the press,” which had now resulted “in the demand for civil and political rights, and for democracy” (Council of the European Union 2021).

This official statement, issued by Josep Borrell, in effect the foreign minister of the EU, was extremely direct. It expressed concern about the repression of the demonstrators and stated categorically: “We unequivocally support the right of all Cuban citizens to express their views peacefully, to make demands for change, as well as to assemble to give voice to their opinions, including in the Internet”. The EU also called for the release “all arbitrarily detailed protestors, to listen to the voices of its citizens, and to engage in an inclusive dialogue on heir grievances”.

The EU statement did not limit itself to the events of July 11, however, or even to the broader demands for greater press freedom and increased respect for human rights. Indeed, Borrell stepped outside the general thrust of his observations and referred to the need for significant structural reforms: “Addressing the Cuban people’s grievances requires internal economic reforms. External trade and foreign investment also play a crucial role in setting the country on a path towards modernisation, political and economic reforms and sustainable growth”.

One of the most surprising discussions in Washington about the events of July 11 revolved around the involvement of the Organization of American States (OAS). On July 26 an emergency meeting of members was called (to be held two days later) to discuss the situation in Cuba. Washington Abdala, Uruguayan ambassador to the OAS and president of the Permanent Council, was keen to focus on the human rights situation and the July 11 disturbances. He condemned the situation on the island: “What Cuba is living through now must be dealt with

immediately. We are talking about hundreds of people being denied their freedom, of having their human rights being affected” (AP News 2021). [All translations from the Spanish original have been made by the author].

The request by Almagro to hold this emergency session of the OAS was roundly condemned by Caribbean Community (CARICOM) nations. In fact, on July 26 they wrote to President Biden, calling upon him to lift the US embargo of Cuba “so that all the rights to which the Cuban state and its people are entitled can be respected and upheld” (Sanders 2021). In all, 13 CARICOM countries requested that the meeting be cancelled. Eventually, when it was clear that a significant number of member countries were opposed to the meeting, it was dropped by the OAS leadership.

The significance of this diplomatic episode is worth noting, particularly its denouement. Traditionally the OAS, and especially under the leadership of Almagro, has supported Washington’s policies in the region. It was expected that this meeting would add to a campaign of international condemnation of events in Cuba, and support Washington’s position on Cuba. But the idea of showing Cuba to be rejected by the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean failed. Instead, it showed the support for Cuba of many of the countries in the region, and indeed the isolation of the US position. Sir Ronald Sanders, the ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the OAS and coordinator of the CARICOM group there, expressed with clarity the feeling of many countries:

No possible useful purpose will be served by any meeting to discuss Cuba. The OAS can enforce nothing on it. Any discussion can only satisfy political hawks with an eye on US mid-term elections, where winning South Florida with the backing of Cuban exiles would be a prize. The task of the OAS should be to promote peaceful and cooperative relations in the hemisphere, not to feed division and conflict. (Sanders 2021).

The position of the Canadian government was more ambiguous. During the Covid-19 pandemic Canada has also provided material support for Cuba, including: 300,000 Covid test kits, \$300,000 to the Pan American Health Organization for the procurement of medical supplies; \$100,000 through CARE for seniors and sanitary personnel in seniors’ residences; \$50,000 through OXFAM for awareness training; \$1 million through the World Food Program for the purchase of rice, peas and lentils; and \$950,000 through UNICEF for medical supplies (Personal correspondence with Canadian officials 2021).

That said, the government was clearly shocked by the events of July 11, and the Canadian media were critical of both the Cuban government’s repression of dissent and the violence shown by security forces. On July 23 Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs, spoke with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla. An official government statement made clear Canada’s position: “Minister Garneau expressed Canada’s deep concern over the violent crackdown on protests in Cuba, particularly the repressive measures against peaceful protestors, journalists and activists, and arbitrary detention. The people of Cuba deserve their full rights to freedom of speech an assembly, as well as democracy” (Government of Canada 2021).

Far less critical was the position of Mexico, which played down the questions of social frustration and government repression. Instead, it focused attention on the punitive aspects of the US embargo and called for the Biden administration to adopt a more humanitarian approach to Cuba. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) condemned the US embargo of Cuba and reminded Mexicans of the near-universal rejection of the US policy at the United Nations General Assembly: “It is not conceivable that in these times somebody would wish to punish an independent country with a blockade. Moreover, almost all the countries in the world are opposed to this blockade against Cuba” (Reyes 2021). He went further, offering personal advice to Biden: “you need to separate politics from humanitarian needs. Life is the most important value and is the very basis of all human rights”.

In addition to showing significant independence toward Cuba, AMLO also offered a message to the international community, encouraging countries who had voted against the US embargo to follow up and provide tangible support for Cuba: “It’s not sufficient to just vote against the blockade every year at the UN. Let me take advantage of this opportunity and make an appeal to all countries in the World, asking you to convert your vote against the blockade into actions, and help the Cuban people” (Reyes 2001). Mexico certainly followed up, sending three ships with food (powdered milk, beans, flour, oil and tinned goods), medical supplies (oxygen, syringes, personal protection equipment), and fuel (100,000 barrels of diesel) to the island. In the past some emergency aid had been sent to Cuba following hurricanes, but never anything of this magnitude.

López Obrador described the US embargo in his morning addresses as an “extreme measure,” inhumane” and a “medieval act” (Verza 2021). Given Mexico’s pro tempore leadership of the Community of Latin American States (CELAC), and his comments on both Cuba’s resistance to the US embargo and the need to replace the Organization of American States “with an organization that is truly autonomous, and not a lackey of any nation” (Verza 2021), AMLO’s message to the US neighbor and major trading partner was clear. The high profile visit of President Díaz-Canel to Mexico in September to celebrate the anniversary of Mexican independence allowed AMLO to express support for Cuba, a country which “like few in the world, has known how to defend with dignity its right to be free and independent, without permitting the interference in internal matters of any foreign power” (La Jornada 2021).

The greatest supporters of the Cuban government in the wake of the events of July 11 were, not surprisingly, China and Russia. North Korea also provided moral support, while Vietnam donated 12,000 tons of rice and President Nguyen Xuan Phuc spoke with his Cuban counterpart to express his confidence in the revolutionary government. China, increasingly a geopolitical and commercial rival of the United States particularly in the Global South, expressed its strong support for Havana. Three major donations of medical supplies (22 and 24 tons in the last two flights) were sent. On August 4 the spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a formal declaration condemning US policy: “China firmly opposes any move to arbitrarily impose unilateral sanctions and interfere in other countries’ internal affairs under the pretext of so-called ‘freedom,’ ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy’... We urge the U.S. to heed the universal appeal of the international community, immediately, and completely lift the sanctions and embargo against

Cuba, and immediately stop making excuses to engage in gross interference and destabilization” (Ross 2001).

Just as valuable for the beleaguered Cuban government as the badly needed medical supplies was the political support from Beijing. On August 30 President Xi Jinping held a phone conversation with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel. The most important areas of discussion, according to the Chinese foreign ministry, focused on their countries’ longstanding bilateral ties, ideological similarities, and development goals. The Chinese president termed them “a model of solidarity and cooperation between developing countries”. He offered increased collaboration in several strategic areas: “China is ready to intensify high-level exchanges with Cuba, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning in the governance of part and state, deepen anti-pandemic cooperation on international and multilateral occasions to safeguard the common interests of developing countries” (Xi Jinping Speaks 2021).

Cuba’s traditional ally Russia also provided political and humanitarian support. On July 26 some 88 tons of food and medical equipment arrived in Cuba, followed by a second planeload of humanitarian aid (28 tonnes of medicines and two tonnes of flour) on August 12. Later that month Presidents Vladimir Putin and Díaz-Canel participated in a phone conversation to discuss the situation in Cuba, and potential avenues of cooperation. Díaz-Canel thanked Russia for its generous support and used the opportunity to confirm the “excellent state of bilateral relations and the importance of strengthening economic, commercial and financial ties, and cooperation” (Redacción OnCuba). An official Kremlin summary of the conversation emphasized “the strategic nature of Russian-Cuban partnership that is rooted in old traditions of friendship and mutual support” (Tass August 25, 2021).

Concluding Thoughts

The events of September 11 caused shock waves in Cuba, with scores of demonstrations around the island demanding reforms. In terms of the international reaction there was an immediate degree of astonishment at the extent of the protests. After things had settled down, however, it was clear that the status quo in international relations with Havana had largely returned, with a handful of countries condemning the Cuban government for its heavy-handed response to the protests, while the majority carried on as before.

The U.S. government was, unsurprisingly, the leader of those countries which criticized Cuba. As noted, Secretary of State Antony Blinken obtained the support of only twenty other countries to demand the freedom of all those arrested after protesting on July 11. The statement of July 25 was supported by conservative governments in the region with the worst human rights records--Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Honduras.

In many ways this embarrassing attempt to rally support for US tactics against Cuba, together with the failed attempt at the OAS, illustrate the international feeling about US policy towards Cuba. This also bears out the latest UN General Assembly vote 184-2 (the US and Israel voting in support) just two months earlier condemning the embargo of Cuba.

In terms of the impact of the July 11 public demonstrations and government response on international relations it was clear that little had changed in terms of allies and adversaries. That said, there were some slight shifts. Chinese support, which in recent years had been less than exuberant due to concern at Cuba's economic management, increased—mainly as a result of Cuba's potential role as a political and commercial bridge to Latin America. Likewise, the CARICOM countries showed stiff opposition to an OAS attempt to gather them into supporting an anti-Cuban position.

Perhaps one of the most striking developments in terms of the international reaction was the position of Mexico, which in recent years under the presidency of López Obrador has clearly sought a leading role in Latin America. His plea to Biden to terminate the US embargo and allow family remittances to Cuba was accompanied by a further piece of badly needed advice for Washington: it was necessary to remember “something which is of fundamental importance: dialogue, dialogue, dialogue” (Garduño and Méndez, 2021). This is clearly a widely held belief in the international community.

Bibliography

AP News, “OEA posterga sesión sobre Cuba tras rechazo de varios países,” July 28, 2021. Found at: <https://apnews.com/article/fa26f4eb51c84baab43123d4b311573f>.

Biden, Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Statement by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. on Protests in Cuba,” July 12, 2021. Found at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room-statements-releases/2021/>.

Council of the European Union, “Cuba: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on recent events,” July 29, 2021. Found at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/29/...>

Garduño, Roberto and Enrique Méndez, “AMLO pide a Biden ‘tomar una decisión’ contra bloqueo a Cuba,” *La Jornada*, July 27, 2021. Found at: https://www.jornada.com.mx/2021/07/27/politica/003n1pol#.YP_Yb...

Government of Canada, “Minister of Foreign Affairs speaks with Cuban counterpart,” Official Statement of July 23, 2021. Found at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2021/07/minister-of-foreign-affairs-speaks-with-cuban-counterpart.html>

La Jornada, “Actuar con grandeza y frenar bloqueo a Cuba, plantea AMLO a Biden,” September 17, 2021, *La Jornada*. Found at: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2021/09/17/politica/002n1pol#.YUUaj...>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Official Statement, “Xi Jinping Speaks with Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel on the Phone” August 30, 2021. Found at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1903327.shtml

Personal correspondence from Global Affairs Canada personnel, August 19, 2021.

Redacción OnCuba, “Díaz-Canel agradece a Putin la ayuda recibida de Rusia en plena pandemia,” *OnCuba News*, August 25, 2021. Found at: <https://oncubanews.com/cuba/diaz-canel-agradece-a-putin-la-ayuda-re...>

Reyes, César, “AMLO sugiere a Joe Biden tomar decisión de levantar bloqueo a Cuba y llama a países a convertir en hechos el apoyo a la isla,” *La Opinión*, July 26, 2021. Found at: <https://laopinion.com/2021/07/26/amlo-sugiere-a-joe-biden-tomar-decision-de-levantar-bloqueo-a-cuba-y-llama-a-paises-a-convertir-en-hechos-el-apo...>

Ross, John, “World mobilises against the U.S. on Cuba—including China,” *Monthly Review*, August 21, 2021. Found at: <https://mronline.org/2021/08/21/world-mobilises-against-the-u-s-on-c>

Sanders, Sir Ronald, “Using the OAS to promote discord over Cuba,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, July 31, 2021. Found at: <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20210731/ronald-sanders-using-oas-promote-discord-over-cuba>.

Tass, “Putin, Cuban president discuss joint projects, future cooperation--Kremlin,” Russian news agency report, August 25, 2021. Found at: <https://tass.com/politics/1330099>

United States Department of State, “Joint Statement on Cuba,” July 25, 2021. Found at: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-cuba/>

“Xi Jinping Speaks with Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel on the Phone,” August 30, 2021 report from the Embassy of China. Found at: <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1903327.htm>