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Renting Recognition: The Subsidised Diplomatic Corps in Havana

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Abstract— Havana hosts more resident embassies than Mexico City. The Cuban foreign ministry records 114 foreign missions accredited on an island of eleven million people whose economy cannot reliably supply its own population with food, fuel or electricity, and among them are missions of states that maintain almost no overseas network at all. This article argues that the explanation lies in price rather than in accumulated prestige. The Cuban state is the sole supplier of diplomatic premises, residences and locally engaged staff, and it can therefore charge one government a commercial rent and another a nominal one for equivalent property. Diplomatic law does not reach that instrument: the Vienna Convention regulates the immunities of a mission comprehensively and the price of its presence not at all. Drawing on the author's observation of the resident diplomatic community in Havana between 2015 and 2021 as a member of a European diplomatic mission, the article describes the tiers of treatment this produced, the circuit through which sending states supplied sympathetic envoys at their own expense, and the reading of the non-interference duty pressed upon resident missions. It argues that the subsidy reliably purchases recognition, and that in a country from which every independent monitor has been excluded for more than three decades the resident missions are the last observers left.

Keywords— Cuba; diplomatic corps; Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations; recognition; non-interference; authoritarian diplomacy; practitioner observation

An Anomaly in the Diplomatic Map

Havana hosts more embassies than Mexico City. According to the Cuban foreign ministry's own figures, 114 foreign diplomatic missions and eight international organisations are accredited on the island (Viera, 2025). The Mexican foreign ministry's directory of accredited missions lists 88 for Mexico City (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, n.d.). Only Brasília is busier: the Brazilian foreign ministry records some 135 resident foreign embassies there (Itamaraty, n.d.). Published lists of resident missions put Buenos Aires at 86 and Santiago de Chile at 71. The country that ranks second in Latin America for resident diplomatic presence has eleven million inhabitants and the largest sustained emigration in its modern history. Its economy has been shrinking for years and cannot reliably supply its own population with food, fuel or electricity.

The anomaly is visible in the choices of individual states, and the clearest cases are the smallest. Djibouti maintains one embassy in the whole of Latin America, and it is in Havana; from there its ambassador is concurrently accredited to Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Venezuela. A state with a very small overseas network selected Cuba, rather than Brasília or Mexico City, as its point of entry to an entire hemisphere. East Timor maintains three embassies in the Americas: in Brasília, in Washington and in Havana, and none in Mexico City or Buenos Aires. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, whose diplomatic network is among the smallest in the hemisphere, maintains a resident embassy in Havana and none in any neighbouring Caribbean state. The pattern is visible from the other end as well: Brazilian compilations of the missions accredited to Brasília note that states without a resident embassy there are generally represented from Washington, Buenos Aires or Havana, which places Cuba among the three capitals from which the hemisphere is covered at a distance. Such decisions may be purely budgetary from the sending state's side, but their effect is not. A resident embassy is a political fact whatever motivated it, and Havana counts it as one.

The reverse side of the picture points to what the network is not for. Cuba maintains 165 missions abroad, including 123 embassies, a network comparable in size to Italy's and larger than Spain's (Lowy Institute, 2024; Viera, 2025). Against those 123 embassies it maintains 21 consulates, half of them in two countries, Spain and Mexico (Viera, 2025). Spain runs 116 embassies and 91 consulates. A consular network serves citizens abroad; an embassy network serves the standing of the state. Havana built the second and not the first, and the ratio states the preference more precisely than any declaration could.

That Cuba's diplomatic presence is disproportionate to its weight has been noticed before. Gabriel Salvia argued in 2012 that the island had constructed a form of diplomatic imperialism whose object was to secure the international support that would supply a legitimacy which, judged by respect for democratic freedoms, the government lacks at home. He

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called the resulting arrangement a kind of international political clientelism, sustained alongside campaigns about supposed external threats, and pointed to the annual General Assembly votes on the United States embargo and to Cuba's repeated election to the Human Rights Council as its most eloquent results (Salvia, 2012). This article treats that as its starting point. Salvia's account does not explain the other side of the transaction. Clientelism describes a relationship of dependence, but it does not say what the client receives, what it costs the patron, or why so many states with almost no overseas network choose to maintain a resident embassy in Havana rather than in a larger capital nearby. Those are questions about the price of presence, and they have not been asked.

This article argues that the Cuban state lowered that price deliberately and selectively, and that the resident corps in Havana is best understood as a purchased good rather than an accumulated one. Where the state is the sole supplier of premises, residences and locally engaged staff, and where the rent charged to one government can be a small fraction of that charged to another for equivalent property, the terms of presence become an instrument of foreign policy. A mission can be made cheap or expensive, quick or slow, comfortable or exhausting, and the difference can be applied one sending state at a time. In the author's observation the resulting hierarchy was legible from inside, and the missions themselves could read their place in it.

The purchase secures less than the size of the corps suggests. A cultivated diplomatic community might be expected to produce support: sympathetic reporting, useful votes, diplomatic cover. The subsidy reliably buys presence itself, and presence is the commodity Havana has always most needed. A state whose principal adversary has spent six decades attempting to isolate it can point to 114 accredited missions as a standing refutation. The corps is not primarily an instrument for producing outcomes elsewhere. To a considerable degree it is the outcome.

Two qualifications frame what follows. The article does not claim that any of the practices described is unlawful; the central legal observation, developed next, is that diplomatic law does not reach them. And it does not claim that states with embassies in Havana are clients or that their diplomats behave improperly; the argument concerns the incentives a receiving state can create, not the integrity of those who respond to them. The evidence is of two kinds: public documentation, and the author's observation of the resident diplomatic community in Havana between 2015 and 2021 as a member of a European diplomatic mission. The latter is reported at the level of pattern rather than incident, names no individual, no sending state's service and no confidential document, and omits anything that could identify a source by elimination. The public figures show that something unusual exists; only the view from inside the corps explains how it was produced.

A Market No One Priced

Everything described in this article is lawful. That is not a concession offered in advance of the argument; it is the argument. Practices that breach a treaty tend to be contested, documented and, in time, abandoned. Practices that fall outside a treaty's reach attract no challenge at all, because there is no forum in which to bring one and no rule by which to say what has gone wrong.

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961 addresses premises twice, and neither provision touches price. Article 21 requires the receiving state to facilitate the acquisition of premises necessary for the mission, in accordance with its own laws, or to assist in obtaining accommodation by other means. The obligation is one of facilitation and is expressly subordinated to domestic law. Article 22 then makes the premises inviolable once they exist. The Convention protects a mission after it has been established and says nothing about what establishing one should cost.

Article 47 appears to fill the gap and does not. It prohibits discrimination between states, but by its own terms that prohibition governs only "the application of the provisions of the present Convention", and it expressly excepts both restrictive application in response to reciprocal restriction and more favourable treatment extended by custom or agreement (United Nations, 1961). Rents, protocol precedence, access to officials and the recruitment of local staff are not provisions of the Convention. Differentiating them between sending states is therefore not discrimination within the meaning of Article 47, nor a breach of anything else.

The omission reflects an assumption about the world, and not an oversight of drafting. The Convention was written for receiving states in which premises are acquired from private owners on a market and the government's role is to remove obstacles rather than set prices. On that assumption a rule about price is unnecessary, because the state is not the seller. The drafters were capable of anticipating receiving-state leverage where they saw it: Article 11 permits a receiving state to require that a mission be kept within limits it considers reasonable and normal. The commercial terms of presence were not seen as a lever, because in the states the drafters had in mind they were not one.

Cuba is the case in which that assumption fails. Since 1962, three years after the revolution, a state enterprise has existed for the specific purpose of housing and servicing the foreign diplomatic community. Cubalse was founded in that

year to provide the diplomatic corps and other foreigners with housing and property management, and when it was liquidated in 2009 its real estate business, including the renting of houses to diplomats, together with the agency recruiting local personnel for embassies, passed to a successor state company (Havana Times, 2009). Foreign missions obtained their premises, residences and Cuban staff from an arm of the state designed to supply exactly those things, and from which there was no alternative. Article 21's deference to the laws of the receiving state, drafted for ordinary planning and property regimes, here defers to a monopoly.

The resulting instrument is worth describing plainly. It can be applied to one sending state at a time, adjusted at will and withdrawn without notice, and it is at no point reviewable, because no obligation has been breached and no body has jurisdiction. It requires no reciprocity, and it is invisible in the documentary record of diplomatic relations, which registers accreditations, agréments and expulsions but not the terms on which a mission lives. It is legible only to those subject to it, which is to say to the resident diplomatic community itself.

The Subsidy and Its Tiers

A diplomatic community is ordinarily differentiated by the weight of the states represented and the standing of their heads of mission. The community in Havana is differentiated along a further axis that the receiving state controls: missions differ in the terms on which they are permitted to exist, and those terms are set by the government to which they are all accredited.

The differentiation was never formal. No schedule was published, no criteria announced, no mission informed of its position. It was nonetheless legible. In the author's observation, over a posting between 2015 and 2021, the resident community understood with reasonable precision which missions were being accommodated and which were not, and on what basis.

The supply of presence

Foreign missions in Cuba do not buy their presence on a market. Chancery premises, residences and locally engaged Cuban employees were obtained from state companies created for that purpose, and during the author's period in Havana the principal supplier of diplomatic housing was the state company Palco. On the author's arrival in 2015, both chancery premises and residences could be obtained only from such state suppliers. Private letting of residences, though not of chancery premises, became possible later in the decade, but Palco remained dominant throughout. At no point was there a market from which a mission could obtain an alternative quotation for its offices.

This distinguishes Havana from the capitals in which most diplomacy is conducted. In Madrid, Ottawa or Pretoria the landlord of a diplomatic residence is a private party and the rent is what the market will bear; the receiving government could not price a mission in or out of the country if it wished to. In Havana that capacity exists as an ordinary consequence of how the economy is organised.

Two tiers

The first and most consequential differentiation was of price. It was reported within the resident diplomatic community, consistently and by colleagues across a range of missions, that rents and related charges for some sending states were set at a small fraction of what others paid for equivalent property. The device was the dual currency system in force until January 2021, under which the state decided whether a given obligation fell due in convertible pesos, pegged to the dollar, or in ordinary pesos worth a twenty-fourth as much for the general population (Mesa-Lago, 2021). The nominal figure could be identical; the real burden differed by an order of magnitude. The underlying agreements are not public, and this account rests on the settled understanding of the diplomatic corps in Havana.

The second differentiation was of quality, and it was directly observable. Missions in favour were offered habitable properties. Others were offered buildings requiring substantial renovation before they could be occupied. In a developed economy that is an inconvenience a ministry can budget for. In Cuba, where cement, timber, paint, fittings and skilled labour were persistently scarce and their procurement itself required state intermediation, a renovation was a project of months and a permanent claim on a small mission's attention. The difference between being handed a house and being handed a ruin was not principally financial. It was a difference in how much of a mission's capacity was consumed by simply existing.

The third concerned access, which is the currency of diplomacy proper. Requests for meetings at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were made formally, by note verbale. In the author's observation the interval between request and meeting varied systematically by sending state, and for some European missions a routine appointment could take up to three weeks. Nothing was refused; the response was simply slow, and slowness of that order changes what a mission can do. A démarche delivered three weeks after the event it concerns is a different instrument from one delivered the same week. Protocol treatment and the level of official at which a mission was received completed the pattern.

A subsidy that costs almost nothing

A conventional subsidy transfers resources the granting state could otherwise have used. This one does not, because the revenue forgone is largely notional. A property let to a small African or Caribbean mission at a nominal charge is not a property that would otherwise have found a paying tenant at a commercial rate; in an economy with no private diplomatic property market and few alternative commercial users, the counterfactual tenant does not exist. Cuba is not spending money on these missions. It is declining to collect revenue it could not have collected anyway. In exchange it receives a resident embassy, an accredited ambassador, a flag at official ceremonies and a name on the list of the diplomatic corps that the foreign ministry itself publishes (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba, n.d.).

From the other side the same transaction looks entirely different, and this explains the pattern set out at the opening of this article. For a ministry maintaining a handful of posts worldwide, the binding constraint on opening an embassy is running cost, of which premises and local staff are the largest components, and not the level of diplomatic interest. Remove that cost and a post becomes affordable that otherwise would not be. A state that can afford three embassies in the Americas will place them where they are cheapest relative to what they yield. That is why Djibouti covers six Latin American countries from Havana rather than Brasília, and why East Timor has a mission in Havana and none in Mexico City: ordinary budgetary decisions of small foreign ministries, taken in a market where one supplier has set its price at close to zero.

Differentiation as a signal

Beyond its material effects, the arrangement does informational work. A subsidy nobody could observe would still reduce costs but would do nothing else. This one was observable, and what missions knew about their relative treatment travelled to their capitals along with everything else they reported. The proposition it conveys is standing and unstated: that the terms of a mission's existence are a function of its government's disposition, and that the disposition is under review. Nothing has to be threatened, because nothing has been promised. A mission whose conditions are good has no undertaking that they will remain so, and one whose conditions are poor has no procedure by which to improve them. The uncertainty is the instrument, and it leaves no trace in any record a third party could examine.

Who is Sent, and What Happens to Them

A receiving state that can price the presence of missions still cannot choose who staffs them. That decision belongs to the sending state, and it is therefore the part of the arrangement Havana controls least. It is also the part that required the least effort, because a significant number of sending governments supplied what the receiving state would otherwise have had to cultivate.

Seniority

The first pattern concerns rank, not disposition. In the author's observation, heads of mission from Caribbean states were frequently senior political figures with previous ministerial experience or equivalent standing in their national systems, rather than career officers at the ordinary point in a rotation. The documented case is Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, whose diplomatic network is among the smallest in the hemisphere. Its embassy in Havana was headed for close to a decade, until early 2026, by Ellsworth John, who had previously served as his country's ambassador in Washington and at the Organization of American States; on his departure the Cuban foreign ministry awarded him its Friendship Medal (CubaPlus, 2026; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, n.d.). For a ministry of that size, Havana and Washington are posts of comparable weight, and the length of the tenure is itself unusual.

Whether such envoys were sympathetic is a separate question. They were, in any case, consequential. A former minister carries standing at home that a mid-career diplomat does not. Such a person's reporting is read where policy is decided, not merely where it is processed, and the access they obtain in Havana is correspondingly better. The receiving state therefore deals, across a meaningful part of the corps, with interlocutors whose favourable disposition has direct purchase in their own capitals.

Selection

The second pattern concerns disposition. In the author's observation, some sending governments, predominantly from Latin America and the Caribbean, appointed heads of mission who were ideologically affine to the Cuban government. The logic was unremarkable and unconcealed: an envoy sympathetic to the host government will find the relationship easier, and a government that wants good relations with Havana has an obvious reason to send one.

The consequence was not an absence of public criticism, since resident ambassadors of any orientation rarely criticise a host government publicly and a study measuring only public statements would find nothing. The difference showed in conduct inside the diplomatic community: whether a mission joined the coordination among like-minded missions on political

questions or stood apart, how visibly it participated in the regime's set-piece occasions, and the tenor of what it conveyed to its capital. These are the dimensions along which the corps was legible to itself, and which the receiving state could observe as readily as its members could.

The loop

Combined with the differentiated treatment described above, selection produces a circuit that sustains itself. A sympathetic envoy arrives already disposed to view the host government favourably. That disposition makes the mission a natural candidate for accommodating treatment, which is supplied. Accommodating treatment, over a posting of several years, deepens the disposition and raises the cost of revising it. Favourable reporting reaches a capital pleased with the state of the relationship, and a pleased capital has every reason to appoint a successor of the same type.

The cost structure is what makes the circuit durable. The receiving state does not purchase the sympathy, because the sending state supplies it at its own expense and for its own reasons. Havana's contribution is confined to differentiated treatment which, as shown above, costs it revenue it could not have collected in any case. A mechanism of influence requiring neither payment nor pressure is unusual, and its principal input is a decision taken in another country's foreign ministry on grounds that have nothing to do with Cuba's intentions.

The vocabulary

The circuit has an output the author encountered directly. The Cuban state's public vocabulary for its domestic critics has been stable for more than two decades. In March 2003, in the repression known as the Black Spring, seventy-five people were arrested and sentenced to terms of between six and twenty-eight years. Among them were independent journalists, trade unionists, librarians and human rights activists, tried under Law 88 of 1999 and presented in the official media as mercenaries in the service of the United States (Amnesty International, 2003). The same formula has been applied since, without material variation, to the Damas de Blanco, to the artists and journalists of the San Isidro Movement, and to the participants in the protests of July 2021, whom the organ of the Communist Party called a grouplet of mercenaries, lumpen and counter-revolutionaries in the service of Yankee imperialism (Granma, 2021). This is the standing designation, applied as a matter of routine to anyone who documents a detention, publishes outside state control, defends a prisoner or petitions for a right the Cuban constitution itself provides for. The practice is not a Cuban invention. The communist states of Central and Eastern Europe before 1989 described their own dissidents in the same register, as hooligans, antisocialist elements or agents of imperialism, and for the same purpose: to characterise a political disagreement as a criminal or foreign enterprise, so that the substance of what was being said never had to be answered.

That a government speaks this way about its critics is a fact about that government. The author, however, heard the same vocabulary from diplomats representing democratic states, applied in conversation to Cuban human rights activists. This is not a claim about any mission's confidential reporting; it is an observation about how people spoke in a professional community over a period of years.

Three things follow. To describe private individuals as mercenaries is to allege a paid agency relationship, an allegation for which no evidence has been produced in any forum and which a diplomatic agent is in no position to make. The people so described were, overwhelmingly, human rights defenders and political dissidents, persecuted for that activity and in many cases imprisoned for it, engaged in exactly the conduct the sending states protect by law at home and fund the promotion of abroad. And a diplomat who adopts the receiving state's own designation for the receiving state's own critics has taken a position on a contested domestic question, on the government's side. Whatever else that is, it is not neutrality. It is the one form of involvement in another state's internal affairs that nobody describes as interference.

What would look different

An account of this kind risks explaining everything and forbidding nothing, and should therefore specify what would count against it. If the circuit were not operating, ideologically affine missions would be indistinguishable from others once formal ties of alliance and regional grouping are set aside: they would coordinate in the same forums, appear at the same occasions with the same visibility, and speak in the same terms. The author observed that they did not, and that the differences were consistent enough to be a standing feature of the community rather than a matter of temperament.

A second point concerns scope. The circuit operates on the conduct and reporting of missions in Havana. Whether it also translates into support for Cuba in multilateral settings is a reasonable question, and the author's view is that it does. Establishing it would require evidence of a different kind from that presented here, and this article therefore claims only what it can show: that the subsidy shapes the information environment of sending governments. That is a real effect, and a sufficient one for the argument made here.

The Non-Interference Norm

The Cuban government has for decades maintained that contact between foreign diplomats and its domestic critics constitutes interference in its internal affairs. The claim is made in legal terms, as a breach of the receiving state's rights, and in political ones, as participation in a counter-revolutionary project. It is not made abstractly. In the author's experience it was made directly and repeatedly to diplomats who met government critics, and on one occasion the author came close to being declared persona non grata and expelled from the country.

The legal claim has a genuine basis, which is what makes it effective. Article 41(1) of the Vienna Convention obliges persons enjoying diplomatic privileges and immunities to respect the laws of the receiving state and imposes a duty not to interfere in its internal affairs. Read in isolation, and combined with a sufficiently broad definition of what counts as internal, it will support almost any complaint a receiving state cares to make.

It is not the only relevant provision, and the others point the other way. Article 3(1)(d) lists among the functions of a mission ascertaining by all lawful means conditions and developments in the receiving state and reporting thereon to the sending government. Article 25 obliges the receiving state to accord full facilities for the performance of those functions. Ascertaining conditions is therefore a core function which the receiving state has a duty to facilitate. Behrens (2014) examines the resulting dilemma at length, observing that restrictive and permissive norms bear on the same conduct and that the Convention offers no guidance on reconciling them.

The Cuban reading collapses precisely the distinction the Convention preserves, treating the gathering of information about the treatment of critics as interference rather than as the discharge of a function the treaty assigns. The reading is not obviously wrong, since the boundary is contested and no tribunal patrols it; and that is the point. There is no forum in which a mission can obtain a ruling that a particular meeting was lawful, and the only sanction available to the receiving state, a declaration of persona non grata under Article 9, requires no reasons and is not subject to review. A contestable reading backed by an unreviewable sanction is, in practice, an authoritative one.

The claim is also inconsistent with Cuba's own practice abroad. Cuban ambassadors in democratic capitals meet whomever they choose, including opposition parties, campaign organisations, trade unions and public critics of the governments to which they are accredited, and no receiving state treats this as interference or suggests that it should stop. The freedom Cuba's own representatives exercise as a matter of course is the freedom it denies to heads of mission accredited to Havana.

The last observers

The reading of Article 41 would matter less if other observers were present. They are not. Cuba is the only country in the Americas that Amnesty International has been unable to visit since 1990 (Amnesty International, 2019). Human Rights Watch is likewise barred from sending fact-finding missions (Human Rights Watch, 2006). The International Committee of the Red Cross, which conducted prison visits in 1988 and 1989, has had no access since, and the government has not invited the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (Freedom House, 2020). After years of requests, Amnesty reported that Cuba's ambassador to the United Nations told the organisation that "Amnesty International will not enter Cuba, and we don't need their advice" (Amnesty International, 2019).

One comparison shows what the exclusion accomplishes. The International Committee of the Red Cross has visited the detention facility at the United States naval base at Guantánamo Bay more than a hundred times, and a great deal is consequently known about the treatment of those held there. It has not entered a Cuban prison since 1989. More is independently established about detainees at a foreign military base on Cuban territory than about prisoners in the custody of the Cuban state, and the difference is a function of who grants access to whom.

This article is concerned with the effect of the exclusion on the standing of the diplomatic corps rather than on the human rights record. Where no international monitor is admitted, the resident missions are among the last independent observers left. Article 3(1)(d), in most postings one function among many, is in Havana close to the only remaining channel through which conditions can be observed by anyone not employed by the Cuban state. Three things follow.

First, diplomatic observation in Cuba carries a weight it does not carry elsewhere. A meeting with a person under surveillance, an attempt to attend a trial, a note recording that a named individual has been detained again: these are ordinary acts of diplomacy, and in a country from which the monitors have been excluded they are also the primary record. Whether a mission maintains such contacts is not a question of style or of how warm it wishes its bilateral relationship to be. It is a question of whether anything independent is recorded at all.

Observation is not the only thing such contact accomplishes, and it was often not what mattered most to the people on the other side of it. A meeting with a foreign diplomat tells a person under surveillance that their situation is known outside

the country and that they have not been left alone with the state. That function is at its most consequential precisely when it is hardest to perform. The author met the head of a Cuban organisation shortly after a police operation against its premises in which materials were seized and its members subjected to body searches, and in which harassment continued afterwards. Nothing in such a meeting alters the conduct of the security services in the short term. It confirms to people who have just been shown the full weight of the state that the effort is registered somewhere and is not futile.

Second, the conduct described in the previous section is graver than it first appears. A representative of a democratic state who adopts the government's designation of its critics is not merely being tactless about people he has not met. He is contributing the government's own characterisation to the only body of independent observation that exists, with the authority of a state presumed to have no interest in defending the Cuban system. The vocabulary does not merely travel; it arrives in capitals carrying a credibility the Cuban state could not itself supply.

Third, there is a form of conduct that leaves no trace and is therefore easily overlooked. Repeating the state's vocabulary is visible; avoiding the subject is not. In the author's observation a substantial number of missions did not meet government critics at all, some from ideological sympathy and others from a straightforward calculation that such contacts would damage a relationship they were there to maintain. The second motive requires no sympathy with Cuban positions and was common among missions whose governments held no particular view. The effect is the same. Where the independent monitors are excluded, a mission that declines to look is not refraining from a controversial activity. It is removing one of the few remaining instruments through which anything could have been seen.

Both edges of the same treaty

Set against the preceding sections, this reveals a consistent posture rather than two unrelated tactics. Where diplomatic law is silent, as on the commercial terms of a mission's presence, the Cuban state acts freely. Where it speaks, as on non-interference, the same state invokes it at its broadest while passing over the provision of the same treaty that authorises the conduct complained of. The Convention is treated as a source of the receiving state's rights and not of the sending state's functions.

The observation that gives this section its point concerns neither the law nor the Cuban government. It is that the reading was accepted by a substantial part of the diplomatic community, including missions of states not aligned with Havana. Asked by the author why they did not raise human rights questions, Latin American colleagues explained that to do so would be to meddle in Cuba's internal affairs, and that this was the reason for their silence. The explanation was offered as a statement of principle rather than as a defence, and by representatives of governments whose relations with Cuba were unremarkable and in some cases, cool.

Of everything described in this article, the norm is the cheapest to operate. The subsidy requires premises, an administrative apparatus and a decision about price. The norm requires nothing at all. Once enough missions accept that ordinary contact with a government's critics is an impropriety rather than a function, the receiving state no longer has to deter that contact, because it is not attempted. Deterrence has been replaced by conviction, and conviction is maintained at the sending state's expense.

The norm also operates asymmetrically. If taking a position on a contested domestic question is what makes conduct interference, a diplomat who repeats the government's characterisation of its critics is interfering as surely as one who meets them. Nobody says so. Non-interference, as understood in Havana, constrained expressions of concern about the treatment of citizens and placed no constraint whatever on endorsement of the state that was treating them. A rule with that shape is not a rule about interference. It is a rule about which side a mission may take, and it was enforced in part by diplomats whose governments would have rejected it as declared policy.

Conclusion

Havana hosts more embassies than Mexico City, and the states that keep them there include some of the poorest and least networked in the world. The explanation lies in the price at which Cuba has been willing to supply diplomatic presence rather than in the accumulated prestige of its foreign policy. The resident corps is better understood as a purchased good than as an earned one.

The mechanism rests on a condition diplomatic law never contemplated. The Vienna Convention obliges a receiving state to facilitate the acquisition of premises and protects them once they exist, but says nothing about what presence should cost, because it was drafted for states in which the landlord is a private party. Where the state is the sole supplier of premises, residences and local staff, and can charge one government a fraction of what it charges another, the terms of presence become an instrument applicable one sending state at a time, adjustable at will and withdrawable without notice. Nothing is breached, so nothing is reviewable; no reciprocity is required; no trace is left in any record a third party could consult; and the revenue forgone could not have been collected from anyone else.

Alongside it runs a second and cheaper device. The Cuban state has pressed on resident diplomats a reading of the non-interference duty under which ordinary contact with its own citizens becomes an impropriety, while passing over the provision of the same Convention that makes ascertaining conditions a function of a mission, and while its own ambassadors abroad meet whomever they choose. Its real achievement is that a substantial part of the diplomatic community accepted that reading, including missions of states with no sympathy for Havana, so that contact did not have to be prevented because it was not attempted.

Three implications follow. The first is for diplomatic law, which regulates the immunities of a mission comprehensively and the price of its presence not at all. Where the government is also the supplier, this leaves an instrument of foreign policy unregulated and effectively invisible, and the gap is available to any state that combines a controlled property market with an interest in who is accredited to it.

The second is for how the international reach of small states is measured. Counts of diplomatic missions are routinely read as evidence of influence; the Cuban case suggests they may equally be evidence of subsidy, and it supplies a simple diagnostic. A state that maintains one hundred and twenty-three embassies and twenty-one consulates, half of the latter concentrated in two countries, has not built a network for the benefit of its citizens abroad. The ratio of embassies to consulates distinguishes a diplomatic service from a claim to standing more efficiently than any assessment of either.

The third is for diplomatic practice. In a state that has excluded every independent monitor for a generation, the resident missions are what remains. Whether an ambassador meets a person who has just been raided, whether a mission records a detention, whether its reporting uses the state's vocabulary for the state's critics or its own: these are not questions of tone or of how warm a bilateral relationship is preferred to be. They determine whether an independent account of the country exists at all. It is a considerable achievement of Cuban diplomacy that so many representatives of democratic states came to regard those choices as matters of etiquette, and it was obtained at almost no cost, which is why it lasted so long.

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