Re-establishment of relations between the United States and Cuba: from geopolitics to identity politics

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I have read and understood the School’s rules on assessment offences and the work herein is my own apart from properly referenced quotations.
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ACRONYMS

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<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>ALBA</td>
<td>Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America</td>
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<td>CELAC</td>
<td>Community of Latin American and Caribbean States</td>
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<td>FPA</td>
<td>Foreign Policy Analysis</td>
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<td>IR</td>
<td>International Relations</td>
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<td>NRC</td>
<td>National Role Conception</td>
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<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
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INTRODUCTION

After more than 50 years of hostility between the U.S. and Cuba, on 17 December 2014, both Presidents formally announced the willingness to start a formal normalization of diplomatic relations (Obama, 2014; Castro, 2014). After more than a year of secret negotiations, this announcement meant a momentous shift in terms of foreign policy and its implications especially for the regional political dynamics (Alzugaray, 2015). This contentious relationship has traditionally been addressed in terms of a Realist Geopolitical analysis (Morales and Prevost, 2008). According to this approach, the relationship of enmity as a struggle for power in the anarchical international system was destined to be perpetual (Morgenthau, 1948). However, the decision to re-establish relations contradicts the Realist argument. Therefore, how was it possible to pass from hostility to the re-establishment of relations between these two states?

Some explanations insist on realist dynamics of power, including structural and domestic variables, affirming that for example the U.S. made this decision as the calculus of benefits regarding Cuba changed (LeoGrande, 2015; Hernandez, 2015). Nevertheless, these explanations ignore that the interests guiding foreign policy are the result of a process of interpretation based on state identity (Weldes, 1996). Therefore, this dissertation aims to examine this case study through a constructivist perspective arguing that both countries needed to affirm their state identities due to the contestation by external and internal actors; then the foreign policy decision of re-establishing relations was the appropriate response, showing a change in the way in which they were playing specific roles in the international system, but maintaining coherence with their identities (McCourt, 2011; March and Olsen, 1989; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012).
Theoretically, this is explained through Role Theory within a meta-theoretical constructivist framework, which has recently been developed by several contemporary scholars as a link between International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis (McCourt, 2011; Thies and Breuning, 2012; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012). Even if no study was found using this specific approach to the current relations of the U.S. and Cuba, its explanatory power has been shown for analysis in Europe, as the one conducted by Aggestam (1999) about identity politics after the Cold War, as well as the analyses of British identity by McCourt (2011; 2014); and more relevant to this case, the studies of Latin American foreign policy by Thies (2008; 2014). Indeed, this approach provides the theoretical elements to determine what roles each state has played historically and currently and how they have influenced the construction of interests through the relationship (Wendt, 1999). In addition, it is shown that the National Role Conception categories proposed by Holsti in 1970 are still useful to analyse current international relations issues; since although the strategies of role-playing may be modified and new roles may be constructed, some roles and identities are so internalized that they remain in the social cognitive structure, which is expressed in the policymakers discourse (Doty, 1993; Weldes and Saco, 1996). Then, it is considered that this approach is more explanatory than a mere realist explanation based on the calculation of objective facts, as foreign policy decisions cannot be comprehensively understood unless state identity is considered.

Thus, in the case of the U.S., for example, the NRCs of regional leader, regional protector and defender of the peace (Holsti, 1970) were contested by the claims against the embargo imposed on Cuba, by the U.S. allies and non-allies, within the institutional frameworks of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN) in the last two decades. In the case of Cuba, the NRCs as independent or bastion
of revolution (Holsti, 1970) were no sustainable anymore in the context of the protracted socio-economic crisis that affects the socialist model in the Island. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the dynamics of interaction through roles, and the effects of role contestation at different levels in foreign policy as well as the implications of the responses to it.

In terms of methodology, a qualitative analysis is developed mainly through the interpretive analysis of state representatives’ discourse of both countries. Besides these primary sources, additional evidence is provided including relevant statistics of each country. All these elements allow examining the socially constructed ideas which are the basis for identities, roles and interests and thus find the answer to the how-possible question posed to understand this shift (Doty, 1993).

In addition, this dissertation is intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship considering the roles and identities of both countries as well as other actors, in order to overcome the traditional focus given only to the politics of the great powers, which in this case invites us to assume that this shift has been more driven by the U.S. Therefore, besides the academic analyses conducted in the U.S. and Europe, and although it has been more difficult to find analyses from Cuban scholars, some of them have been considered (Hernandez, 2015; Alzugaray, 2015; Dominguez, 1998, 2010) as well as analyses from other Latin American scholars (Serbin, 2016; Bobes, 2015; Ortiz, 2014).

Regarding organization, the analysis is developed through three specific objectives. First, this paper aims to explain in theoretical terms why a constructivist analysis which includes the importance of state identity is essential to understand foreign policy in contrast with a mere realist geopolitical analysis. The second objective
is to analyse why the historical relationship between Cuba and the U.S. can be better understood through the social construction of images, roles and identities. Finally, the third objective is to identify which roles are currently being played by each state in the international and regional context and how the contestation about some of these roles finally resulted in a change of relations. Therefore, each chapter is aimed to address each objective in order to arrive at a final conclusion which let us understand to what extent state identity has influenced the decision to change hostile behaviour towards a more cooperative one.
1. Theoretical framework: state identity from a constructivist perspective

In contrast, to a geopolitical realist perspective which has often been the way of explaining the historical relationship between Cuba and the U.S. (Morales and Prevost, 2008), this dissertation considers that the interests defended by both countries throughout the years are not only based on rational calculations to assure power and security, but that the logic to determine those interests is conceived according to their state identities (Wendt, 1992; Hopf, 2002). Now that this relationship of enmity starts to be transformed into more cooperative terms, a realist analysis is incomplete to understand change. Therefore, the need of state identity affirmation through role-playing (McCourt, 2011) as well as the implications of role contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012) can better explain change in foreign policy decision-making.

Geopolitics and Realism

As one of the fathers of the geopolitical thought, Mackinder in 1904 argued that the balance of political power depends on economic and strategic geographical conditions as well as relative military capabilities. However, as mentioned by Deudney (1997: 93), the term ‘Geopolitics’ has been used in world politics analysis with a variety of meanings. In this paper, we consider it as ‘realism with emphasis upon geographical factors’, broadly understood as ‘power politics between states’; which has been a prevalent way of using it, especially by American analysts in the 1990s (Deudney, 1997: 96). This is consistent with Morgenthau’s (1948: 5) realist argument that the national interest, which determines foreign policy, has to be ‘defined in terms of power’; and with the Neorealist view that acting according to this interest implies to look for the country’s security, considering the position of each state regarding the
distribution of power in the system; which has given pre-eminence to great powers (Waltz, 1979). Specifically, the fact that historically the main interest of the U.S. has been assumed to be the annexation of Cuba as part of its territory or at least of its area of political influence, due to their geographical proximity and superior material capabilities (Perez, 2003), corresponds to this definition.

One of the constraints of the realist perspective is that the objective material capabilities are pre-eminent while ideas are considered as unimportant (Ruggie, 1998). Moreover, the national interest is assumed to be determined by the survival of the state in material and power terms within an environment in which self-help is vital and enmity is perpetual, then the possibility of change to more friendly relations is not considered (Wendt, 1992). Furthermore, states are the only actors in the international system, conceived as rational unitary units with the same interest in surviving and therefore without differentiation, thus the analysis is mainly focused on the structure of the system (Waltz, 1979). In the field of FPA, some Neoclassical Realist scholars have tried to overcome the limitation of considering the state as a black-box, including domestic factors as intervening variables (Taliaferro et al., 2009: 56); however, systemic factors are still independent variables which influence decision-making, and a rationalist logic still ignores that the definition of interests regarding any situation or threat cannot be considered as self-evident but is the result of interpretation (Weldes, 1996). Undoubtedly, the Cuban-American relationship cannot be understood unless the images and representations constructed throughout history are considered.

Regarding that this relationship has been developed in a regional context, it has been found that analyses of foreign policy of Latin American countries and their relations with the U.S. have previously been developed in terms of the different roles played in the region (Thies, 2008; 2014). In this context, the role of the U.S. as regional
hegemon due to its superior material capabilities has been considered as determinant for the hemispheric international relations, which has been often linked to Realism or Dependency Theory (Thies, 2014). In this respect, it is evident that a geopolitical realist perspective of the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba is consistent with the trends of academic analysis within the region. Nevertheless, some scholars have proposed constructivist insights for the analysis of Latin American international politics (Thies, 2008; 2014), as well as for the Cuban-American relationship (Weldes and Saco, 1996; Bernell, 2011), showing that considerations of a socially constructed state identity can more profoundly explain the political regional dynamics.

**A constructivist approach to understand change**

Indeed, the realist argument that change is not possible in the international system was challenged by the constructivist claim that the interests and identity of states are socially constructed through their continuous interaction; thus, the lack of a supreme authority which controls the relations among nations could not only result in self-help but also in cooperation, transforming anarchy in ‘what states make of it’ (Wendt, 1992: 395). Certainly, Wendtian constructivism shows more explanatory power for change than Neorealism (Waltz, 1979), which Wendt tries to improve adding the social cognitive element to the material capabilities distribution. Besides, he affirms that ‘power and interest are just as important as before, but constituted more by ideas than material forces’ (Wendt, 1999: 135), which explains that any object (geographical, military, economic) has a material substrate but at the same time the interests and actions towards it are influenced by socially constructed ideas (Wendt, 1992).
However, Wendt assumes in a similar way to Realism that the states are ‘unitary actors with a single identity and a single set of interests’ (Weldes, 1996: 280). Indeed, Wendt (1999: 11) himself accepts that his aim is not to explain foreign policy decision-making, noting that ‘theories of international politics are distinguished from those that have as their object explaining the behaviour of individual states, or ‘theories of foreign policy’. This apparent division between International Politics, focused on the structure of the international system, and FPA, focused on the domestic arena and decision makers; has been contested by several other constructivists who see in the continuous process of co-constitution of agents and structure the way to avoid giving priority to any of these two spheres (Kuvalkova, 2001). In this context, and considering Constructivism as a meta-theoretical approach (Thies, 2009), the premises of Role Theory, previously introduced into FPA by authors such as Holsti (1970), have been further developed in recent literature as a constructivist element which can integrate FPA and IR theory (McCourt, 2011; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012; Thies and Breuning, 2012; Thies, 2009, 2013, 2014; Brummer and Thies, 2015).

**Identity affirmation through role-playing**

Certainly, Role Theory insights considered with a constructivist perspective overcome the limitations of geopolitical realist analysis. First, it allows analysing interaction beyond objective material and power factors, recognizing the importance of identity. McCourt (2011) differentiate the concepts of identity and role, which can wrongly be considered as synonyms. For him, *state identity* is the notion of the ‘‘Self” of the state’, i.e. a ‘predominant set of ideas and images about what a country *is* and *should* be in world politics’ (2011: 1604); while *roles* are specific ‘sets of expectations
about the proper behaviour of an actor in a given social position’ (2011: 1607). Therefore, identity affirmation occurs through role-playing since ‘identity requires the prior existence of social roles which give that identity meaning’ (McCourt, 2011: 1605). As it will be shown, the need of identity affirmation through roles is evident in both countries.

In addition, ‘roles can bridge different levels of analysis, from the individual to the state to the international system’ (Thies, 2013: 29). Moreover, Role Theory acknowledges that consensus about roles is not always possible, then role contestation may occur by other actors at the systemic level, as well as in the domestic field, ‘vertically (between elites and masses) and horizontally (among elites)’ (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012: 5); resulting in changes in the expectations, legitimacy and assessment of consequences related to each role (Brummer and Thies, 2015). The fact that these tensions may result in a change of policy, implies a multi-level explanation for change which better addresses the complexity of international politics. Furthermore, for role analysts, the mechanisms of competition and socialization result in different interests and identities and thus a functional differentiation of units (Thies, 2013). In this way, although the notion of role comes from the theatre regarding specific scripts that actors have to follow (Thies, 2013); through a symbolic interactionist viewpoint (Wendt, 1992; McCourt, 2011), roles are considered as ‘used by individuals to gain a sense of the structure of a particular situation, and the possibilities and constraints on their action therein’ (McCourt, 2011: 1607); thus explaining the co-constitution of agency and structure.

Furthermore, the explanatory richness of Role Theory includes a variety of concepts which allow understanding the dynamics of roles. Role-taking refers to the action by which the Self puts in the Other’s shoes, and taking the Other’s role it can
construct the ‘assumption of the perspective of key Others’ (McCourt, 2011: 1615); while role-making refers to the Self’s choices about the appropriate actions which make a Self-role according to the situation (2011). Furthermore, the concept of altercasting is key as it means that some actors can cast their roles over a relevant Other, aiming to result in a complementary role for the Self (Thies, 2013; McCourt, 2011). Thus, identity affirmation implies a process that is interpretive and practical, which results in the appropriate foreign policy decisions according to the Self’s roles (McCourt, 2011). This is consistent with the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1989) according to which actions are considered as appropriate within the framework of a specific identity; which is different from the logic of consequentiality, often associated with the realist thought, which is focused on obtaining results that maximize interests and preferences. Considering that in this case several policies seem to have been assessed in terms of the logic of appropriateness according to roles and identities, role analysis allows us to go beyond the realist material and power calculations.

Returning to Holsti’s study (1970: 245), his concept of National Role Conception ‘include the policymaker’s own definitions of the general kinds of decision, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions... their state should perform... in the... system’. His typology of 17 national roles was proposed after analysing statements by policymakers of 71 governments, including Cuba and the U.S. (Holsti, 1970). Then, it is considered that in order to analyse the case study through Role Theory, it is necessary to adopt some of the Holsti’s categories. Even if his study was conducted in 1970, both countries have maintained the same regime type (socialism in Cuba, democracy in the U.S.), and in the case of Cuba the same political party in office. Undoubtedly, there have been many changes in the context and role-playing strategies; nevertheless, it is argued that the Holsti’s NRC categories are still applicable...
to the relationship between both countries. These categories are considered through a broader perspective to the Holsti’s one (1970) which assumes that roles are conceived in an individual cognitive level, considering instead that state identity expressed in policymakers discourse is the evidence of the social construction of reality (Doty, 1993).

The need of identity affirmation is explained through the concept of ‘ontological security’, since ‘agency... rests on an identity, which means that actors need stable identities to be ‘actors’ or ‘agents’ at all’ (Mitzen, 2006: 271). Moreover, identity affirmation through the performance of specific roles is related to the legitimacy which is claimed by policymakers regarding their foreign policy actions. Indeed, as stated by Aggestam (1999: 2), ‘The politics of identity refers to a particular set of ideas about political community that policy-makers use and drawn on to mobilise a sense of cohesion and solidarity to legitimate the general thrust of foreign policy’. In this case, it is suggested that the decision to normalize relations is aimed at legitimizing and affirming the state identity of both countries, because that is the way of assuring their position as actors in the system.

In sum, it has been shown that a constructivist analysis focused on the influence of identity politics in foreign policy explains better the dynamics of change and overcomes the limitations of the traditional geopolitical realist explanation. This will be also shown in the case study starting with a brief analysis of the historical bilateral relations.
2. Understanding the historical relations between the United States and Cuba

Throughout history, Cuba and the U.S. have had a complex and unique relationship which has often been explained in realist geopolitical terms, especially by the U.S. intention to expand its power and influence over Latin America (Ortiz, 2014; Morales and Prevost, 2008; Perez: 2003). However, in order to understand the current rapprochement, it is necessary first to understand that their relationship was not only a matter of objective power calculation but a relation of enmity that has been socially constructed through two centuries of interaction, which have implied several interpreted roles, images and representations (Bernell, 2011: 9; Weldes and Saco, 1996: 368).

The geopolitical analysis of the Cuban-American history

Perez (2003) argues that in the case of Cuba and the U.S., proximity and geography are determinant factors to understand their relations, since being close neighbours facilitated their interaction even before they both became sovereign states. Indeed, when being European colonies they maintained commercial relations, which soon became more political as independence motivated strategic movements and territorial expansion (Morales and Prevost, 2008; Perez, 2003). For instance, Jefferson in 1823 assured that he considered ‘Cuba as the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of states’ (as cited in Karnes, 1972: 31). After being a Spanish colony and a U.S. protectorate, the independent state of Cuba remained under the U.S. influence according to the Platt Amendment (1901), which allowed the North Americans to intervene in political, economic and military Cuban issues (Perez, 2003). The U.S. renounced to this right in 1934, after exerting it several times including military occupation (BBC, 2012).
In 1959, after some failed attempts to overthrow President Fulgencio Batista which was considered to be favouring U.S. interests, Fidel Castro became the leader of the Cuban Government (Morales and Prevost, 2008). Then, in the name of the Revolution, in 1960, Castro nationalised all the U.S. companies without any compensation; which was replied with the severance of diplomatic relations and a trade embargo (BBC, 2012). After this, Castro allied with the USSR to promote communism, which was considered by the U.S. as an evident threat regarding an increasing socialist influence in the Western hemisphere (Morgenthau, 1967). Then, within this Cold War environment, the U.S. Government supported an unsuccessful coup d’état known as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the CIA attempted to assassinate Castro several times (BBC, 2012). This escalation of violence reached global extent in terms of insecurity and distrust, when the deployment of soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba almost triggers a nuclear war (CFR, 2014). All these events were read as part of the ‘quest for security’ according to the logic of ‘great-power politics in a bipolar world’ (Waltz, 1979: 166, 172).

According to LeoGrande (2015), after the end of the Cold War the Cuban threat decreased for the U.S. but change was not necessary as maintaining the status quo was not costly; contrarily, the cost to change policy was high in electoral terms and there was the risk of receiving hostile responses by Cuba as after previous intentions of a rapprochement. Indeed, in 1996, the Clinton Administration assured that the embargo was not lifted without the Congress approval through the Helms-Burton Act (CFR, 2014). Similarly, the Bush Administration continued with a ‘strategy of economic and political isolation’ towards Cuba (Gibbs, 2011). In 2008, Fidel Castro retired due to illness and his brother Raul Castro took over the position of President (CFR, 2014).
There are various aspects why the geopolitical realist analysis is problematic. It is important to realize that the geographical proximity and the difference in terms of capabilities regarding territory, military power, economy and political influence, do not generate by themselves a relation of enmity, but instead specific representations of the Other are necessary (Wendt, 1999). In this case, this was the result of the interaction through a series of hostile actions and responses by both sides which gave meaning to the mutual attribution of threat (Wendt, 1992; Weldes and Saco, 1996). Moreover, even if geopolitics can explain part of the relationship in terms of hostility aimed to protect security interests, those national interests were not only a matter of power and objective cost calculations, but were determined according to the identity of each state (Wendt, 1992). For instance, after the end of the Cold War, with a weakened Cuban military power and economy, the Island did not mean any actual material threat to the U.S., however, the fact of being the only state in the hemisphere with a communist regime represented a threat to its values which were internalized as part of its state identity; consequently, President Clinton decided to strengthen the embargo through a legislative act (Bernell, 2011).

Another weakness of the realist reading is that it is focused on great powers, in this case namely the U.S., while the rest of states are downplayed. Indeed, Waltz (2000) assured that the punishment imposed by the U.S. to the countries which challenge its convictions such as Cuba, is explained by the inequalities in the capabilities of states which enable the U.S. to do so as the undeniable greatest power in the system. Similarly, the ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’ was considered as an issue between the two great powers in the context of the Cold War. Consequently, it was assumed that Cuba was being used by the Soviets as a strategic point in the hemisphere. Thus, the agency of the
Cuban Government was not taken into account regarding the need to protect its nation against a continuous threat to its sovereignty (Laffey and Weldes, 2008).

Therefore, it is argued that the geopolitical realist analysis is not enough explanatory to understand the different stages of the historical Cuban-American interaction. Dominguez (1998) suggests that in this particular case it is necessary to complement the realist explanation with ideological and domestic variables. In this dissertation, it is suggested that a constructivist perspective based on role analysis enables us to examine the different levels of interaction (international, regional and domestic), going beyond an analysis in terms of power and calculation in order to understand how that relationship was constructed.

A socially constructed relation of enmity

Considering the complexity of defining such a fluid concept as state identity which comprises a variety of images and ideas that are not fixed (McCourt, 2011); for the present analysis, it is suggested that the relevant state identities are those which have been most evidently shaped since the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and which still constitute a framework for the governance of each state. Indeed, the essential elements of state identity and roles can be found in the respective political constitutions, which in the case of the U.S. was already in force, and for Cuba defined the state values after the Revolution (United States Constitution, 1787: 1; Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, 1976: 1 – emphasis added):

We the People of the [U.S.], in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility… promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty…, do ordain and establish this Constitution...
Cuba is an independent and sovereign socialist state of workers… as a united and democratic republic, for the enjoyment of political freedom, social justice, individual and collective well-being and human solidarity…

Therefore, although these respective systems of values have been the basis for the Cuban-American relationship, their meanings were affirmed through the interaction. It is important to note, that the values in themselves are not opposed and some of them are actually similar as in the case of liberty or population welfare, but the way of interpreting them has contributed to constructing them as contrary (Weldes, 1999). Then, it is suggested that the interaction through specific roles conceived in a framework of specific representations of the Self and the Other is what has shaped the antagonism (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, on the basis of some of the Holsti’s NRC categories, not only a description of individual roles is suggested but it is analyzed how the interaction shaped the construction of each other’s images, roles and role-playing strategies, which in turn affirmed their respective identities (McCourt, 2011).

The most evident role performed internationally by both states after the Socialist Revolution in Cuba is what Holsti (1970: 264) calls defender of the faith, which implies that ‘foreign policy objectives and commitments [are conceived] in terms of defending value systems (rather than territories) from attack’. Indeed, the U.S. has historically claimed that its state actions are driven by the defence of ‘democracy, freedom, human rights, liberty and progress’ (Bernell, 2011: 58). These values have been linked to its role of defender of the peace worldwide, and during the Cold War were associated with the role of anti-communist agent (Holsti, 1970). For instance, President Kennedy (1961: 1, 2) highlighted the U.S. role of defending their values at any cost, during an inaugural address:

Let every nation know... that we shall pay any price... to assume the survival and the success of liberty... only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom... I do not shrink from this responsibility- I welcome it.
By its part, since the triumph of the Revolution, Cuba defined its main values as freedom, equality and independence (Castro, 2000). As mentioned, some of them are not in themselves opposed to the U.S. values, yet its interpretation has determined their meaning as such. For instance, freedom and independence for Cubans mean in part freedom to choose their own political and economic system without the U.S. intervention or influence; moreover, the ‘opposition to U.S. policy’ has been understood as ‘a matter of national pride and national defense’ (Bernell, 2011: 129). Therefore, Cuba complementarily to the role of defender of the faith played the roles of anti-imperialist agent, bastion of revolution and liberator supporter (Holsti, 1970), which had meaning only in opposition to the roles played by the U.S.

Thus, the role of defender of its own system of values has given meaning to the identity of each state, which has been possible through the interpretation of an opposed one to perform this defence; therefore, this opposition is in itself also constructed (McCourt, 2011; Bernell, 2011). This was the context in which, for example, the ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’ was interpreted by the U.S. assuming that military response was compulsory to prevent a threat to the national security; while for Cuba, the missiles were justified to defend themselves from the continuous U.S. interventions and the ‘October Crisis’ was a confirmation of the U.S. arrogance and interference in its sovereign military decisions (Weldes, 1996: 291). The Cuban perspective as defensive is explained by Castro (1968) in a report about the crisis:

We defended these missiles with affection... We were fighting for the first time almost on equal terms with an enemy that had threatened and provoked us unceasingly (As cited in Salas-del Valle, 2003: 11).

Certainly, the Cold War was the framework to play these opposed roles, which, were not only part of a bilateral relation but implied their respective relations with other states
in the system, e.g. the alliance of Cuba with the USSR and its collaboration with leftist revolutions abroad (Bernell, 2011).

At the regional level, the U.S. assumed the roles of *regional leader* and *regional protector* of the American continent (Holsti, 1970), as the result of ‘a series of representations, meanings, understandings and images... marking the entire region as part of a distinct geographic domain within a legitimate sphere of US influence’ (Bernell, 2011: 16). Thus, the U.S. exceptionalism i.e. its self-image as the best country in the world, defined its superiority in relation to Latin America, and consequently over Cuba (Bernell, 2011). During the Cold War, the U.S. pretended self-obligation to enlighten the region with its values explains the need to solve the ‘Cuban Problem’ understood as the ‘threat of Soviet and Communist interference in the Western Hemisphere’ (Weldes and Saco, 1996: 362). Furthermore, besides the interpretation of Latin America as inferior and needing protection, it was considered as underdeveloped in comparison to the U.S. (Bernell, 2011). Then, the U.S. role as *regional developer*, *collaborator* and *integrator* (Holsti, 1970) was played for example through development programs such as the Alliance for Progress (Bernell, 2011).

Nevertheless, Cuba contested the regional leader and protector roles of the U.S., eliminating its direct influence in its domestic policy and adopting communism (Bernell, 2011) and thus defending its role as an *independent* state (Holsti, 1970). The words of Castro (1962) about the Inter-American Conference held in Uruguay some weeks before the exclusion of Cuba from the OAS due to the U.S. lobby, confirm the image of the U.S. in the Cuban view, the contestation about its regional leadership described as imperialism, and their opposed identities:

...a great ideological battle unfolded between the Cuban Revolution and Yankee imperialism ... Cuba represented the people; the [U.S] ...the monopolies... Cuba
[spoke] for sovereignty; the [U.S] for intervention... Cuba for socialism; the [U.S] for capitalism (as cited in Salas-del Valle, 2003: 10).

After the demise of the USSR, their roles continued to be played according to the Cold War representations (Bernell, 2011); however, this radical change of context made it necessary to look for ways to sustain the meaning of their identities in the relationship. For Cuba, which had lost its main supporter ideologically, economically and military, this resulted in the first reforms of the economic system (Dominguez, 1998); nevertheless as Fidel Castro (2000: 1) highlighted, the state was still committed to its values:

Revolution means to have a sense of history; it is changing everything that must be changed… it is defending the values in which we believe at the cost of any sacrifice… is fighting for… justice… which is the foundation of our patriotism, our socialism and our internationalism.

By its part, the U.S. strengthened the isolation policies against Cuba, which as seen did not mean any material threat but a threat in terms of identity (Bernell, 2011). Indeed, the Clinton Administration legally conditioned the lift of the embargo to the transition of Cuba to a democratic regime (Renwick et Al., 2016). Similarly, the Bush Administration adopted in 2003 additional measures including tightened conditions to travel to the Island, a more aggressive information campaign aimed to the Cuban population, and the creation of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (BBC: 2012).

Consequently, several roles shaped the relations between the U.S. and Cuba since the Cuban Revolution; therefore, the change from a relatively close relationship towards a hostile one has not been generated by the geographical or material capabilities by themselves, but because the actions and responses were interpreted according to the constructed images they had about each other, which in the process of interaction were
increasingly shaped as a threat in terms of their opposed roles and identities. These roles have been sustained even after the end of the Cold War because they had their basis in social constructions which transcended beyond geographical or material considerations. But how this constructed enmity opened the door to the possibility of normalizing relations? This is analysed in the following chapter.
3. The shift towards the normalization of relations: role contestation and identity affirmation

Considering the continuity of the hostile relationship between Cuba and the U.S., the re-establishment of relations was an unexpected shift (Alzugaray, 2015), which is a challenge for the analysis of change in international politics. Some explanations point to external and internal factors in both countries, seen from the perspective of rational calculation which includes also geopolitical considerations. For example, LeoGrande (2015: 473) explains this change through four structural factors (‘(1) the threat Cuban foreign policy posed to US interests; (2) the political influence of the Cuban American lobby; (3) the attitude of Latin America towards the US–Cuban stand-off; and (4) the changes under way within Cuba since the assumption of the presidency by Raúl Castro...’) which gradually changed throughout the years until being now in a moment in which the calculus of the costs and risks of the impact of the U.S. policy towards Cuba made possible that President Obama decide for a rapprochement. Similarly, Hernandez (2015) points to domestic factors in both countries, regional and international dynamics, and power asymmetries to explain this shift.

However, it is suggested that the analysis in terms of mere rational calculations of those factors is incomplete as any interest is based on the identity and roles each state plays (Wendt, 1992). It is acknowledged that the social interaction implies changes in the external and internal context, which is evident if we compare the current situation to the political, economic and social scenario in which the embargo was settled (Bobes, 2015). Nevertheless, it is argued that the key element which triggered this shift is the explicit role contestation by some external and internal actors, which made impossible to continue playing roles in the same way than 50 years ago, because that put in danger
the respective state identities (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012; Mitzen, 2006). Then, these dynamics aimed to the affirmation of identity are analyzed in the following paragraphs.

**Contestation over the leadership role of the United States**

During the last two decades, the disagreement on the embargo against Cuba, at the international and regional level, has meant an evident contestation over the leadership and protection roles of the U.S. Indeed, the UN General Assembly has condemned the embargo every year since 1992, assessing it as contrary to the human rights of the Cuban population (BBC, 2015). Considering the U.S. self-image as a leader in the defence of human rights (Bernell, 2011), this implies a contestation about the way of performing the role of *defender of the faith*, suggesting that its policy was incoherent with its identity. Certainly, the lack of support for the embargo policy has been acknowledged by President Obama (2014: 2) in his speech to announce the rapprochement:

...though this policy has been rooted in the best of intentions, no other nation joins us in imposing these sanctions, and it has had little effect beyond providing the Cuban government with a rationale for restrictions on its people.

Furthermore, this contestation over the U.S. leadership role has been more evident at the regional level. In the new century, Latin America started to make increasingly more explicit its contestation about the U.S. political and economic influence, which resulted in the election of several leftist governments in Latin America (Bernell, 2011). Among these, the Venezuelan Government of President Hugo Chavez which promoted the ‘twenty-first century socialism’ became the regional closest ally of Cuba (Morales and Prevost, 2008; 154). In 2004, Chavez and Castro reinforced their ties through a political integration initiative opposed to the U.S. influence in the region
(Bernell, 2011). The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our American (ALBA), comprised of 9 countries including Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Santa Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, was defined as a ‘political, economic, and social alliance in defense of the independence, self-determination and the identity of the peoples comprising it... [separating] “Our America”... from the other America, which is expansionist, and driven by imperial appetites’ (ALBA, 2010: 1 – emphasis added).

Moreover, this and other regional integration initiatives, such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) established in Caracas in 2011, which comprises 33 states excluding the U.S. (CELAC, 2016); are intended to gain independence from the U.S. historical influence, in opposition to the OAS which has been seen as an instrument used to advance U.S. interests (Bernell, 2011). In this regard, it is remarkable that the exclusion of Cuba from the OAS became contested not only by the states which shared socialist ideals; thus, in 2009, the OAS decided to revoke the resolution adopted in 1962 which excluded Cuba from the Inter-American System (OAS: 2009). Moreover, in the OAS VI Summit of the Americas in 2012, Presidents Daniel Ortega from Nicaragua and Rafael Correa from Ecuador did not attend in protest of the exclusion of Cuba; while Dilma Rousseff from Brazil, and even Juan Manuel Santos from Colombia, which has historically been a close U.S. ally, claimed that they would not attend a next summit without the Cuban participation (Wilson, 2012, Leogrande, 2015). Thus, the regional support to Cuba was confirmed regarding its demands of more regional inclusion and the lift of the embargo, in opposition to the Cuban image promoted by the U.S. as isolated (Bernell, 2011).

Certainly, Cuba started to interact more actively in the region, not only as a standard participant but, as showed with the initiative of ALBA, trying to play a new
role of leadership among the regimes aligned with socialist values (Serbin, 2016). Moreover, the identification of Cuba with a role of *regional integrator and mediator* (Holsti, 1970) has been evident for instance since 2011 as it has been the guarantor and host, along with Norway, of the peace negotiations to solve the protracted conflict between the Colombian Government and insurgent groups (Whitney, 2016). It is remarkable that this integrator and mediator role is a new role made by Cuba according to the new context, since it was not identified in the Holsti’s study.

In this context, and considering all the historical constructed self-images of the U.S. as superior and obliged to promote its values to achieve political and economic organization in the hemisphere, the pressure exerted by the Latin American leaders to include Cuba again in the OAS, and the creation of regional organizations opposed to the U.S. influence or at least excluding it, were a clear contestation about the U.S. role of regional leader and protector. This, added to the increasing economic relations of Latin American countries, bilaterally or in bloc, with the EU and with regimes which are not close to the U.S. political values such as China (Domínguez, 2010; Shifter, 2016); had confirmed the decline of the U.S. influence regionally which challenged the social meaning of its identity as leader and integrator.

Consequently, the decision to change the hostile policy towards Cuba was a change of the U.S. strategy, aimed to affirm its state identity in a context of contestation over its leadership role which could not have meaning without the acceptance of the other actors in the system (Brummer and Thies, 2015). Indeed, the U.S. framed the shift as a moment of renewal in its role of regional leader. Thus, Obama, who had opposed the inclusion of Cuba in the OAS Summit in 2012 (Wilson, 2012), during the speech announcing the re-establishment of relations, welcomed the Cuban participation in the
subsequent summit invoking the importance of integration, and evidently trying to altercast the U.S. values on the whole region (Obama, 2014: 7):

...our shift in policy towards Cuba comes at a moment of renewed leadership in the Americas... we are prepared to have Cuba join the other nations of the hemisphere at the Summit of the Americas... I call... to give meaning to the commitment to democracy and human rights... Let us leave behind the legacy of both colonization and communism...

For Cuba, the regional contestation over the leadership of the U.S. and the regional support provided to the Cuban lobby generated the moment to position itself again in the Inter-American System, going towards a leadership role focused on a regional integration beyond the countries prone to socialism. Undoubtedly, the acceptance to negotiate with the U.S. towards normalization and the decision to re-establish relations were part of a change of strategy, which was more appropriate in the context of the reformed socialism that aims to sustain the Cuban state identity. This need of state identity affirmation is analysed in the next section.

The need to affirm the socialist state identity in Cuba

Although during the last few years the Cuban role of defender of the faith (defender of socialism), had significant ideological and material support in the region, e.g. by Venezuela, the sustainability of that role and the socialist identity itself was uncertain due to the difficult domestic situation in political, social and mainly economic terms (Serbin, 2016). Although the ideational factors are determinant for identity, it is necessary also to have a material substrate in order to interact, which in the case of states means an ‘organizational apparatus of governance’ (Wendt, 1992: 402). After the death of Chavez in 2013, the Venezuelan support significantly decreased due to their
own deep economic and social crisis, and in addition, the latest reforms in Cuba have not been enough to make the economy totally sustainable (Serbin, 2016). Therefore, some explanations of the re-establishment of relations point to the interest in a new economic source. This is evident, but what is not considered in such an explanation is that the basis of that economic interest is the need to sustain the socialist model which gives meaning to the state identity.

If identity was not a priority, the Cuban Government would openly portray their reforms as capitalist, however, they have preferred to follow the pattern of China and Vietnam which have reformed their socialist economies and maintained relations with the U.S. (Morales and Prevost, 2008) without renouncing to their state identities. Then it is evident that the Cuban state wants to preserve the defender of socialism role, in this case playing it in the same way of some fellow socialist states, which shows the process of role-making with reference to how those countries played this role with successful results (McCourt, 2011). Certainly, the success of China and Vietnam is acknowledged by President Raul Castro (2016: 4) in his report presented at the VII Congress of the Cuban Communist Party:

The introduction of the laws of supply and demand is not opposed to the principle of planning. Both concepts can cohabit and complement each other… as it has been successfully demonstrated in the processes of reform in China and of renovation in Vietnam…

In addition, the socio-economic crisis has resulted in the decrease in support to the socialist system by the Cuban population because of its ineffectiveness to provide economic and social welfare, thus an increasing part of the population criticise and complain about the disadvantages of the socialist regime (Bolender, 2012). This has been the case of thousands of Cubans which have emigrated especially to the U.S.
throughout these five decades; indeed, ‘in 2013 more than 1.1 million Cuban immigrants resided in the United States’ (Rusin et al., 2015: 1). Furthermore, the continuous demonstrations of political opposition persist in spite of being strongly restricted by the regime, in 2014 there were 8,900 detainees for this reason (Renwick et Al., 2016). This vertical contestation, i.e. by the population opposed to the governing elite regarding the socialist identity (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012) is not new in Cuba; however, after realizing about the ineffectiveness even of the radical economic reforms adopted since 2007, a growing number of people felt more disappointed with the system (Bolender, 2012; Serbin, 2016).

Therefore, it is suggested that the normalization of relations was considered by the Government as part of the response to the demands of its population, and as the international role as an independent socialist state is no longer sustainable externally unless there is an internal solution to the constraints of the socialist system. These limitations are acknowledged by Raul Castro (2016: 3):

> The monetary reordering of the country will ease to... overcome the harmful effects of egalitarianism... Thus it will be possible to correct the... ‘inverted pyramid’ which does not allow paying work in a fair way... generating a lack of motivation in the workforce...

Moreover, this contestation about the socialist state identity by the Cuban exiles throughout the years transcended the Cuban territory and positioned an influential lobby in the U.S. political system in favour of the continuation of the embargo (Gibbs, 2011). In fact, the support of Cuban Americans to the embargo has been one of the main political considerations to get the votes of the Latin American electorate (Renwick et Al., 2016). However, due to the increasing interaction of the new generations of Cuban Americans with their relatives in Cuba their support to the embargo decreased; thus in
2014, 52% of Cuban Americans countrywide opposed the continuation of that policy (FIU, 2014).

Therefore, in this case there is a clear element of contestation by the Cuban population against the Cuban elite regarding state identity and its consequences in the daily life of the population. This evidences the conflict between the role of a socialist independent state and defender of the socialist values with the actual welfare of the population, which in the end resulted in the series of reforms adopted by the Cuban Government not only in terms of its domestic policy but also its foreign policy towards the U.S. In addition, the dynamics of this Cuban issue had their own effects in U.S. politics, which ultimately had to respond to the modification of thought in the young Cuban Americans who themselves posed a contestation over the negative effects of the U.S. main role-playing strategy as anti-communist agent and defender of its faith. Obama (2014: 3) acknowledged this contestation:

...when I came into office - I promised to re-examine our Cuba policy.... we lifted restrictions... to travel and send remittances... And through these exchanges, a younger generation of Cuban Americans has increasingly questioned an approach that does more to keep Cuba closed off from an interconnected world.

**The re-establishment of relations as a way of affirming state identities**

After analysing the constructed images, roles and identities which influenced the relationship between Cuba and the U.S., it is possible to argue that the re-establishment of relations was the best way for both states to respond to the new political, economic and social context as well as to the contestation by external and internal actors, in order to preserve their state identities. Indeed, the outcomes show that the gains in terms of
affirming their state identities were greater for both countries than the losses after this decision.

For the U.S., normalizing its relations with Cuba did not mean any significant benefit in economic or military security terms (LeoGrande, 2015), yet it was an effective response to the external and internal contestation about the incoherence between its strategies of role-playing and its identity. Indeed, it was the best way to position itself again in the region as integrator and protector which in turn allowed it to gain coherence in their international image regarding its roles of defender of the faith, defender of the peace and developer; which have always been part of the U.S. official discourse, but became contradictory considering the increasingly negative effects of the embargo in the rights and welfare of the Cuban population.

Even if there is still strong opposition to the embargo, the U.S. foreign policy decision to normalize relations has been welcomed by many states, especially in the region (BBC, 2014). Although other regional integration forums continue to be developed, with the inclusion of Cuba in the OAS, the U.S. gathered again the hemisphere under the Inter-American system which is mainly identified with the U.S. values. In the following extract, it is evident that the U.S. is willing to continue playing the role of defender of its system of values which will be promoted to Cuba but now through a new strategy of engagement:

I do not expect the changes I am announcing today to bring about a transformation of Cuban society overnight. But I am convinced that through a policy of engagement, we can more effectively stand up for our values and help the Cuban people help themselves... (Obama, 2014: 6).

In the case of Cuba, it clearly gained more economic opportunities to sustain the socialist economic system, which is an essential element to maintain the Cuban state
identity in a similar way to China and Vietnam. Of course, for the Cuban elite, recognizing that the socialist economy has to be reformed adopting some of the capitalist ideas is a drawback, but this has been the price to maintain its identity alive. Additional costs include that the Cuban Government loses a significant part of its argument that the domestic crisis is mainly generated by the U.S. isolation policy (Bolender, 2012); it is evident that the lift of the embargo will not be immediate due to political and juridical constraints (Hernandez, 2015), but the re-establishment of relations and changes in policy adopted until now by both countries make a significantly positive difference in terms of commerce, exchanges and cooperation.

In addition, Cuba is evidently making a new leadership role which was first played in the context of the emergence of new socialist Latin American governments, and after the difficulties and changes that some of them have experienced, the Cuban leadership is now focused on the roles of regional collaborator, integrator and mediator. This dynamic role-playing has given Cuba more support especially at the regional level and therefore more capacity to negotiate with the U.S. as a legitimate regime and; despite the image of superiority internalized in the U.S. state identity, at least diplomatically, now Cuba is considered as an equal state (Hernandez, 2015). Moreover, internally the state has increased its popular support as 97% of the Cuban population considers the normalization as beneficial for Cuba (Partlow and Craighill, 2015).

In sum, the need of identity affirmation has been notably considered by both states to decide the most appropriate behaviour to respond to the changing context and contestation. Consequently, the normalization seems to have been calculated to respond to the national interests but conceived in terms of the respective state identities. For instance, President Obama (2014: 8) highlights the pre-eminence of the U.S. roles as protector, leader, and integrator:
...we are making these changes because it is the right thing to do. Today, America chooses to cut loose the shackles of the past so as to reach for a better future - for the Cuban people, for the American people, for our entire hemisphere, and for the world.

Similarly, the defence of the principles guiding the Cuban state during this process of normalization is emphasised by Raul Castro (2016: 10), as well as its roles of defender of the faith, collaborator and independent:

We are willing to...build a new type of relationship... However... it should not be pretended that... Cuba renounces to the principles of the Revolution... accepts concessions inherent to its sovereignty and independence... or regarding the exercise of its foreign policy, which is committed with... the auto-determination of peoples and the... support to fellow countries.

At the moment, this shift in relations is an evident example of the possibilities of change in international politics, which can be understood only through the construction of interests on the basis of identity and the mutual constitution of agency and structure (Wendt, 1992). The agency of both states has been highlighted in terms of the willingness to start a different kind of relationship, which seems to have been motivated by what each side considered as potential benefits, some of which are now evident. However, those interests show a high influence of considerations of state identity.

Because of this last reason, and considering that in this specific case the regime convictions are closely tied to the identity of the state, the continuity and progress of this process of normalization of relations will depend not only on the socially constructed roles and their possible future contestation, but also on the principles and types of strategies that the future political leaders and elites defend in order to affirm and shape their state identities. Therefore, the insights of Role Theory focused on identity will certainly be useful to understand the future dynamics of this relationship.
CONCLUSION

After analysing this case study guided by the question: How was it possible to pass from hostility to the re-establishment of relations between the U.S. and Cuba? it has been concluded that:

1. Change in international politics cannot be explained by a geopolitical analysis conceived in realist terms as it ignores the importance of interpretation which is always related to considerations of state identity. Therefore, an analysis through Role Theory within a constructivist meta-theoretical framework has allowed us to overcome the limited realist assumption that the state is a rational actor which calculates its foreign policy actions based on national interests which are assessed through self-evident objective facts. Indeed, it has been shown that the different interests that guided the actions throughout the historical relationship between these two countries such as security or liberty have been conceived in terms of their respective state identities. It is true that the geographical factor has been crucial because it implies the impact of physical proximity and the differences in the distribution of capabilities of states in their relations, as well as the regional context as the framework to understand the dynamics of leadership, integration and power. However, those dynamics are better understood through the performance of specific roles in the system, which are linked to the images and representations of the Self and the Other.

Moreover, through the analysis of constructed images and roles it has been possible to examine the implications when a state perceives that any of its roles are contested and how the resulting change of strategies of role-playing can actually affirm state identities. Role Theory has allowed analyzing the impact of role contestation at
different levels and by different actors including states, international organizations, domestic population and even specific social groups such as the Cuban Americans. Consequently, the complexity of the international system has been comprehensively analyzed with the inclusion of domestic actors and factors; thus linking the domains of IR and FPA. Additionally, the insights of Role Theory understood with a constructivist perspective allows considering the co-constitution of agency (by both countries, not only the most powerful one) and structure as a continuous process in which state identity and roles are not fixed patterns but are continually constructed and affirmed within the interaction. Moreover, it has been shown that states are not limited to a perpetual relation of enmity but can transcend to more cooperative patterns without renouncing to their identities.

2. The historical relationship between the U.S. and Cuba can be better understood through the social construction of images, roles and identities. Their relation originally started to be one of continuous exchanges until it became a relation of enmity especially after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, due to the interpretation and representations of the Other as different and threat in terms of state identity and roles. Certainly, the roles that each one played in the international system had meaning in relation to the roles played by the other state, e.g. the opposed roles of defender of the faith (Socialist values - Cuba)/ defender of the faith (Democracy and liberty - U.S.), anti-imperialist agent (Cuba)/ regional leader (U.S.), independent (Cuba)/ regional protector (U.S.). Thus, the enmity relationship was in itself a way of affirming the respective state identities. Indeed, those identities were so internalized that for example, after the end of the Cold War the U.S. continued to
consider Cuba as a threat although it was no longer a material security threat to the U.S.

3. It has been shown that what significantly influenced the decision of re-establishing relations was the need to affirm the respective state identities due to the contestation about roles and foreign policy in two specific respects: First, the leadership role of the U.S. was contested during the last few years regarding the isolation policy against Cuba, especially by the Latin American states which joined the Cuban contestation, claiming for the respect for their sovereignty and political and economic systems. Additionally, the conformation of regional integration organizations parallel to the OAS, such as ALBA and CELAC, as well as the increasing relations of Latin American countries with counterparts different from the U.S. including China, meant the evident decline of its regional leadership.

Second, Cuba needed to affirm its state identity too because its domestic population increasingly has contested the economic and political system even after the inclusion of the last reforms which were not significant to tackle the deep social and economic crisis. The increasing emigration flows of Cubans, as well as the rising number of detainees because of political dissidence, make evident this contestation and the consequent lack of sustainability of the socialist system which is the basis for the Cuban state identity. This domestic contestation has always had an echo in the U.S. by the Cuban exiles which historically defended the embargo policy, but now, considering the perspective of the new generations of Cuban Americans, have resulted in a majority of them which do not support the policy; thus resulting in domestic contestation which pressed for foreign policy change in the U.S.
4. Finally, the decision of re-establishing relations was possible as it was the best way to affirm the state identities of both states as a response to the contestation about the respective roles at different levels. It is not suggested that an analysis based on state identity is the only way of explaining this shift, however it has been shown that it is more explanatory than the geopolitical realist perspective, in order to understand international politics as a continuous process which can result in sharp shifts from the status quo, as in this case, which pose a significant challenge to the academic analysis.

The innovative way in which some FPA scholars have conceived the insights of Role Theory within a constructivist framework, makes us think about the infinite combinations and possibilities to deepen in the analysis of international politics. The academic debate, as in this case, between the explanatory power of geopolitics vs. identity politics is undoubtedly advantageous for academia, policymakers and the population in general in order to understand the different perspectives and dynamics within the international system.
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