

Felipe Pereira Loureiro

Universidade de São Paulo, Instituto de
Relações Internacionais, São Paulo, SP,
Brazil (felipeloureiro@usp.br).

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0001-8159-2543

Hamilton de Carvalho Gomes Jr.

Universidade de São Paulo, Instituto de
Relações Internacionais, São Paulo, SP,
Brazil (hamilton.gomes@usp.br).

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0002-3485-8385

Rebeca Guerreiro Antunes Braga

Universidade de São Paulo, Instituto de
Relações Internacionais, São Paulo, SP,
Brazil (rebeca.braga@usp.br).

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0001-8811-355X

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A pericentric Punta del Este: Cuba's failed attempt to join the Latin American Free Trade Area (LAFTA) and the limits of Brazil's independent foreign policy

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Abstract

This article analyzes a crucial but still neglected episode in Latin America's Cold War: the mobilization of regional anti-Communist governments to oppose Cuba's attempt to join the Latin American Free Trade Area (LAFTA) in August 1962. We focus particularly on the forces that shaped Brazil's position, which initially supported Cuba, but eventually changed course.

Keywords: Cold War; Latin America; LAFTA; economic integration; Cuba; Brazil.

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Introduction

Global History has become a rising star in historical studies. Yet its popularity has not been followed by a consensus on what it means. Some scholars understand Global History as an object of study, focusing on the history of global or transnational issues, such as the environment, oceans, migrations, exchanges, and processes linked to globalization. Others understand it as a method, delving into comparative studies; interactions among local, national, regional, and international units of analyses; or, as Conrad (2015, 67) put it, on how to frame “the problem of causation up to the global level.” There are also those who criticize Global History for being “another Anglospheric invention to integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues” (Adelman 2017).¹

Even if the possibilities opened up by Global History have been exaggerated, a promising venue involves understanding phenomena that have been overlooked or interpreted through Western-oriented

¹ There are many accounts on the meanings of Global History. For a recent compilation, see Darton and Motadel (2018).

lenses and lend weight to peripheral territories. This is what Hogan (2004, 14 [author highlights]) identified as the **denationalization of subjects**. In the area of Cold War studies, Smith's call (2000) for a **pericentric framework for the study of the Cold War** goes in this direction. Over the past two decades, scholars have been investigating how the Third World experienced its own Cold War – understood here not only as a superpower military and political conflict but also as an ideological confrontation. This confrontation involved a clash of two antagonistic paths for modernity (liberal capitalism and communism), which were fought and propagated by multiple and overlapping sets of states and non-state actors, and not only by Washington and Moscow (Harmer 2014; Kirkendall 2014). Understanding how the Third World contributed to “**expanding, intensifying, and prolonging the struggle**” (Smith 2000, 568 [author highlights]) between the United States and the Soviet Union adds up to the effort of denationalizing – and, thus, globalizing – the history of the Cold War.

In studies focused on how the Cold War played out in Latin America, this perspective brought what Joseph (2008) called the **Latin Americanization of the Cold War**. Scholars have been examining how topics that traditionally have been seen as by-products of U.S. motives and policies need to be understood **pericentrically** with Latin Americans at center stage. Contributions in this regard include the Latin American roots of John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress (Darnton 2012); the instrumentalization of Cold War symbols and labels by local elites to resist projects of social justice and democratic participation (Grandin 2004); the role played by Latin American military dictatorships in the destabilization of left-wing regimes in the Southern Cone (Harmer 2012); and the participation of Latin Americans in key episodes of the Cold War, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis (Hershberg 2004a; 2004b; Keller 2015), Salvador Allende's downfall in Chile (Power 2015), and Ronald Reagan's struggle against Sandinista Nicaragua (Armony 2008).²

Despite significant progress toward the **Latin Americanization of the Cold War**, many scholars still frame narratives centered on Washington.³ Historical events in which the United States was not directly involved tend to remain largely unexplored. The object of this paper – Cuba's failed attempt to join the Latin American Free Trade Area (LAFTA) in August 1962 – is a good example. Aside from Salvador Rivera's (2014) book on the history of Latin American integration, no other scholar has ever examined the issue. This includes studies focused on LAFTA, Cuban foreign policy, and the foreign policy of the most important LAFTA members – Argentina and Brazil.⁴

Cuba's interest in joining LAFTA is crucial for several reasons. First, the episode took place six months after the January 1962 Punta del Este Conference, when the U.S. and the largest Latin American countries, led by Brazil, clashed on how to respond to Fidel Castro's Cuba. Eventually, the U.S. prevailed, and Cuba was expelled from the Organization of the American States (OAS) (Franchini Neto 2005). Months later, Cuba's attempt to join a Latin American organization had

² For reflections on how to frame Latin America in the Cold War, see Joseph (2008), Kirkendall (2014), Marchesi (2017), and Pettinà and Sánchez Román (2015).

³ See, for example, Grow (2008) and Rabe (2012).

⁴ See Domínguez (1989), Erisman (1985), Morgenfeld (2012a; 2012b), Míguez (2011; 2015), Reed (1979) and Romano (2008). Walcher (2007, 203) mentions the episode in a footnote without providing details.

strong political implications: at the time Latin American countries had to determine on their own how to deal with Cuba. The fact that they denied Cuba's membership is significant, especially because the LAFTA Charter – the 1960 Treaty of Montevideo – stated that the association should be open to all Latin American countries. The episode is also meaningful because Brazil did not support Cuba's rights the same way it had done at Punta del Este, exposing the limits of the country's so-called Independent Foreign Policy (*Política Externa Independente* (PEI)).

Second, even though LAFTA ultimately failed to create a Latin American free trade area, initially many hoped that it would succeed. Had Cuba been accepted into LAFTA in August 1962, it would have represented a clear move against the U.S. trade embargo. This was consistent with Brazil's arguments at the 1962 Punta del Este Conference. According to *Itamaraty* (Brazil's Foreign Office), keeping ties with Cuba would avoid pushing the country further toward Moscow. The lack of multilateral channels for negotiating with Cuba in the Americas during the October 1962 Missile Crisis was a by-product of the decision to deny Cuba's access to LAFTA, even though bilateral channels, especially with Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, remained open (Hershberg 2004a; 2004b; 2012).

Finally, the case is important because of its long-term implications. After having been denied LAFTA membership, Cuba remained outside of inter-American initiatives until 1975, when the country joined the Latin American Economic System (*Sistema Económico Latinoamericano* (SELA)) (Domínguez 1989; Reed 1979). However, it was only in 1999 that Havana ratified the 1980 Treaty of Montevideo, which established LAFTA's current successor – the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA). Cuba's openness to engage with multilateral organizations in the hemisphere was confined to institutions in which the U.S. was not a member. Although the OAS voted to lift sanctions against Cuba in 1975, Havana stated that it did not have the intention to join the OAS again (Erisman 1985). Only when Raúl Castro came to power in 2008 (alongside the shift in U.S. foreign policy under Barack Obama) that conditions for Cuba's readmission to the OAS were met, resulting, in 2009, in the cancellation of the 1962 Punta del Este Resolution that banned Cuba from the organization.⁵ Therefore, Latin America's decision to keep Cuba out of LAFTA contributed to the extension and solidification of Cold War divisions in the Americas (Smith 2000).

This article seeks to understand why Latin American countries decided to block Cuba's membership in LAFTA in mid-1962. Employing mainly U.S. and Brazilian official documents, we propose a three-step argument. First, the crucial factor was Argentina's radical opposition to Cuba, a key difference from the January 1962 Punta del Este Conference, when Argentina had followed Brazil's lead and supported Cuba's right to self-determination. Second, even though the U.S. exerted indirect influence on Latin American countries, the Kennedy administration did not play a central role in the matter, letting Latin American Cold Warriors, especially Argentina, do the job on its behalf. Finally, Brazil changed its position not because it dreaded cuts to U.S. foreign aid, as Salvador Rivera (2014) argues, but because it took Argentinean threats seriously and feared to undermine the regional integration effort.

⁵ OAS General Assembly Resolution on Cuba (2009).

Setting the Stage: LAFTA and the Context of Cuba's Application to the Association

The Latin American Free Trade Area (LAFTA) was the first substantive attempt at economic integration in Latin America's history. It drew upon debates within the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) on the importance of regional markets for Latin American development. Previous calls and initiatives for the establishment of a free trade area in the region, such as President Juscelino Kubitschek's 1958 Operation Pan-America, also contributed to the project. Established in February 1960 by the Treaty of Montevideo, LAFTA started out with seven members (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay), reaching eleven participants (Ecuador and Colombia joined in 1961; Venezuela, in 1966; and Bolivia, in 1967).⁶ The organization grew out of negotiations between Argentina and Brazil in the late 1950s. Their primary objective was to circumvent GATT pressure to terminate bilateral trade agreements by setting up a multilateral trade association.⁷ Chile and Uruguay joined the project for similar reasons. These four countries accounted for 80% of Latin America's intraregional trade in 1960 (Milenky 1973).

Pragmatic motivations were followed by an ambitious development project. ECLA members envisioned the Argentine-Brazilian initiative as a springboard for a larger free trade area, spurring Latin American development through trade creation and industrialization. As a result, all Latin American countries were given the right to access LAFTA. Article 58 of the Treaty of Montevideo established that the organization should "remain open for the adhesion of the remaining Latin American states," provided that they deposited "the corresponding Adhesion Instrument" with the Uruguayan government.⁸ Therefore, LAFTA membership represented a unilateral decision.

Even though LAFTA did not live up to its most optimistic expectations, the project was not a complete failure. Brazil's exports to Latin America grew two times faster in the 1960s than the country's total exports to the world in the same period; in Argentina, the expansion was even more dramatic – three times faster (Porcile 1995). This increase was due to tariff cuts negotiated on a yearly basis at LAFTA meetings (Porcile 1995; Romano 2008). Not only did LAFTA serve to protect previous bilateral trade agreements from GATT intrusions, but it also stimulated trade, and became a tool for regional development.

The promising start of LAFTA prompted Colombia and Ecuador to join it in 1961. Even Cuba explored the possibility as early as August 1961.⁹ However, a few important factors stood in the way. These included the Cuban Revolution of January 1959, Havana's increasing links with the Soviet Union, and Fidel Castro's backing for hemispheric revolution – all of which brought

⁶ Unless otherwise referenced, information on LAFTA was based on Dabène (2009), Grien (1994), Milenky (1973), Rivera (2014), and Romano (2008).

⁷ The 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) banned bilateral trade preferences. Free trade areas were exempted from the most-favored-nation clause though (Milenky 1973,).

⁸ For the Treaty of Montevideo, see [https://www3.nd.edu/~jbergstr/DataEIAs2006/FTA5yrData_files/PDF%20Files/Latin%20America/LAFTA%20-%20MONTEVIDEO%20TREATY%20\(1960\)%20\(English\).pdf](https://www3.nd.edu/~jbergstr/DataEIAs2006/FTA5yrData_files/PDF%20Files/Latin%20America/LAFTA%20-%20MONTEVIDEO%20TREATY%20(1960)%20(English).pdf)

⁹ ALALC: amanhã, o início das negociações sobre as tarifas (1961, 37); Cuba quer ingressar na ALALC (1961, 9).

the Cold War to the Americas more strongly than ever. Washington became extremely concerned with the prospect of having a Soviet springboard and Communist showcase in the hemisphere and moved swiftly to resist it (Schoultz 2009; Taffet 2014). Some Latin American governments, particularly those most affected by Cuban revolutionary activities and propaganda, such as Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia and Venezuela, also pursued an anti-Castro agenda (Keller 2015). Others, however, especially the largest Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico), were not in favor of a confrontational approach. Brazil's foreign policy during the Jânio Quadros and João Goulart administrations (1961–1964) – the Independent Foreign Policy – represented the most compelling example of this perspective (Storrs 1973; Loureiro et al. 2015).

Brazilian officials, particularly those at *Itamaraty*, argued that normative and policy considerations justified a moderate stand on Cuba. On the normative side, they defended the principles of non-intervention and self-determination. Countries should respect each other's sovereignty by not intervening in domestic affairs and by accepting different forms of social and economic organization. On the policy side, Brazilian officials argued that isolating Havana was not the best way to deal with the Cuban challenge, as it would only push Cuba even more into the Communist bloc (Storrs 1973).

The split between countries that defended tougher vs. softer measures on Cuba became clear during the Eighth Meeting of Consultation of Foreign Ministers of the American Republics in Uruguay in January 1962. Following the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Tiar), Colombia proposed holding the Punta del Este Conference to “consider the threats to the peace and to the political independence of the American states that might arise from the intervention of extracontinental powers” – in this case, Soviet intervention in the Americas through Cuba.¹⁰ Despite strong U.S. pressure, Brazil led a group of large and medium Latin American nations (Argentina, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, and Bolivia) against Cuba's expulsion from the OAS. Brazil's Foreign Minister, San Tiago Dantas, proposed the neutralization of Cuba instead: American countries should accept Havana's socialist order, provided that Cuba severs ties with the Communist bloc and halt revolutionary rhetoric and activities in Latin America (Franchini Neto 2005; Leacock 1990; Weis 2001). No compromise was reached. Instead, Cuba was expelled from the OAS, albeit with the minimum number of votes. The largest Latin American countries abstained, which represented a significant defeat for Washington.

The 1962 Punta del Este Conference sent shockwaves across Latin America. In Brazil, an anti-Communist parliamentary coalition carried out a campaign against the Brazilian foreign policy (Weis 2001). In Ecuador and Argentina, political developments were more decisive, leading to democratic breakdowns. Right after the Conference, the predominantly anti-Communist Argentinean and Ecuadorian military forces compelled presidents Arturo Frondizi and Carlos Julio Arosemena to cut diplomatic relations with Cuba. Eventually, the military decided to remove both presidents

¹⁰ Organization of American States [OAS] 1962. It is important not to confuse this meeting with the August 1961 Punta del Este Conference, which launched the Alliance for Progress – John F. Kennedy's economic aid program for Latin America. See Taffet (2014).

from office. In late March 1962, Frondizi was forced out of power and the president of the country's Senate, José María Guido (a military-controlled figurehead), took his place (Sheinin 2006). In July 1962, Arosemena faced the same destiny, being replaced by a military *junta* (Epps 2009).

The backlash of the 1962 Punta del Este Conference brought serious challenges to the implementation of Brazil's Independent Foreign Policy in hemispheric *fora*, including those in which the U.S. was not a member, such as LAFTA. This was particularly true when it came to Brasília's relationship with Buenos Aires. LAFTA depended on solid relations between Brazil and Argentina. Brazilian officials were aware that divergences with Argentina could destroy LAFTA and harm Brazil's interests in South America.¹¹ *Itamaraty* wished to maintain the same relations with Cuba, but the conditions that had allowed a Brazilian-led coalition at Punta del Este in defense of Havana's right to self-determination had been dismantled after the March 1962 coup in Argentina. Exactly in this context, Cuba decided to challenge the OAS decision by attempting to join LAFTA.

Explaining the Crisis: Cuba's Failed Attempt to Join LAFTA

Less than two months after the Punta del Este Conference, Cuban representatives approached LAFTA's Executive Secretary, Brazilian economist Rômulo de Almeida, and asked about the application process to the free trade area. Two weeks later, in mid-April 1962, Almeida learned that Cuba had set up a study group. The Brazilian Ambassador to LAFTA, Gerson Silva, concluded that this represented a **strong indication** that Cuba was determined to become LAFTA's tenth member.¹² At this point, Brazil was probably the only country that knew how serious Cuba's intentions were. The Brazilian delegation to LAFTA tried to invite Cuba to the Second Conference of the Contracting Parties, scheduled for August 1962 in Mexico City. Five members rejected the proposal – Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru.¹³ Other Latin American countries had been invited as observers, including Anastasio Somoza's Nicaragua, which confirms that Cuba was singled out as an excluded party.¹⁴

The crisis within LAFTA broke out in mid-August 1962, just one week before the opening of the Mexico City Conference: on August 17, Havana deposited the instruments of ratification for the Treaty of Montevideo with the Uruguayan government. This suggests that Cuba was trying to enhance its security not only by allying with the Soviet Union and instigating revolutionary uprisings in the hemisphere – as scholars emphasize –, but also by diversifying and strengthening links with Latin American governments (Domínguez 1989; Erisman 1985). Even if contradictory in principle, both strategies aimed at making Cuba less exposed to US political, economic and military attacks.¹⁵

¹¹ Circular 4250, Brazil's Foreign Ministry (hereafter *Itamaraty*) to Brazil's Diplomatic Posts in the Americas, except Argentina, Canada, and Cuba, 02/04/1962, Book "Secreto Correspondência, Circulares Pareceres, 1961-1962", Arquivo do Ministério das Relações Exteriores, Brasília (hereafter AMRE).

¹² Brazil's Delegation to LAFTA, Montevideo (hereafter LAFTA Montevideo) to *Itamaraty*, 13-14/04/1962 (Gerson Silva's quotation); LAFTA Montevideo to *Itamaraty*, 24-25/04/1962, Book "Telegramas Expedidos e Recebidos, Confidencial, 1962", AMRE.

¹³ LAFTA Montevideo to *Itamaraty*, 27-28/07/1962, Book "Telegramas Expedidos e Recebidos, Confidencial, 1962", AMRE.

¹⁴ Latin Trade Unit Set to Block Cuba. (1962, 48).

¹⁵ Gleijeses (2003) argues that Cuba's stimulus to revolution in the Americas was more rhetorical than real in the 1961–1962 period.

Cuba's move took many by surprise. Despite alleged intentions to join the association, few expected the country to do so, especially after Fidel Castro's February 1962 radical encouragement of hemispheric revolution following Cuban expulsion from the OAS (Erisman 1985).¹⁶ In private, all participants recognized that Cuba's application to join LAFTA was indisputable on legal grounds.¹⁷ However, the association's anti-Communist members were adamantly opposed to it. Given that denying Cuba's application required the passing of a resolution without opposing votes, LAFTA was about to face a serious institutional crisis.

The Kennedy administration immediately understood the gravity of the matter and rushed to push Latin America into blocking Havana's move. In a cable to all U.S. diplomatic posts in LAFTA countries, Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued that "Cuban membership [in] LAFTA [would be] contrary [to the] spirit and intent [of the] Alliance for Progress program and [to the] decisions taken [at the 1962] Punta del Este meeting." Given that Cuba was no longer an OAS member, continued Rusk, Havana should not enter LAFTA, as the free trade area could be regarded as part of the inter-American system. If Cuba were allowed to enter, neither Washington nor OAS institutions (the Inter-American Development Bank, IDB) would provide aid to LAFTA. The Secretary requested that U.S. representatives pass on these views to Latin American officials, "bearing in mind [that the] Department does not wish [to] create [the] impression [that the] U.S. [is] interfering in [a Latin American] organization."¹⁸

Washington officials were aware that Brazil's stance would be crucial for deciding Cuba's future. The U.S. Embassy in Rio de Janeiro swiftly followed through on Secretary Rusk's order, but the results were not encouraging. Political Counselor Robert Eakens met with the Brazilian official responsible for LAFTA matters in *Itamaraty*, Ambassador Henrique Valle. Valle made clear to Eakens that the Brazilian government would follow legal guidelines, supporting Cuba's right to membership. When Eakens mentioned that LAFTA was part of the inter-American system, indirectly suggesting that U.S. money could not be provided to organizations that included Cuba as a member, the Brazilian diplomat did not seem worried. Valle responded that "the U.S. was already cool toward the idea" of providing funds to LAFTA, meaning that U.S. threats did not yet concern Brazil. Valle further argued that the best thing to do was to handle Cuba's application with "indifference," as "nothing would come out" of it due to "technical and practical problems arising from [the] inconsistency [of the] Cuban system with [the] free trade concept."¹⁹

Even more important than the Brazilian perspective was the Uruguayan position, at least during the first days of the crisis. If Montevideo formally recognized Havana's deposit of the instruments of ratification, Brazilian intentions would no longer be relevant. Surprisingly, however, the U.S. Ambassador to Uruguay, Wymberley Coerr, argued for a low profile attitude. In response

¹⁶ Telegram 426, Rio de Janeiro to State Department, 18/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, Classified General Records, compiled 1941-1973 (hereafter CGR), Record Group (hereafter RG) 84, National Archives II, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA), 1; Cuba incorporou-se à ZLC, assinando ontem o Tratado de Montevideu (1962, 9); Cuba Files Plea to Join Latin American Trade Unit (1962, 6).

¹⁷ Circular 283, State Department to Rio de Janeiro, 19/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA. Washington forwarded the telegram number 139 from Montevideo, also written on August 19, to Rio.

¹⁸ Telegram 494, State Department to US Posts in LAFTA countries, 17/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1-2.

¹⁹ Telegram 426, Rio de Janeiro to State Department, 18/08/1962, NARA, 1-2.

to Rusk's August 17 order, Coerr saw the decision to raise the issue with Montevideo as unwise, since the "Cuban move [was] apparently encountering [...] spontaneous opposition" from LAFTA members. Coerr specifically asked to have Rusk's order deferred "unless it appears necessary in view [of] further developments."²⁰ The next day, not only did the State Department follow through on Coerr's suggestion, but it went further: Washington decided to back away from all LAFTA countries. According to the new directive, U.S. diplomatic "posts should suspend further action [to] persuade LAFTA members [to] oppose accession [of] Cuba to LAFTA."²¹

This sudden shift in Washington's policy was in response to pressure from anti-Communist LAFTA members on Uruguay, especially from José María Guido's Argentina. The Argentinean government wanted Montevideo to postpone formal recognition of Cuba's deposit until members decided what to do at the upcoming LAFTA Conference in Mexico City. Initially, the Uruguayan government expressed the desire to follow the legalist line, using the 30-day period from the recognition of the deposit to Cuba's full membership as an opportunity to "adopt decisions [...] that could affect Cuban participation" in the free trade area. Uruguay's Minister of Foreign Affairs told the U.S. Ambassador that he had already "asked select commercial and juridical authorities [...] [to] prepare opinions on [the] possible incompatibility [between] Cuba's state enterprise system with [the] Free Trade Association."²² LAFTA's anti-Communist members did not think that limiting Cuban participation was sufficient. They did not want Cuba included in LAFTA at all.

A swift and decisive Argentinean reaction forestalled Uruguay's legalist intentions. On August 22, Buenos Aires presented a strong protest to the Uruguayan government. According to accounts from the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires, the Argentinean Ambassador in Montevideo argued to Uruguayan officials that five out of nine LAFTA members (Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru) were completely against Cuba's adherence to the association, and that Uruguay could not recognize Havana's act before the LAFTA Conference in Mexico City. Montevideo backed down the same day, postponing the recognition for one week – by August 29 –, which suggests that Argentina's pressure paid off.²³ Buenos Aires achieved its primary objective: to buy time prior to the opening of the Mexico City Conference. The path was clear for transforming what was originally a unilateral legal act into a multilateral decision.

The Mexico City Conference was meant to be the second big opportunity for LAFTA members to negotiate tariff concessions. Brazilian entrepreneurs, particularly those in the manufacturing sector, had been preparing themselves for this meeting for months.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, the Cuban

²⁰ Circular 283, State Department to Rio de Janeiro, 19/08/1962, NARA, 1.

²¹ Telegram 500, State Department to US Posts in LAFTA countries, 20/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA.

²² Circular 307, State Department to Rio de Janeiro (forward Montevideo 146, August 20), 23/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA. As early as August 22 Buenos Aires had been boasting about leaving the association if Cuba got in. See *Ação para deixar Cuba fora da ALALC* (1962, 3).

²³ Telegram 39, Buenos Aires to State Department, 23/08/1962; Telegram 4, Montevideo to State Department, 24/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA.

²⁴ See, for example, the role played by the São Paulo Industrial Federation (*Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo* (FIESP)) ALALC: reunião do grupo de trabalho (1962, 34); "Industriais de três países falam sobre a entidade (1962); Indústria têxtil e a ALALC (1962, 15); ALALC: segue para o México a representação de São Paulo (1962, 22).

problem took precedence over anything else.²⁵ Argentina led a coalition of four LAFTA countries (Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru) supporting an amendment to the Treaty of Montevideo. Buenos Aires claimed that new participants could only be accepted in the organization upon the approval of two thirds of the members.²⁶ Brazil and Mexico did not agree and wanted to follow the legal rules. They argued that it was better to limit rather than deny Cuba's participation in LAFTA. Chile and Uruguay began supporting the legalist position, but very quickly moved to the Argentinean side. U.S. officials understood that this had occurred mainly because of pressure from Buenos Aires.²⁷ During the Conference, Argentina sent a request to Montevideo, supported by its four backers plus Chile, asking for an indefinite postponement of the recognition of the Cuban deposit. The Uruguayan government acquiesced.²⁸ Now Cuba's adherence depended on the decisions that would be made at the Mexico City Conference. The impasse endured as amendments to the Treaty of Montevideo and LAFTA resolutions had to be approved without opposing votes. This meant that Brazil and Mexico held veto power over the Argentinean proposal.²⁹

On the opening day of the Conference in Mexico, the State Department reauthorized U.S. representatives in LAFTA countries to press against Cuba's membership to the free trade area. Even though the State Department considered "gratifying and understandable [the] reluctance [on the] part [of] host governments [to] permit Cuba [to] participate [in] LAFTA," American officials were still worried. For example, even if Montevideo was about to "be persuaded by anti-Cuban LAFTA members [to] avoid [the] acceptance [of Cuba's] accession instrument," Secretary Rusk still considered important to let Uruguayan officials know that the United States "would prefer [Cuban] non-accession [in LAFTA] to non-participation."³⁰ It seems that Montevideo dropped its legalist position not only because of Argentinean pressures but also due to American pressure.

However, Washington's turnaround cannot be overestimated. The Kennedy government continued to be cautious when dealing with LAFTA. As the Mexico City Conference dragged on, with Brazil and Mexico remaining adamant in their positions, representatives of the Argentinean government asked the U.S. for help. On August 31, the Political Counselor of Argentina's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Santos Muñoz, directly inquired with the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina, Robert McClintock, "if it might not be possible for [the] U.S. to quietly make a demarche with Brazilian and Mexican governments." According to Muñoz, Buenos Aires feared "a negative vote particularly from [the] Brazilian delegation." Even though McClintock promised to pass on the request to the State Department, he considered that the U.S. was "sensitive about taking initiatives

²⁵ Cuba Issue Perils Latin American Trade Bloc (1962, 2).

²⁶ Confronta la ALALC uno de sus más graves problemas (1962, 1-2); ALALC estudia a proposta argentina (1962, 9).

²⁷ Telegram 4, Mexico City to State Department, 30/08/1962; Airgram 118, Montevideo to State Department, 01/09/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1.

²⁸ Telegram 4, Mexico City to State Department, 30/08/1962; Airgram 118, Montevideo to State Department, 01/09/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1

²⁹ Confronta la ALALC uno de sus más graves problemas (1962, 1-2).

³⁰ Telegram 522, State Department to US Posts in LAFTA countries, 21/08/1962, Folder "510.1 Free Trade Area", Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1-2.

over what was an entirely Latin American conference, although our attitude toward Cuban regime [is] well known.”³¹ More importantly, McClintock said he thought that Brazil and Mexico would abstain, without providing further details.³²

Washington’s confidence in a possible shift by Brazil and Mexico probably had to do with previous Argentinean maneuvers at Mexico City. Buenos Aires had taken a radical stance the day before, threatening to put the entire integrationist project at risk in case Brazil and Mexico did not cede. On August 30, the Argentinean Chargé d’Affaires at the Conference informed U.S. representatives that “four or five nations would automatically abandon LAFTA if Cuba [were] admitted.” Hence, concluded the Argentinean official, Cuba’s accession would be a “dead [issue] from [a] practical standpoint,” as the association would cease to exist.³³ On the following day, Mexican newspapers reported that LAFTA was in danger and faced “one of its gravest problems.”³⁴

Coincidentally, after Argentina threatened to destroy LAFTA, Brazil stepped back. A compromise was reached on how to prevent Cuba’s accession to the association. *Itamaraty* was against amending the Treaty of Montevideo, so a commission of four jurists was set up to draft resolutions.³⁵ The commission elaborated two resolutions: the first stated that countries whose economic regimes were **incompatible** with the principles of the Treaty of Montevideo could not have their instruments of ratification accepted; the second affirmed that Cuba’s economic system was **incompatible** with LAFTA. It also established that as long as the Communist regime persisted, Havana could not join the association.³⁶ Once Brazil decided not to use its veto power, Mexico stood alone in defending Cuba’s rights, though only for a short time.³⁷ As the only non-South American LAFTA member, Mexico had never had the same level of involvement with the free trade area. Soon the Mexican government gave up on Cuba as well. On September 3, with seven votes in favor and two abstentions (from Brazil and Mexico), the resolutions were approved. Cuba could not join LAFTA.³⁸

Evidence suggests that the key motive behind Brazil’s position was the fear that LAFTA would break up if Argentina’s stance were not accepted. Right after Cuba’s membership had been denied, the head of the Brazilian delegation in Mexico City, Henrique Valle, argued that Brazil had abstained “in obedience above all to the spirit of cooperation [...], and in order not to impede the progress of important negotiations which await us.”³⁹ The Brazilian newspaper

³¹ Telegram 44, Buenos Aires to State Department, 31/08/1961, Folder “510.1 Free Trade Area”, Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1.

³² Telegram 44, Buenos Aires to State Department, 31/08/1961, Folder “510.1 Free Trade Area”, Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1.

³³ Telegram 4, Mexico City to State Department, 30/08/1962, NARA, 1.

³⁴ *Confronta la ALALC uno de sus más graves problemas* (1962, 1–2). Rationally, terminating LAFTA would go against Buenos Aires’ own economic interests. Argentina probably approached the US asking for Washington’s help to press Brazil to avoid a worst-case scenario. Despite Argentinean pleas, there were no further U.S. engagements with Brazilian officials, at least as far as declassified documents allow us to go.

³⁵ *ALALC: o caso cubano seria resolvido amanhã* (1962, 2); *Secretos os entendimentos acerca do ingresso de novos membros da ALALC* (1962, 9).

³⁶ *Segunda Conferencia de las Partes Contratantes* (1962, 576–7).

³⁷ Telegram 5, Mexico to State Department, 01/09/1962, Folder “510.1 Free Trade Area”, Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 1; *De México depende hoy la admission de Cuba a la ALALC* (1962, 1, 3).

³⁸ *Incompatibilidad entre Cuba y los países libres* (1962, 1, 6); *Cuba foi excluída da ALALC* (1962, 22); *Rejeitada Cuba na ALALC* (1962, 1).

³⁹ Enclosure 1, “Foreign Office Note on Cuban Adherence to Treaty of Montevideo”, enclosed to Airgram 346, Rio de Janeiro to State Department, 26/09/1962, Folder “510.1 Free Trade Area”, Box 137, CGR, RG 84, NARA, 3–4.

“*Jornal do Brasil*,” a traditional venue for *Itamaraty* to publish anonymous statements, was much more direct, arguing that Brazil’s position was related to the “threat, made by countries that [did] not have diplomatic relations with Cuba, to leave [LAFTA] if the Cuban government were admitted.”⁴⁰ As *Itamaraty* considered LAFTA a key initiative, it did not have any option but to concede. The U.S. Embassy in Rio arrived at the same conclusion. On the one hand, the Embassy stated that *Itamaraty* was “unable to find any ‘juridical’ reason in the Treaty of Montevideo for excluding Cuba;” on the other hand, Brazil’s Foreign Office was “aware that a vote in accordance with that conviction might wreck LAFTA in the face of threatened walk-outs by other members.”⁴¹

Brazilian diplomats offered several indications that they regarded positive relations with Argentina as crucial for Brazil. Even though the Brazilian Embassy in Buenos Aires showed great discomfort with the Argentinean position on Cuba’s application to LAFTA, dubbing it as a “merely political [position], without any legal foundation,” it also argued that the Brazilian government could not be “hostile towards her [Argentina] in any way [...], because we have permanent interests here that cannot be forgotten.”⁴² One of these **permanent interests** was specifically LAFTA. Since late 1961 the Embassy had been engaged in trade negotiations with the Argentineans within the framework of the free trade area.⁴³ The aim was to stimulate Brazilian exports to LAFTA members, especially to Argentina (considered a key market), to manage Brazil’s serious balance of payment crisis.⁴⁴ According to the Embassy, “Argentina constitutes the virtual outlet (*escoadouro virtual*) for Brazil’s increasing manufacturing production.”⁴⁵ Brazilian entrepreneurs were also optimistic about LAFTA’s prospects of increasing the country’s exports, particularly of industrial goods.⁴⁶ All of this diplomatic effort would have been lost if LAFTA ceased to exist. It is important to highlight, however, that the João Goulart administration (1961–1964) in Brazil continued to support Cuba’s right to self-determination.⁴⁷ Surely, the LAFTA episode showed that Brazil’s independent foreign policy had limits, such as those regarding the country’s basic economic interests in the Southern Cone. However, this does not mean that the Brazilian authoritarian dictatorship’s anti-Cuban policy had its roots here.

⁴⁰ Rejeitada Cuba na ALALC (1962, 1).

⁴¹ Airgram 346, Rio de Janeiro to State Department, 26/09/1962, NARA, 1.

⁴² Quotations come from, respectively, Telegram, Buenos Aires to *Itamaraty*, 24/08/1962, Book “Buenos Aires, CTs-Telegramas Recibidos Expedidos, Confidencial, 1960-1962”, Box 262, 1; and Report 368, Buenos Aires to *Itamaraty*, 16/06/1962, Book “A-L, Ofícios Secretos, 1960-1962”, Box 7, AMRE, 4.

⁴³ One example of these initiatives was the constitution of the Argentinean-Brazilian Special Group for Cooperation in the Manufacturing Sector. See Telegram, Buenos Aires to *Itamaraty*, 24/10/1961, Book “Buenos Aires, CTs-Telegramas Recibidos Expedidos, Confidencial, 1960-1962”, Box 262, AMRE.

⁴⁴ San Tiago diz que posição do Brasil ante Cuba não muda nem pode mudar (1962, 3). This crisis came down to decreasing commodity prices, rigid imports, and high short-term financial liabilities. See Loureiro (2014; 2017).

⁴⁵ Report 368, Buenos Aires to *Itamaraty*, 16/06/1962, AMRE, 4.

⁴⁶ Indústria têxtil e a ALALC (1962, 15); ALALC: segue para o México a representação de São Paulo (1962, 22).

⁴⁷ Examples include Brazil’s somewhat dubious attitude during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 and the country’s support for Cuban participation in the Latin American preparatory meetings for the upcoming United Trade Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in March 1964. See Hershberg (2004b), Weis (2001).

Finally, Argentina's motives came down to the political turnaround following the March 1962 military coup. The appointed leader, former Senate President José María Guido, was caught in the middle of a ferocious political struggle within the Armed Forces. Factions in the military disagreed about the best way to resist what they regarded as a serious local Communist threat supported and instigated by Cuba (Sheinin 2006). The most extreme elements of the Armed Forces, the so-called **reds** (*colorados*), had strengthened their hold on President Guido on the eve of the Cuban application to LAFTA.⁴⁸ It was no coincidence that Argentina played a key leadership role during the episode, and it would continue to do so. When the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out in October 1962, Guido's Argentina provided the most enthusiastic response in favor of the U.S.: not only did it back Washington at the OAS and pledge support for the U.S. quarantine, but it quickly followed through with the promise, deploying naval and aerial forces in the Caribbean (Keller 2015; Morgenfeld 2012b). Post-Frondizi Argentina proved to be an important Cold Warrior in Latin America.

Conclusions

Cuba's attempt to join the Latin American Free Trade Area in August 1962 led to a serious crisis in the region's most ambitious project for economic integration. LAFTA's main leaders, Argentina and Brazil, were on opposite sides. Buenos Aires saw Havana's membership as a serious threat to regional security and sought to stop it at any cost. This meant infringing the Treaty of Montevideo, which unambiguously granted all Latin American nations the right to join LAFTA. Brasília, on the other hand, following the principles of the Independent Foreign Policy, understood that Cuba's right to self-determination and LAFTA rules should be respected and that Havana's adhesion to LAFTA would not negatively impact the organization. In the beginning, Uruguay, Chile, and Mexico shared Brazil's perception. Yet, Argentina prevailed. The association broke its own norms and kept Cuba out. This decision represented a ratification of the January 1962 OAS Punta del Este Conference, excluding Havana from inter-American multilateral *fora*. However, this time the decision was made by Latin American countries within the framework of a Latin American institution.

Buenos Aires was the key obstacle to Cuba's membership. The Argentinean military, buttressed by March 1962 military coup, reversed the country's foreign policy, carrying out a clear anti-Communist line in inter-American affairs. With indirect U.S. support, Argentina exerted strong and successful pressure on Montevideo, preventing the Uruguayan government from recognizing Havana's deposit of LAFTA's instruments of ratification. The matter was then taken to a LAFTA meeting at Mexico City, transforming what should have been a unilateral act into a multilateral decision. During the meeting, Buenos Aires led a group of five countries that threatened to

⁴⁸ Intelligence Note, Power Struggle in Argentine Military, Roger Hilsman to Secretary of State, 09/08/1962, folder "Argentina General 8/62", Box 7, Countries, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston (hereafter JFKL), 1-2.

abandon (and, thus, to destroy) LAFTA, leaving Brazil no choice but to acquiesce to Argentina's demand. The Brazilian government and entrepreneurs considered LAFTA a key initiative and were looking forward to strengthening economic integration in Latin America, especially with Argentina. LAFTA was seen as a means to stimulate Brazilian trade and reverse the country's serious balance of payment crisis. Argentina's threat to destroy LAFTA caused Brazil to step aside from its commitment to the association's norms and the principle of self-determination, putting economic interests in inter-American affairs ahead of the country's foreign policy principles.

This story is highly significant because Cuba's failed attempt to join LAFTA was determined more by the attitudes of Latin American countries than those of the United States. Washington clearly wanted Cuba out of LAFTA, and initially made an effort to avoid it. Ultimately, however, the Kennedy administration assumed a low profile position, allowing regional Cold Warriors, especially Guido's Argentina, to take on the effort. This does not mean that the U.S.' role was unimportant. In fact, Washington had been leading multilateral actions against Cuba in the Americas for some time – the best example being Havana's expulsion from the OAS at the January 1962 Punta del Este Conference –, and had helped Argentina to push Montevideo into an anti-Cuban position during the crisis. Nonetheless, neglecting the actions taken by Latin Americans, regardless of the influence that the U.S. had on them, makes it impossible to understand why Cuba was kept out of LAFTA.

The case also illustrates how one possible way of understanding Global History – through Michel Hogan's **denationalization of subjects** and Tony Smith's **pericentric perspective** – allows us to build a broader interpretation of the Cold War in Latin America. At key moments, Latin Americans stood at center stage against what they perceived as a significant threat to their way of living. The Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro's regime represented such threats; that's why Latin American Cold Warriors fought hard to block Cuban ascension to LAFTA. The August 1962 Mexico City Conference represented then a sort of Punta del Este reloaded, but one in which Latin Americans, not the United States, played the central role against Cuba.

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