

Carefully Guarded Criticism:

India's position on the 1965 American intervention in the Dominican Republic

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The onset of the Cold War brought Latin America and the Caribbean – despite being firmly within the American sphere of influence – into a tug-of-war in which any political innovation in the region was ostensibly understood by the United States as an act of Communist penetration. After the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the victory of Juan Bosch in December 1962 in the Dominican Republic's first free elections – allegedly with a pro-Communist bent – witnessed the rising expectation of a possible US intervention in the region, which eventually came to pass in 1965. After Bosch was removed from power by a coup in September 1963, a military junta installed a new president, Donald Reid Cabral. Having failed to gain popular support, Cabral was unable to curtail the numerous factions that sprung up to defeat him. By 1965, supporters of Bosch attempted to reinstate him, sparking civil war and a [US intervention](#) to quell the continuing political unrest.

Issues such as the Dominican Crisis gained an almost immediate Cold War imprint, becoming flashpoints between the two superpowers. In addition, the role and position of the non-aligned movement on such issues took on a greater significance, and India, owing to its historical



experiences, remained at forefront of this bloc. India's policy during the Cold War, despite its inherent weaknesses, was marked by both idealism and pragmatism – and by a careful understanding of what a non-aligned policy entailed. India had always remained silent, never publically proclaiming its political position on the numerous international crises that concerned either of the superpowers. As such, India also maintained its silence on the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Separated by a span of just three years from the Cuban crisis, India was under pressure to make its position on the 1965 US intervention in the Dominican Republic clear, especially since preparations were underway for the Second Afro-Asian Conference – to be held in Algiers in 1965, but ultimately cancelled due to the Sino-Soviet split and the fall of the Ben Bella government in Algeria. The upcoming conference caused concern in India that its silence on this newest incident would permanently implicate them as "a lackey of American imperialism." Several diplomatic correspondences between the Deputy Secretary and the Foreign Secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in New Delhi, as well as their interactions with Indian Foreign Minister Swaran Singh, hint at the significance of safeguarding its sword against the United States, despite intense pressure from the Soviets. In one such instance, the request of Soviet leaders to comment on the American intervention in the Dominican Republic in the Foreign Minister's statement during his visit to Moscow in 1965 was refused by the Minister himself. Swaran Singh discreetly convinced his hosts that since India and Indian leaders had not yet expressed their opinion on the issue, it would not be



"appropriate" for him to articulate them on his first visit abroad. He did, however, affirm that he would do so upon his return to India.

Interestingly, the Soviet-Indian Communiqué issued on 19 May 1965 acknowledged the presence of neo-colonialism in Latin America for the first time: "The Soviet Union and India favor the complete elimination of the colonial regimes which still remain. They are against all forms of colonialism and neo-colonialism and express their sincere support for the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America who are struggling for the achievement and consolidation of freedom and independence." India knew that due to internal and external pressures, the Soviet Union did not want to leave the Dominican question unanswered, and as such were pushing for a stronger condemnation of the military actions of the United States. Officials inside the MEA also believed that even at the risk of "offending" Americans, India had to take a position on the Dominican Question. Nonetheless, India did not want to lose American military and economic aid by acceding to a Soviet request to support the draft resolution for the Algiers Conference, which included sharp-edged wording against American imperialism. India's Permanent Representative to the UN also refused a Soviet proposal to discuss the specifics of this question at the UN Security Council despite "considerable pressure" from the Soviet Union.

Conversely, at Algiers, India would not be able to avoid criticizing the US military intervention as it had managed to do at previous sessions of the United Nations: "We would also be accused of having lost 'anti-imperialis[t]' ardor and having become a 'status quo' power." Indian MEA



officials explicitly believed that "our place in the 'Afro-Asian Sun' is nearly as important to us as the continuation of US military and economic assistance." MEA files discussed the two options available to India: one, confining itself to supporting the "anti- neocolonial" struggle in Latin America; or two, going further and specifically targeting the presence of US troops in the region.

It must be noted that the MEA was quite reluctant to attack the United States by specifically speaking out against the "sphere of influence policy" – a critique Afro-Asian nations were adamant to include in the resolution – since it formed the historical basis of American foreign policy. India believed that not only the United States, but India, the Soviet Union, and most other powerful nations also had "spheres of influence," even if the Soviets did not "blatantly" announce it as the Americans did. India was also wary of the fact that an attack on the Monroe doctrine – which held that any European intervention in the Western hemisphere was an act hostile to the United States and was at the time nearly synonymous with US President Lyndon B. Johnson's foreign policy – might not be to the liking of the President, who had a reputation for being quite "sensitive" to the criticism of his policies. Inside the MEA, officials at one point even flirted with the idea of issuing an official statement on the Dominican issue, but without naming the United States.

Several requests from the Soviet Union to finalize an official statement only made India more anxious. India's foreign ministry was of the view that unless and until Indian leaders stated their position on this question



domestically, silence must be maintained abroad. Indian foreign ministry officials agreed among themselves that the Provisional Agenda for the Algiers Conference was too harsh, and were also unhappy at the inclusion of the Cuban question in the document.

For policy guidance, the Indian Government referred to the Cairo Declaration (1964) that called upon "foreign pressure and intervention to impose changes in the political, economic, and social system chosen by a country are contrary to the principles of international law and peaceful co-existence, requests the Government of United States of America lift the commercial and economic blockade applied against Cuba." The MEA was of the opinion that since Cuba has already shifted its trade to Europe and the Soviet Union including the notion of a "continued" commercial and economic blockade in the Provisional Agenda was quite "emotive." Beyond that, Cuba had resolved to settle their differences with the United States peacefully, and as such it was unnecessary to mention the issue. On the Dominican question, well aware of the fact that the Chinese – perhaps with the backing of the Soviet Union – would join forces in launching a "vitriolic attack" on any American action, the MEA held the view that India wished to show its disapproval of the United States, but did not feel it necessary to "toe the [harsh] Chinese line" either. Instead, India intended to discuss the matter based on the "principles of policy" by "reiterating our policy that we are against the interference in the internal affairs of one country by any other country." India was "certainly against military intervention by a third power."



The MEA approved a statement expressing "concern at the reappearance of the concept of 'sphere of influence' in the thinking and pronouncements of world statesmen" without making any reference to the United States. By using a "generally-worded statement," India believed that it was not only stating its position on the Dominican situation, but also correspondingly signaling to the United States that it also opposed the Peking-Sukarno position on Malaysia, which denied Malaysia independence from Indonesia. Internally, it was argued that India's position in its present form would make clear that a US attack on the [Peking-Sukarno line](#) on Malaysia was "acceptable" and justified. Afro-Asians, on the other hand, would interpret it as critical of US presence in the Dominican Republic. Further, India expressed its displeasure at having to enter too far into Cold War questions in relation to Indonesia and Malaysia, and reiterated that it had recognized Malaysia, and stood by that position. MEA officials also made clear that India would rally for the inclusion of Malaysia in the Afro-Asian Conference. In order to prevent a major fallout – over the one-sided opposition to US policy – India took an ingenious position to let the various parties interpret the same things differently. By doing this, India hoped to create a safe exit on this issue.

Against this backdrop, the Indian Foreign Minister's visit to several East African countries on a trade mission was also in some sense connected to the Dominican question. The MEA wanted the Foreign Minister to refrain from speaking on this question, as India was still officially without a position. Nonetheless, the MEA prepared specific talking points for the Foreign Minister, in case a press conference was held at



Algiers, which included the following suggestion: "We have followed with concern the developments which have taken place in [the] Dominican Republic. We are against external interference, military or political, in the internal affairs of another State. We are in favor of a peaceful settlement of all situations by negotiations between the parties concerned without outside interference. The Security Council is still seized of the Dominican situation. Within the last few days there has been some normalization of the situation in the Dominican Republic and we hope that the people of the Dominican Republic will be able themselves to settle internal disputes that [have] arisen in that country without any intervention." Eventually, based on speculation, the MEA agreed to follow a careful approach at the Algiers Conference and, if the "need arises, vote for a resolution which the majority desires."

All the information utilized in preparing this blog has been sourced from File no. WII- 104/33/66, Indian attitude on American Intervention in the Dominican Republic 1966, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

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