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Asa McKercher. "The Most Serious Problem'? Canada-U.S. Relations and Cuba, 1962." *Cold War History* 12:1 (February 2012): 69-88. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2011.562202.

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Review by **Adam Chapnick**, Canadian Forces College / Royal Military College of Canada

It has now been fifty years since the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world as close to nuclear conflict as it has ever been. The passage of time, not to mention the end of the Cold War, has made North American governments more willing to allow researchers access to documents that shed significant light on the nature of western relations with Cuba in the early post-second world war era. Asa McKercher, now teaching history at Cambridge University, is one of a number of scholars who have taken great advantage of the wealth of newly available archival material. The resultant discoveries add significantly to scholarly understanding of the Canada-United States-Cuba dynamic.

McKercher's focus in this article is on the under-studied Canadian response to U.S. efforts in 1962 to internationalize Washington's economic embargo of Cuba. The general conclusion – that the government in Ottawa sought to maintain a well-founded, independent position without unduly affecting the tenor of the Canada-U.S. relationship – is not surprising, but the analysis is nonetheless valuable in terms of the insights that it offers into Canadian and American diplomatic thinking at the time.

The story in the article is recounted in an accessible manner. Canadian and American policies towards Cuba in the early 1960s were similar in intent – both states feared Communist expansion within the Americas – but radically different in implementation. While the U.S. lobbied the Organization of American States (and Canada, which was not yet a member) to pursue a comprehensive trade embargo against the island state, the Canadian government of Progressive Conservative John Diefenbaker, in spite of its distaste for the Castro regime, expanded trade on non-military items. McKercher likely both overplays and underplays the politics of the Canadian move – making too much of the demonstration of Ottawa's independence and not enough of the economic benefit of

the policy to prairie farmers¹ – but there is no question that Diefenbaker’s approach was well-received at home. Nonetheless, once Canadian representatives in the United States came to realize the importance that Washington attached to its allies’ Cuba policies, both the Department of External Affairs and its Secretary of State, Howard Green, made significant efforts to accommodate President John F. Kennedy’s concerns.

Indeed, McKercher notes, Canada was far more sympathetic to U.S. pleas for less tolerance for the Castro regime than were other so-called allies in Central and South America. Over time, as the Kennedy administration came to appreciate the steps that Ottawa had taken to accommodate its concerns², relations between Canada and the United States improved. As a result, concludes McKercher, “even the prime minister’s actions during the missile crisis did little to alter this move from ‘friction to cooperation’” (71).

The article, which is refreshing in its explicit and detailed consideration of economic diplomacy, reaffirms the notion that Canada’s approach to international trade was above-all pragmatic. John Diefenbaker differentiated between his anti-communism and his perception of the importance of cultivating new export markets for Canada’s non-strategic goods. He and his government did not believe that sacrificing Canadians’ economic prosperity would help contain or deter Soviet aggression. At the same time, once Ottawa realized how angered Washington had become, it quickly adjusted its approach to accommodate its greatest ally’s needs. At no time, then, was the Canadian government unclear about its national interests. While the economic gains from trading with Cuba were important, no policy could threaten the long-term stability of the relationship with the United States.

Historiographically, this article is noteworthy for its nuanced portrayal of Secretary of State for External Affairs Howard Green. Typically known as the minister in the Diefenbaker government who was most supportive of the prime minister’s lack of explicit support for Washington during the initial stages of the Cuban missile crisis, here Green comes across as significantly more aware of the importance of the bilateral relationship.³McKercher might have said more about Green and his thinking, and an assessment of the differences between the Minister and his Prime Minister on this issue

¹ See, for example, Kenneth Norrie, Douglas O’ram and J.C. Herbert Emery, *A History of the Canadian Economy*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Thomson Nelson, 2008), 380.

²Why McKercher finds it odd that “the Kennedy administration seems to have initially ignored Canada’s helpful position” (71) is unclear given the lack of priority that governments in Washington have traditionally given to relations with Ottawa.

³Robert Bothwell has recently made a similar suggestion. See his *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945-1984* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2007).

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(81) might have been illuminated by the recent scholarship of Patricia McMahon⁴, but this article's observation is critical regardless.

McKercher's interpretation of Canada's resistance to U.S. calls for it to join the Organization of American States (73) is also less thorough than it might have been – members of the Department of External Affairs were near unanimous at the time in opposition to efforts to regionalize the international system, an approach to power politics which would have inevitably diminished Canada's influence worldwide⁵ – but this point is not critical to the article's overall findings.

In sum, McKercher has utilized previously unseen diplomatic documents ably and in doing so has added nuance to contemporary understanding of both the Canada-U.S. relationship and the effect of American efforts to apply economic sanctions in Cuba prior to the missile crisis.

This is a good article, one that will serve students and scholars of North American history well.

Adam Chapnick is the deputy director of education at the Canadian Forces College and an associate professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. His most recent book is *Canada's Voice: The Public Life of John Wendell Holmes* (UBC Press, 2009).

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⁴Patricia I. McMahon, *Essence of Indecision: Diefenbaker's Nuclear Policy, 1957-1963* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

⁵See, for example, John W. Holmes, *The Shaping of Peace: Canada and the Search for World Order, 1943-1957*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 257.