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Switzerland's Representative Role in US-Cuba Relations

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Cuban leader Fidel Castro in discussion with Swiss Ambassador Emil Stadelhofer in 1964. (Swiss Federal Archives)

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For 54 years US and Cuba had no diplomatic relations. During this period Switzerland represented the mutual interests of the two enemy countries.

As US Secretary of State John Kerry made history during a milestone visit to Cuba last Friday of August 14th, to reopen the US Embassy in Havana, a little unknown fact is bound to spring up. When the US and Cuba severed ties in 1961, Switzerland was asked to step in as protecting power of US interests in Cuba and vice versa. Swiss authorities took over American interests in the island and worked through many diplomatic challenges in the years that followed.

The assignment of Switzerland as protecting power was unexpected. This was no ordinary task. The Castro-led revolution had just nationalised American businesses and properties in Cuba and the threat of war was ever present. Swiss diplomats had to act swiftly and carry out duties that are not normally included in a protecting power mandate.

One of the first tasks was the repatriation and safe return of US diplomats and citizens. It took almost two years to ensure that all American citizens who wanted to leave could do so safely.

Then the infamous missile crisis happened in 1962 when President Kennedy had to rely on all possible channels of communication in order to avoid an air strike and a potential escalation into a Third World War. At this time the Swiss ambassador in Havana, Emil A. Stadelhofer, who had built a special relationship with Fidel Castro, played an important role in relaying messages from the US to the Cuban leader.

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Another immense task for the Swiss diplomats was the organising of the departure of massive numbers of Cuban refugees whom Castro allowed to leave for the US. During 1965 some 9,268 Cuban citizens were transported by sea and air to Florida, US. The Swiss embassy officials had to interview, document and clear each one of them prior to departure. The process continued until 1973 by which time 260,737 refugees had entered the United States this way. According to US diplomat and academic Wayne S. Smith "no protecting power has ever before or since shouldered a greater burden".

Interventions like this continued in the intense period up until 1977 when a unit called 'US Interests Section' was established at the Swiss Embassy in Havana that allowed American officials to work on administrative issues. However, Swiss negotiators and diplomats continued to carry a representative role up until July 20th, 2015, when finally the two countries established diplomatic relations in Washington and Havana.

Switzerland's representation of US interests in Cuba and also of Cuban interests in the US is the longest protecting power mandate in history. What made the Swiss role unique is that it came amidst fears of another world war; it involved emergency situations and required strong skills and actions from Swiss diplomats. Traditionally the role of a protecting power is limited to processing visa and documents and relaying the occasional diplomatic note. But experts agree that the Swiss representation of US interests in Cuba and vice versa went beyond the normal bureaucratic tasks and involved many unusual assignments.

Neutral Switzerland first started acting as protecting power for other countries in late 19th century-looking after interests of the Kingdom of Bavaria and the Duchy of Baden in France during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. In the First World War it assumed 36 protecting mandates and during the Second World War Switzerland represented the interests of 25 countries. This was the time when the Foreign Interests Section was the largest office in the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs in Berne.

During the Cold War period whenever international tensions would arise Switzerland was quite often called to act as a protective power for various countries. Currently Swiss authorities act as protective power for US in Iran, for Iran in Egypt, for Russia in Georgia and vice versa. Although the number of mandates has decreased over time the Swiss role as representative of interests of foreign countries is still important.

(Courtesy of Swiss Embassy in Tirana)