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YUGOSLAV FOREIGN MINISTER VRHOVEC VISITS CUBA

By Zdenko Antic

Summary: The recent visit of Yugoslav Foreign Minister Josip Vrhovec to Cuba may be seen as another attempt to bridge the deep differences in relations between the two nonaligned countries. While Cuba, which now holds the chairmanship of the Coordinating Bureau of the Nonaligned, is in favor of a closer alliance with the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc, Yugoslavia suggests that the nonaligned movement be genuinely independent. These disparate positions, shared by other members, of late virtually blocked any constructive activity by the nonaligned countries.

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According to the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug, Yugoslavia's Federal Secretary for Foreign Affairs Josip Vrhovec left on September 17 for Cuba, where he was to confer with Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca. (1) The meeting between the two men would concentrate, according to Yugoslav reports, on bilateral relations, the current international situation, and on the nonaligned movement.

The most recent high-ranking Yugoslav visit to Cuba was made by the late President Tito last September to Havana during the Sixth Nonaligned Summit. In May of this year, Malmierca was a member of the official Cuban delegation sent to Belgrade to attend Tito's funeral. On that occasion Malmierca had brief meetings with Josip Vrhovec. (2) Significantly, Fidel Castro unexpectedly did not go to Belgrade. His absence from Tito's funeral was noted with surprise by both domestic and foreign observers. (3) Finally, it is an interesting point that Vrhovec's current visit to Cuba is taking place shortly after Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko ended his own visit, in the course of which he met with Fidel Castro. TASS noted the coincidence of stands between the two countries on all major international issues.

This carousel of visits in the Belgrade-Havana-Moscow triangle, as well as Castro's unexpected absence from Belgrade last May, are indicative of some of the problems, differences, and strains in the bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and Cuba. While bilateral relations at the state level are more or less normal, relations at party level have always been reduced to the minimum, and profound differences on a variety of issues concerning the international communist movement, its policy, and interparty relations are well known. What the Yugoslav Communists have followed with concern and deep suspicion was Cuba's ever deeper commitment to supporting Moscow's African and Asian expansionist policies. Cuba's military intervention in Angola and Ethiopia is regarded by Yugoslavia with disapproval, and Cuba's staunch backing of the Vietnamese military intervention in Kampuchea, and of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan have served to deepen still further existing differences between the two countries and parties.

Two completely different political concepts, two different strategies of nonaligned policy lie behind the differences over Kampuchea and Afghanistan. While Yugoslavia conceives nonalignment

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- (1) Tanjug in Serbo-Croatian, 17 September 1980.
 - (2) Tanjug in English, 10 May 1980.
 - (3) See Zdenko Antic, "Castro's Absence From Belgrade Shows Deep Yugoslav-Cuban Differences," RAD Background Report/121, (Yugoslavia), Radio Free Europe Research, 22 May 1980.

as an genuinely "bloc-free" movement, and an instrument with which to bring about the gradual disappearance of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact military blocs, the Cuban concept of nonalignment includes a close alliance with the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc countries. These differences have increased since the Sixth Nonaligned Conference held in September 1979 in Havana. The fact that Cuba was the host for that conference, and that Castro was there made Chairman of the Coordinating Bureau of the Nonaligned Movement for the next two years (1979-1981) enabled the Cuban leader and his supporters to propagate openly for a rapprochement between the nonaligned countries and the Soviet-dominated "socialist bloc," arguing that the latter countries are "the natural allies of the nonaligned countries."

The Cuban attitude, which is supported by a dozen or so radical, pro-Soviet countries, caused serious differences at the Havana summit, in particular concerning the case of the Vietnamese military intervention in Kampuchea, an act that was strongly condemned by the majority of the nonaligned countries. The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan three months later caused even more friction among the ranks of the nonaligned. Yugoslavia and the majority of the nonaligned countries voted for an unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan in the UN General Assembly, while Cuba and the radical nonaligned countries voted against the motion. Together with its radical pro-Soviet supporters, Cuba has continued to block virtually every nonaligned move designed to condemn Soviet military intervention.

It is against this background that Foreign Affairs Secretary Vrhovec will try to find some means of resolving the political stalemate within the nonaligned movement. The Yugoslav leadership is well aware that, in a situation where there is an increasing number of military conflicts among the nonaligned countries, incited directly or indirectly by the concentrated and coordinated interference of the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Cuba, the nonaligned movement, bereft of a resolutely clear position, is condemned to gradual erosion and finally to a total collapse. In such case, the most important pillar of Yugoslavia's foreign policy, which is also one of the main tenets of its political philosophy, will vanish.

It is, therefore, quite certain that the main objective of Vrhovec's conferences in Havana will be to find a minimal common denominator with Cuba, which might enable the two countries to draft a constructive platform for the next meeting of the foreign ministers of the nonaligned countries, scheduled for next January in New Delhi. Yugoslavia and a moderate majority of the nonaligned countries were successful in getting New Delhi selected, rather than Havana, as the site of the next conference. In the meantime, however, India, too, has moved closer to the Cuban position as far as the Kampuchean and Afghanistan issues are concerned. The Yugoslavs are therefore afraid that a solution is further away than ever before. It may be that the communiqué following Vrhovec's Havana conferences will shed some light on this complicated problem.