

Soviet Foreign Policy Toward Different Audiences and with Conflicting Premises: The Case of Nicaragua

by
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INTRODUCTION

Growing Soviet economic and military involvement in Nicaragua has seriously complicated an emerging but inchoate "post detente" mood in Soviet-American relations. It has been the catalyst for a partisan debate in the United States where bitterness has been of a very high order. It has also raised major questions about the alleged discontinuity between Brezhnev's and Gorbachev's Third World policies. This study will examine that policy under the following rubrics. First, it will deal with American national security concerns about growing involvement. Nicaragua will be placed in the late Brezhnev period global ideological context, Soviet perceptions of the characteristics of the Sandinista revolution will be presented and Soviet policy will be described briefly. Moscow's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Nicaraguan regime will be outlined. This will be followed by a presentation of Soviet perceptions of American policies and the opportunities and dilemmas those U.S. policies present to Soviet policy makers. Finally, Soviet-American diplomatic sparring over Nicaragua will be outlined in terms of Moscow's attempts to reconcile its competing demands and conflicting pressures.

NICARAGUA AND AMERICAN SECURITY CONCERNS

The United States government has a strong elemental reaction to the establishment of Soviet military bases or facilities in Central America, a reaction exemplified in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. A Soviet military base in this hemisphere might threaten the Panama Canal, critical sea lanes, Mexico, or the United States itself. Any Central American state, it is argued, that enters into a relationship with the Soviet Union or Cuba would create a dangerous situation for reasons of geographic proximity alone. A base, as part of that arrangement, would undermine the posture of U.S. commitments in world affairs in a general way. It would complicate U.S. contingency plans for conflict situations, improve Soviet efficiency, cut Soviet costs, and at a minimum tie up resources that Washington would prefer to deploy elsewhere. It could act on a "decoy" and U.S. policy makers prefer that such a decoy never come into existence.¹

American policy makers were also concerned about the possibility of the consolidation of "another Cuba" on the land bridge between North and South America. While using carefully restrictive language, in terms of any Soviet commitment to the new regime in Nicaragua, Soviet commentators argued that Managua was part of a "revolutionary process" that was developing in Central America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Marshal Ogarkov, then Soviet chief of staff, observed that while

Cuba was part of this progress two decades ago it had more recently been joined by Nicaragua and a serious battle was ongoing in El Salvador. Soviet commentary revealed that U.S. concerns about "decoys" drawing off or diverting U.S. military capability from areas closer to centers of Soviet power in the Middle East and Eurasia were real. In addition Moscow has habitually contended that any American attempt to close off such areas to Soviet influence would be illusionary. Whatever Washington's anxieties, crises in East-West relations arose because of U.S. attempts to suppress national liberation movements that were part of an inevitable historical process. Washington itself had thus created the crisis.²

To add to Washington's concerns Moscow had at times, although not consistently, included Nicaragua among "socialist oriented states." These governments, unlike full socialist states such as Cuba or Vietnam, were said to be slowly creating a "vanguard party" on the Marxist-Leninist model that could provide a stable institutional base for Soviet influence. Such a state would not go out of its way to display its independence from Moscow and Soviet influence would not be subject to the whims of leaders like Sadat or Nasser. The vanguard party with Leninist political, economic, and security institutions would align with the Soviet Union, its allies, and "progressive" national liberation movements as well as stress the cooperation of its armed forces with Soviet and socialist-bloc counterparts. Centralized coordination "from above" would be combined with the mobilization of the masses and their participation "from below." Ideological unity would rest on the base of Marxism-Leninism. Greater ideological, economic, and military commitments are implied for such regimes over and beyond what is offered to client states like Syria or Libya. Whatever Soviet reticence at the declaratory level in including Nicaragua in this group, such inclusion has been at least partially the case with Managua.³

SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF NICARAGUA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Soviet commentators saw both opportunities and dangers in the developing events in Central America. Cuba existed "as a source of experience and wisdom" that could be applied to the Nicaraguan revolution, but there were also "negative factors" from the Soviet perspective. The first was Nicaragua's geographic position with potentially hostile neighbors on all sides, Cuba isolated by a water barrier and the United States in close proximity. Caution was imperative and the pattern of Soviet policy of neither abandoning the Nicaraguan revolution nor provoking an escalation that might ignite a wider conflict that the Soviet Union was in no position to manage persisted. Both Andropov and Chernenko indicated in word and deed that they would not take any steps that would provoke Washington to intervene. Soviet commentary also strongly implied that Managua should not provide Washington any pretext or excuse to intervene directly with U.S. forces, either by introduction of ground combat units, advanced MiG fighter planes, or symbolic naval support for Managua in the face of American mining of its harbors. Gorbachev has maintained the same policy.⁴

That Nicaragua was in a position of economic dependence on aid from "Western states and reformist movements"⁵ provided another negative factor. Moscow sought to reduce this dependence, with the political ramifications that followed from it, but was reluctant to provide a "blank check" to underwrite the revolution. Soviet assistance would enable Managua to resist any "bourgeoise" leverage resulting from non-bloc assistance but by no means should aid from Latin American, West European, or other sources be rejected or discouraged.

Despite all its caution, Soviet commentary noted that the Sandinistas were able to lead a successful struggle to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in 1978-1979 and then consolidate power in their own hands. A political vanguard would be formed out of elements other than the regular, orthodox Communist parties which, as in Cuba in the last days of Batista, supported discredited regimes until their demise. The Sandinista Directorate was an "insurgent breeding ground" formed in the struggle against Somoza that had established a successful "democratic and anti-imperialist revolution" as a base for an eventual transition to socialism. Managua must continue the process, forming a vanguard party which would, in time, after a "transitional period," take a central place in the entire political system of a new revolutionary state.⁶

Soviet commentary argued that Che Guevara's principles, derived from the Cuban experience, were reaffirmed by the events in Nicaragua. The "popular forces" could win a war against the regular, Somoza, army. They could create a revolutionary conditions without waiting for them to mature; the struggle in itself would create the conditions. The insurrectionary center could act as a "catalyst," accelerating a crisis in the upper echelons of society, sharpening the crisis of the lower strata. This would create a "revolutionary situation" and is of great significance for all Latin American societies since it demonstrates the "tremendous force of the revolutionary, subjective factor."⁷

The military-partisan Sandinista movement must merge with the regular party leadership and a process of mobilization as occurred in Cuba would have to occur with new institutions as required. These included "revolutionary committees of Sandinista Defense" (CDS) to draw the population into economic reconstruction and explain the revolution to them. With "external threats and internal opposition" still in existence the revolutionary army must be strengthened as an arm of the state; the gains of the revolution must be defended. The Sandinista People's Army was created for this purpose. The main levers of power would be controlled by the revolutionary army. Other revolutionary organizations, such as security services formed from guerrilla detachments and irregular armed forces, would be constituted. The Sandinista National Liberation Front had the task of directing these organs in a "genuine people's revolution." The real power in the country would thus belong to the Front supported by the Sandinista Army and the Sandinista Defense Committees.⁸

Such a revolutionary nucleus could permit a mixed economy, freedom of speech and press, and security for all, "within the bounds of

the revolution and not outside of it or against it." Non-ruling party elements must be coordinated by organs attached to the Sandinista Directorate. An analysis of the 1987 Nicaraguan constitution in the Soviet theoretical journal *Latinskaia Amerika* concludes that political pluralism is only a constituent form, "the context of which depends on many features of an objective and subjective order, that inevitably engenders contradictions." In like fashion social rights such as the right to work, social security, and freedom from hunger depend for their maintenance on "any number of objective and subjective factors."⁹

Another unique feature of the Nicaraguan revolution from the Soviet perspective is that "religion may become a kind of catalyst in the struggle of believers for the restructuring of society and against oppression." Nicaragua was "the first socialist revolution in Latin America where the church did not identify with the overthrown dictator." The fate of the Latin American revolution will be affected "by the strategic union between the Marxists and broad masses of believers."¹⁰

SOVIET POLICY INITIATIVES AND NICARAGUA

Despite or perhaps because of its unorthodox features the Nicaraguan revolution merited support. Although the Cubans preceded Moscow with advice and support to the young revolutionary government according to a defector from the Nicaraguan intelligence service, five Soviet generals made a secret visit to Nicaragua in August 1979 to assess possible military assistance to the country. In July 1980 the Nicaraguan army displayed ground to air missiles and anti-tank artillery shells. Transport helicopters, tanks and helicopter gunships were also supplied, part of the largest military force in Central America.

Moscow inaugurated increased trade, technical, security, and economic ties with Nicaragua and helped the Sandinista regime build a tight security apparatus as well as train party, government, and military personnel. This occurred before the Reagan administration took office and began its support of the contra guerrillas. Military assistance accelerated in response to the deterioration in U.S.-Nicaraguan ties, and tanks, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers were supplied to assist in the counterinsurgency campaign. But Moscow made no public commitment to the preservation of the Nicaraguan regime and stated that Nicaragua "had all the necessary means to defend the motherland." Nor did it supply advanced MiG-21 jet fighters in the face of Washington's warnings that this would cross the vaguely defined line beyond which Soviet military assistance might meet an armed American response.¹¹

Economic assistance was also accelerated—from a low base—in contrast to the pattern with some other Third World clients. Credits amounted to as much as \$300 million between 1981 and 1983. Soviet bloc allies played a supplementary role in economic assistance and Libya, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia have provided Managua with credits amounting to several hundred million dollars since 1981. Economic decline in Nicaragua obliged the Soviets and East Europeans to provide additional economic aid, about \$500 million in 1986, \$300 million of

which came from the USSR. This supplemented military and military related equipment amounting to about \$600 million in the same year after Gorbachev had come to power.¹²

Soviet economic assistance has been crucial with most deliveries to Managua financed on credit with extended payment terms. Soviet arms deliveries to all Latin American countries (largely Cuba and Nicaragua) from 1980-1983 and 1984-1987 show an increase in the latter period of \$1.8 billion (\$5.8 billion to \$7.6 billion respectively). Moscow expanded arms shipments while other suppliers were cutting their shipments. Nicaragua imported \$350 million in arms from Moscow in 1984, \$270 million in 1985, and \$575 million in 1986. The 1987 estimate for Nicaraguan arms imports from the Soviet Union alone ranges from \$500 million to \$1 billion.¹³

This increase in economic and military assistance, although modest in comparison to the huge Soviet subsidy in Cuba, is surprising in view of the constrained resource situation that has become more apparent in the Soviet economy in recent years. Slow growth, widespread shortages of consumer goods and services, inadequate or misapplied investment, along with a huge defense sector have raised many questions about the feasibility of continued high military and economic assistance to the Third World. Expenditures for such purposes would be unavailable for the purchase of Western technology or goods and even trade credits divert goods and services away from being used in the USSR.¹⁴

Comments by both Andropov and Gorbachev indicated skepticism about the permanence of revolutionary changes and the long term reliability of some of the new "socialist leaning" states acquired as clients in the latter days of the Brezhnev era. Their poor economic performance and low levels of legitimacy were increasingly noted. There was more of an emphasis on building socialism through a state's own efforts and the need for the continued coexistence of capitalist and socialist structures and relations. Aid from external capitalist sources would remain essential for development. Soviet largesse has its limits, it is implied, and there will be far fewer "free lunches."¹⁵

Yet despite the need for stricter accountability in the use of resources at home and abroad, it is difficult to assume from historical analogies that the cumulative costs of maintaining allies and positions per se lead to self limitation externally. The costs are not excessive in relation to the Soviet economy. In addition Moscow is not racing against itself in Third World situations and the costs depend less on Soviet internal dynamics than on the degree of resistance offered by outside powers and demands from states like Nicaragua. The perceived costs of a basic change of course in terms of lost prestige or forsaking a client, even an inept one, are deemed unacceptable. Soviet leaders would have to become convinced that it would be better to change their policy and improve their economic situation than accept the costs of continuing the existing policy.¹⁶

There are also benefits to continued military and limited economic aid, especially to states like Nicaragua. It is smaller than Cuba, less

advanced industrially, and needs less to maintain its economy, albeit at a rudimentary level. Pressures from the United States against Nicaragua may subside, reducing the need for increased economic aid. In addition Moscow gains access to the Central American mainland and gains a reputation as a bulwark of revolutionary movements besieged by the "forces of imperialism." The Soviets also gain credit for even a limited commitment and create a presence, a factor that the Sandinistas cannot ignore.¹⁷ Soviet arms and armed diplomacy, with judicious mixtures of limited economic assistance, have fulfilled their function in other parts of the world and are a major instrument of Soviet statecraft. Accordingly, the costs have been deemed worth incurring.

NICARAGUAN ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES

But serious questions emerge when one examines the effectiveness of Soviet aid to Nicaragua, both in terms of its magnitude and quality, in helping to resolve the deep ills in the Nicaraguan economy. This is particularly so when Nicaraguans, while making the obligatory obeisance to the "selfless" character of Soviet assistance, question its adequacy and when Soviet commentators express dissatisfaction with the manner in which aid commitments have been utilized. The latter insist that the amount and quality of aid, when combined with East European and non-socialist assistance, is adequate to enable Managua to survive.

Typical of praise extended for Soviet assistance is gratitude for the "highly favorable credit terms" offered by Moscow and the foreign currency that the Soviets pay for Nicaraguan products. Moscow supplies well over one-half of Nicaragua's petroleum needs and Soviet trade is twenty times more than in 1981. Nicaraguan youths are studying in the Soviet Union and Soviet doctors are working in Nicaraguan hospitals. Soviet aid is based on "mutual respect for our sovereignty and freedom" and threatens no one. Nicaraguans should feel nothing but "brotherly respect" for the Soviet Union.¹⁸

However, Tomas Borge, the Minister of Internal Affairs, admits that "internal forces removed from power" can still render serious opposition, in part because of the "difficult economic situation" in the country. Nicaragua is still paid less for its exports of raw materials than it must pay for imported finished goods. Economic assistance has been restricted from capitalist sources and though it has increased from socialist countries, "this is undoubtedly still insufficient to deal completely with the difficulties, which we are experiencing."¹⁹

Nicaraguan socialist, liberal, and conservative leaders in the legislative opposition engaged in a confrontation with Boris Yeltsin, then a candidate member of the Soviet Politburo. Visiting Nicaragua as head of a Soviet parliamentary delegation, Yeltsin insisted that opposition parties create their own system and that Soviet assistance had no strings attached and was prompted solely by solidarity with the Nicaraguan people. Opposition leaders charged that while Soviet aid was valued it was intended only to fasten Soviet control in Managua. It did not contribute to the country's democratization, was designed solely to keep the

Sandinistas in power, and alone kept the contra opposition at bay. This was in stark contrast to Yeltsin's insistence that Moscow did not intend to impose a Soviet model or any other on Managua. In an interview with an American journalist, Daniel Ortega replied ruefully to a question that the Soviets had offered no guarantees—either military or economic, for Nicaragua “is not a member of the Warsaw Pact and the Russians have global interests much more important than problems of Nicaragua. But for that they can't sacrifice what others can contribute to solving regional problems.”²⁰

Soviet comments give Ortega ample cause for anxiety. For example, a Soviet official concerned with foreign economic ties admitted that such relations “have not always developed smoothly, in part because of ‘developing countries’ worsening economic and convertible currency situation and of imperialism’s efforts to destabilize progressive regimes.”²¹ Other commentaries mention “U.S. aggression” and declining world commodity prices that have hurt Nicaraguan exports. Agriculture has enormous economic difficulties that are creating food shortages. There is a stress on conservation of materials, rationalization of production and making increasing use of internal resources. Industrial unrest is indicated by the contention that “workers now pay less heed than before to the demagogical talk of left and right wing union leaders trying to mislead them into making excessive demands on the government to disorganize production.” Contra raids, the effects of the U.S. embargo, the decline in trade with the Central American Common Market, and the cut in aid from international financial organizations and the world economic crisis, all had major adverse effects.²²

In the face of these major difficulties Moscow seemed to demand more effective economic performance in Managua and more utilization of external sources of financing to ease Soviet aid burdens. In describing the role of one of the key component structures of revolutionary power in Nicaragua, for example, one Soviet commentator notes that Sandinista Defense Committees confront the “passivity of some rank and file members,” “timidity” in criticizing employees of state organizations for “bureaucratism and red tape” and the existence of a black market “to which a certain portion of the goods designed for rational distribution finds its way.” Another notes that Managua devoted significant financial and material resources to the war effort, forty of each 100 pairs of shoes, thirty of every 100 pounds of corn. Pressure from Washington did not allow the rapid carrying out of reform, which led to “fatalism” and the “resignation of the people.”

Another commentator makes the obligatory boast that, whatever else may be said, the entire population “is ready at any moment to defend the revolution.” However that revolution is itself unique with no less than five forms of property acknowledged: state, private, mixed, party, and cooperative. The “mixed economy” will persist in the transition period. Certain sections of the bourgeoisie would be used in the process of national renewal and the private sector would be inviolate, as long as it does not impede plans for a “national renewal.” Managua must

“defend real wages” (an admission of high rates of inflation), support production demands and raise productivity for the “time of slogans has passed.” Yet the call for greater economic efficiency and the coexistence of private and public institutions must not impede the goal of eventual full socialization of the economy. It is necessary in a “transition period” and “does not inherently include those features which are linked to models of a social static kind.”²³

Other indications point to the fact that the increased level of Soviet assistance to Managua noted above is not completely welcome in Moscow, even as it seeks to safeguard the survival of the Sandinista regime in essentially its present form with its main organs of power intact and functioning. For example, there were reports that Nicaraguan Vice President Ramirez had told Mexican officials of a cut in Soviet oil deliveries with no oil after 15 June 1987. This was done supposedly to undermine U.S. support for the contras by weakening the justification for treating Managua as a Soviet client and motivating Nicaragua to get more of its oil from Mexico and Venezuela. The Nicaraguans denied that the Soviets had reneged on promised oil deliveries but the Soviets could only supply 50 percent of Nicaraguan oil deliveries for 1987, spreading the burden for the difference to Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, the GDR, and Cuba, who would re-export Soviet oil to soft currency states like Nicaragua. Deliveries are almost totally on credit, not likely to be repaid, and have now become a source of contention between the Soviet Union and its allies.

Other Soviet sources insist that aid from Moscow plus assistance from Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Japan partially compensate for the gap created by American economic pressure. They admit, nonetheless, that Managua lacks the financial resources to acquire spare parts elsewhere for American-made machinery which in turn impedes its ability to increase exports to make payments on its mounting external debts.²⁴

There have recently been conflicting reports on Soviet economic aid policy to Nicaragua. For example, an agreement announced in January 1988 for \$294 million over a three-year period was considerably less than the \$200 million that Managua received from Moscow in 1986 alone. Yet the Soviet ambassador to Nicaragua later announced in Havana on 4 November 1988 that Moscow would increase its economic and military aid to Nicaragua, despite the fact that Soviet possibilities are “not unlimited” and “we have our own economic problems.” He also pledged to “do everything possible so that there are no failures” in future oil deliveries to Nicaragua.²⁵

THE EXTERNAL FACTORS IN SOVIET-NICARAGUAN RELATIONS

Moscow, by its own words and deeds, has always shown a sensitivity to the regional and global context that forms the background to its bilateral relations with Managua. Given its power and proximity to the area, the American factor looms particularly large in Soviet statements

and actions. In the face of this factor, Moscow seeks to reassure Managua without giving a firm commitment to its military defense or economic vitality. Similarly, the Soviets seek to intimidate Washington by making open American intervention an unattractive option without provoking the U.S. and forcing it to intervene directly with adverse effects on other issues in contention with the Americans. Soviet military instruments, traditionally the most effective of the means at Moscow's disposal, are used with maximum psychological effect on the ongoing political debate in Washington over Nicaraguan policy. At the same time, Soviet commentators admitted that Washington's support of the contras was having a major economic impact in Nicaragua, especially when added to the severe economic difficulties that Managua was already experiencing.

Soviet writers sought to depict the isolation in which Washington had placed itself by its Nicaraguan policy because of Western European and Latin American disapproval and especially the latter's traditional distaste for U.S. intervention in the area's politics. Mexico was crucial to this diplomatic pressure on the United States.²⁶ In support of the diplomatic arm, Soviet military arms deliveries and support placed the onus on Washington for the consequences of direct military intervention. American pressure on Managua sought to embody the adage that "when states dare not resort to war, yet dare not renounce the resort to war, international politics is bound to depend heavily upon the threat or prospect of war." The power to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy—vicious diplomacy but still diplomacy.²⁷ Moscow could not threaten to escalate its involvement greatly in an area of overwhelming American predominance but it could exert psychological pressure of its own.

Soviet analysis shows an awareness of the "neither Cuba nor Vietnam" character of the internal debate over Nicaraguan policy in the United States, especially the propriety and effectiveness of the Reagan administration's support of the armed opposition in Nicaragua, the contras. For example, one Soviet commentator observed that the American "Vietnam syndrome," the fear of being involved in an inconclusive war for less than clear-cut objectives, had not really abated. The American public's mood was ambivalent, combining a striving for superiority with a "reluctance to risk paying too high a price for a dubious victory in some foreign country." Former Secretary of Defense Weinberger's dictum that the United States should not send forces abroad without the support of the American Congress and people, and for clear-cut objectives was cited with tacit approval.

Even the reluctant, episodic support of the contras offered by the Congress was depicted as the result of fear that lack of such support would bring electoral damage and the likelihood of open, armed intervention. On the other hand, such support, however reluctant, would make it more difficult to oppose further military intervention in Nicaraguan affairs. The latter could lead, in time, to a "prolonged, costly war and possibly even to the next defeat or, at least, to serious costs at

the global level." The U.S. might occupy Managua's major cities but would face prolonged guerrilla warfare under Sandinista direction, distasteful to people who "want fast results."²⁸

Communist writers also noted the contradictory "left-right" impulses in U.S. policy when deciding how to deal with rulers who had lost popular support. This involved the proper balance to strike between removing the causes of insurgency and mass mobilization, and a hard, anti-Communist military strategy. One described the "torments" of President Carter, torn between putting pressure on Somoza to resign but fearful of a Sandinista victory and the triumph of the revolutionary left in a climate of deepening political polarization.²⁹

A Soviet observer placed the American dilemma in a more general context. If one supports "despotic regimes" because the United States fears growing leftist strength and Soviet influence, one stands against the "broad circle of international public opinion" and alienates the "middle strata" which supports a "moderate, reformist path." But support of "bourgeoisie democratic" governments weakens the most irreconcilable anticommunists and creates a situation where the country will move further to the left.³⁰

Thus, Washington's application of coercion could be partially neutralized by slow but steadily increasing military support of the Sandinista government that could pose unacceptable costs domestically if the United States intervened. The roots of the Nicaraguan problem for the United States were a more specific instance of the problem that post-war U.S. administrations faced in choosing between "rightist" and "leftist" variants in coping with mass popular mobilization and radical change in the Third World.

The economic vulnerability of the Nicaraguan regime and the extent to which its policies alienated some of the Nicaraguan population were accentuated by the disorder that contra raids and depredations were bringing to Managua. Soviet commentary acknowledged this by asserting that the contras had failed to establish a beachhead and form a provisional government on Nicaraguan territory (resulting in more U.S. military assistance). Still, they had "undermined the further process of democratic reform" and had weakened mass identification with the government. The sabotage of the "economic program of reconstruction" called forth the dissatisfaction of different strata of the population.³¹

Soviet observers raised the possibility that the contras were not merely an alien, Washington-created force without roots in Nicaraguan political life. They saw evidence of "clear coordination" between the contras and "actions of internal reaction," with ties to the big entrepreneurs that had left the country and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. They were working with the "rightist" opposition and part of the priesthood who maintained influence "in some degree" with the population, especially the popular Obando y Bravo. The draft law that the Sandinistas instituted to fight the contras was unpopular and leaders of the Catholic Church led demonstrations against it. The arrest of five priests after this action brought U.S. charges of "religious persecution."

Soviet support of some degree of political pluralism and a mixed economy brought its own dangers. The Reagan administration was attempting, in the worsening economic situation, to unite private businesses and the church hierarchy with the "counterrevolution," creating a united anti-Sandinista military-political organization.³²

The dwindling economic prospects in Managua and the draining effect of the insurgency in the long term was a key reason for the Saninista-contra truce talks. Soviet economic and military assistance, while maintaining the Sandinistas in power, could do little about the economic effects of Washington's policies.³³

US-SOVIET DIPLOMATIC BARGAINING AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS: THE NICARAGUAN CASE

Soviet commentators cite and approve attempts to create favorable conditions for a peaceful settlement of complex regional problems as long as these attempts do not touch on the "question of power," the internal order in Nicaragua. The Contadora process and similar efforts "undoubtedly prevented a further escalation of tension in the subregion" as well as appealing to those in Western Europe and elsewhere who were opposed to U.S. policy in the area. Yet the inhibiting effect on Washington was counterbalanced by Soviet concern that Contadora sought to "confine the revolutionary process in Central America to a bourgeoisie-democratic framework." The Soviets could pursue a two-track policy—supporting the Sandinistas with military and economic assistance while partially supporting Contadora and other regional plans and depicting aid to Managua as support to a small state besieged by the U.S. It was easy to support a peace plan and there was much to be gained diplomatically and in propagandistic terms, especially if the United States seemed to oppose such efforts. Washington could be portrayed as a "spoiler" and Soviet freedom to support the Nicaraguans could not be seriously called to account and subjected to internal pressure. Moscow could also use its peacemaking credentials to establish a legitimate role in Central America.³⁴

Recently, Moscow has supported the "Guatemalan Accords (the Arias peace plan) and backed the concessions that Managua has made—including a political dialogue with the opposition. But it continues to oppose any negotiations with the United States on the contras "if these talks touch on the question of power," the irreducible minimum: the Sandinista Directorate, organs of popular mobilization like the Committees for Defense of the Revolution and the unity of the Sandinista leadership and the army. These institutions must be kept in place, even if their attempts to consolidate power are temporarily cut back and curtailed in the complex internal Nicaraguan political environment and the multifaceted international environment around Nicaragua.³⁵

The question of Soviet military aid offered to the Nicaraguan government, Washington's ultimate geopolitical concern, has yet to be

resolved either in peace talks or Moscow-Washington bilateral negotiations. This matter came up for discussion in the Washington summit between President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev. The Soviets seemed to indicate that they would be receptive to a joint agreement including "mutual pledges by the Soviet Union and the United States" to limit arms delivered to Central American countries. This could include Nicaragua and the entire Central American region. Talks between Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto concluded with the acknowledgement of the need to defuse "current regional conflicts" such as Nicaragua "as well as other, similar situations, by political means in a spirit of realism and with a view to the legitimate interests of the parties involved."

The weapons question appeared to be involved in a complicated formula or model that Washington was trying to apply to all regional conflicts with Moscow. This would involve "symmetry," simultaneous American and Soviet cessation (or, at least, drastic curtailment) of weapons supplies to their respective clients in Afghanistan and Cambodia. A Reagan administration official had indicated that the Soviets regarded an Afghanistan settlement that applied symmetry as a model for Cambodia and it also "relates to Nicaragua." If American aid to guerrilla movements is to be halted in such conflicts, a halt in Soviet aid to the respective governments would be required. But Shevardnadze's call for the United States to halt all military supplies to every country in Central America was rejected, possibly because of the prospect of intensified rebel influence in El Salvador,³⁶ and as noted Moscow has pledged to increase its level of military assistance.

CONCLUSION

The eventual result of the new political dialogue between the Nicaraguan government and their armed and unarmed opponents is extremely difficult to predict. Soviet policy publicly supports such efforts and may well support further political concessions by Managua as long as such concessions do not involve deserting an ally and dismantling the apparatus of Nicaraguan revolution. However, these institutions may be altered in their internal coercive and directive power, at least until Managua has had an indefinite "breathing spell" to renovate its economy and possibly obtain a greater degree of support from outside the socialist bloc. The Soviets might be able to cut back their military and economic support if American pressure on Managua were relaxed as a consequence of a greater Nicaraguan readiness to compromise in negotiations with its armed opposition and political opponents within the country.

It must be borne in mind that Soviet military assistance preceded contra attacks and Reagan administration hostility to Nicaragua and that assistance may well continue at least at current levels. It will be linked to internal developments in Washington, especially the nature and character of the new Bush administration, progress in resolving other regional conflict issues, and the policy of Washington and Moscow,

combining wary cooperation with rigorous military and political competition. Any Soviet willingness to cut back military support in Central America will be counterbalanced by an especially strong desire not to relinquish positions, advantages and clients. This is especially the case since they were acquired at a cost that is acceptable in terms of the foothold gained and do not carry major risks of escalation. The aid burden appears bearable for Moscow even if the Soviets would prefer more diversified sources of support for the Nicaraguan economy and improved performance in Managua. The reported increase in assistance of all kinds may well be part of Moscow's bargaining with a new U.S. administration, especially since it is coupled with an insistence that Moscow understands U.S. concerns and has no intention of setting up a "base" in Nicaragua. It is by no means clear the extent to which Gorbachev will pressure the Nicaraguans to institute the wide-ranging political and economic reforms that he is attempting to implement in the Soviet Union.

Endnotes

1. Lars Schoutz, *National Security and United States Policy Toward Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 229-251, 259. See also Gregory Treverton's review of Schoutz in "US Security Interests in Latin America," *International Security* 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), esp. p. 215.
2. See citations in Roger Hamburg, "The Soviet Union and Low-Intensity Conflict in the Third World: Implications for the United States," in *Low Intensity Conflict and Modern Technology*, ed. David Dean (Montgomery: Air University Press, June 1986), pp. 34, 56, 61, Robert S. Litwak and S. Neil MacFarlane, "Soviet Activism in the Third World," *Survival* XXIX, no. 1 (January-February 1987), pp. 34-35.
3. Francis Fukuyama, *Moscow's Post Brezhnev Reassessment of the Third World*, R-3337, USDP (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, February 1986), pp. 31, 32; and Roger Hamburg, "Soviet Perspectives on the Cuban, Chilean, and Nicaraguan Revolutions," *Crossroads* 24 (1987), pp. 72-73.
4. Kiva Maidanik, "Unity: The Key Issue," in *Nicaragua: Long Road to Victory* (Moscow: USSR Academy of Sciences, 1981), p. 183; Boris Yopo, "Soviet Military Assistance to Cuba and Nicaragua 1980-1984," in *Soviet-Latin American Relations in the 1980's*, ed. Augusto Varas (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 112-113; and Hamburg, "Cuban, Chilean, and Nicaraguan Revolutions," p. 73.
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