

August 17, 1983

MOSCOW EYES THE CARIBBEAN

INTRODUCTION

The Reagan Administration's recently stepped-up attention to the Marxist guerrilla challenge in El Salvador has highlighted the growing Soviet involvement in the Caribbean region. In publicly singling out the arms supplies carried by the Soviet transport ship, the Alexander Ulyanov, the President merely noted the tip of a large iceberg. Moscow long has eyed the Caribbean, and the Soviets have geometrically increased their presence in the area, from Nicaragua to Cuba to Grenada, over the past several years.

The construction of a new airstrip at Port Salines on the Caribbean island of Grenada could threaten Caribbean security. This facility will have the capacity to accommodate every war-plane in the Soviet and Cuban inventory. Grenada is closely allied to Cuba, and the possibility that its new airfield may be opened to Soviet air traffic emphasizes the importance of the Caribbean region to the United States and the threat posed by the Soviet Union and its local proxies.

The Caribbean has received only sporadic attention over the years. Interest soars for a few months in the wake of a direct challenge, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, followed by an extended period of neglect based in part on the assumption that U.S. security interests in the area are unassailable.

This complacency is unwarranted. The Soviet Union now poses a growing military threat in the Caribbean region--directly and through its allies. Since 1979, the Soviets have gained access to Nicaragua and Grenada, adding these strategic areas to their already well-stocked and well-fortified base in Cuba. These gains represent an ominous growth in Soviet power and ability to inflict a high toll on U.S. interests. During a six-month period in World War II, for example, the Germans sank more Allied shipping in the

Caribbean than in the Atlantic and they did not even have a local naval base.

In addition to these territorial gains, the numbers of Soviet personnel and arms in the area have increased markedly in the last three years. There are now more than 8,000 Soviets in Cuba and 70 in Nicaragua. The embassy staff in Grenada also has been growing. Soviet arms deliveries to Cuba in the last two years are three times the yearly average since 1962. Soviet ships are also delivering arms directly to Nicaragua.

The Soviet threat is directed at the strategic backdoor of the United States, with the intention of making it more difficult to project U.S. power into Europe or Asia. Already the Soviets' Caribbean involvement has enhanced their intelligence gathering operations and provided more logistical support for their African activities. If the U.S. does not respond to Soviet strategic gains, the USSR will soon be able to threaten American commerce and security.

BACKGROUND

The Caribbean is important to the United States geographically, economically, and militarily. Indeed, 44 percent of all foreign tonnage that enters this country transits the Caribbean. To get from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf Coast is not easy. The area is dotted by thousands of islands and dozens of small states.

The islands, which run in a generally southeasterly direction from Florida to the northern tier of South America, form relatively narrow passages through which commerce must navigate. This means that a hostile power could threaten these "choke points" with relative ease. The Strait of Florida, between Key West and Havana, is one of the wider passages, yet it is but ninety miles across. The straits between Cuba and Haiti, between the tiny island states of the Lesser Antilles, and between Venezuela and Grenada are all narrower.

Traditionally, U.S. security policy has been to maintain military dominance in the region, or at minimum, to exclude clearly hostile and powerful foreign rivals. This policy was violated when the U.S. allowed Cuba to become a Soviet forward base. The last two decades, and the last four years in particular, have seen important strategic gains for the Soviets. In March 1979, the government of Grenada fell to a left-wing military coup and immediately began moving into the Cuban/Soviet orbit. In July of the same year, the government of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua fell to revolutionaries who quickly evidenced their admiration for, and allegiance to, the Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro.

Both these states are now in the process of building airfields which will accommodate long-range Soviet warplanes, and

when completed, will enhance incrementally the ability of the USSR to threaten directly the commercial lifelines and territory of the United States. Soviet interest is obvious from the number of Russians stationed in the area as technicians and advisors. There are currently 2,500 Soviet military advisors in Cuba, along with 6,000 to 8,000 civilian advisors and a combat brigade.¹ Nicaragua provides a base for 70 Soviet agents, most of whom operate in the state security apparatus.

SOVIET OBJECTIVES IN THE CARIBBEAN

Soviet goals range from low-risk, low-priority items to those entailing a greater risk but also offering a larger return. Three examples of low-risk objectives are: splitting the former British colonies in the Eastern Caribbean; using revolution in the Caribbean to foster illegal immigration to the U.S.; and, facilitating Cuban participation in the lucrative U.S. drug trade, which helps the Cuban government raise money and corrupts U.S. society.

A much more important Soviet goal is to enhance their ability to gather information from the U.S. and its allies electronically. Naval bases increase the mobility and range of Soviet surface ships that act as intelligence collectors.

The availability of airfields in widely scattered parts of the Caribbean allows Moscow to increase reconnaissance flights as well. Cuba has served for years as a base for Soviet TU95 "Bear" reconnaissance planes that has enabled them to fly from Northern Fleet bases in the Soviet Union, monitor commercial and naval traffic in the Atlantic, and land at two airports near Havana. Additional airports in Nicaragua and Grenada will increase Soviet espionage capabilities in the hemisphere, especially in Central America and the northern tier of South America. Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada form a well-located geographic triangle, which puts the entire Caribbean under the Soviets' watchful eyes.

A third form of intelligence gathering involves the use of field agents. The Soviets are aided in these efforts by Cuba, whose Direccion General de Inteligencia (DGI) is, for all practical purposes, an extension of the KGB.² Besides fluency in the language, Cuban operatives have the ability to work in areas where the Soviets, for political or cultural reasons, may feel constrained.

¹ Testimony by Fred C. Ikle, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 14, 1983.

² The U.S. Navy and the Caribbean Basin (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, 1983), p. 42.

Support for African Activities

Soviet policies in the Caribbean also serve the USSR's designs in Africa. The sudden appearance of Cuban airborne troops in Angola in 1975 marked the beginning of Cuba's role as Soviet proxy in Africa. Castro now has 20,000 combat troops in Angola and about 12,000 in Ethiopia.³ Transportation between Cuba and Africa will be made easier by the 9,800 foot runway in Grenada, scheduled for completion next spring or summer. This airfield will be capable of handling the largest Soviet cargo and transport planes. Since Grenada is almost a thousand miles closer to Africa than Cuba, it is a convenient refueling point. This allows more frequent flights involving a wider selection of aircraft. Cuba has played an active role in the construction of the airstrip, providing both workers and money.⁴ Grenadan Premier Maurice Bishop maintains that the airstrip is designed not for military purposes but to exploit the country's tourist potential. However, the island has virtually no tourist related infrastructure warranting construction of an international airport, nor have there been any efforts thus far to build new roads or hotels.

What has been built are a large supply depot and army barracks near the airport, capable of housing more troops than Grenada has in its entire army. Such construction hardly seems ideal for boosting the tourist trade.

Interdiction of Trade Routes

The ability of the Soviets and Cubans to operate far out into the Atlantic, which the Grenadan airstrip will provide, endangers U.S. security and commerce. In the event of an emergency in Europe, in which the U.S. would have to resupply the NATO allies or reinforce U.S. troops, 75 percent of the men and materiel would have to go through the Strait of Florida, within easy reach of the Cuban warplanes. In addition, half the oil imported into the U.S. transits the Caribbean Sea.

Soviet access to Nicaragua and Grenada puts hostile forces within easy reach of the choke points of the Caribbean. Grenada, for example, is just north of Trinidad, a major transshipment point for the imported U.S. oil. Other transshipment points are located at St. Croix, Aruba, Curacao, Venezuela, and the Bahamas, all within range of existing or future Soviet installations. This means that if present trends continue, the Soviets

³ "Cuban Armed Forces and the Soviet Military Presence," U.S. Department of State Special Report #103, August 1982, p. 5. See also James A. Miller, Struggle for Survival: Strategic Minerals & the West (Washington, D.C.: American African Affairs Association, 1980).

⁴ Opposition in Grenada to Cuban and Soviet involvement in Grenadan affairs is growing according to Barbara Crossette, writing in the New York Times, August 9, 1983.

may soon be in a position to threaten one of America's most important lifelines. By extending Soviet reach into the Atlantic, the completion of the Grenadan airstrip will enable the Soviets to threaten Persian Gulf oil lanes before the tankers get near the Caribbean.

The U.S. also depends heavily on strategic minerals that come into the Caribbean. Copper from Peru and Chile, tin from Bolivia, and other metals from the western rim of South America all transit the Panama Canal.⁵ The South Atlantic routes are even more vital. Virtually all American supplies of manganese and chromium, indispensable in steel production, nickel, cobalt, and bauxite, used to make aluminum, travel the very routes that Grenada will be able to threaten within one year.⁶

Of particular concern is the vulnerability of the Panama Canal. Much of the oil that the U.S. purchases from non-Persian Gulf sources (Indonesia and North Slope oil, for example) steams through the Canal. Under the terms of the 1977 Panama Canal treaties, U.S. warships have the right to transit the Canal "expeditiously," this means that they can go to the front of the line. The Canal is susceptible, however, to terrorism which the Soviets could sponsor. Interruption in U.S. access to the Canal would mean a serious lack of mobility for U.S. warships, restrict resupply of U.S. bases in Europe, and the Far East, and delay deliveries of oil.

Commerce depends on stability. Moscow need only threaten or destabilize countries such as Trinidad and Tobago to disrupt trade. Possible Soviet measures, via proxies, could include sabotaging facilities, fomenting strikes by dock workers or even sponsoring terrorist attacks on merchant ships. A few such incidents would make a port insecure.

Cuba as a Regional Power

Although clearly dependent on the Soviet Union, Cuba has become a military power in its own right. The Cuban army numbers 227,000 active troops (including 3,000 airborne) and 60,000 reservists, with 650 tanks.⁷ The navy consists of 50 torpedo and missile attack boats, two attack submarines, a Koni class frigate, more than 12 Turya class hydrofoil patrol boats and landing craft, and the Air Force boasts 200 MiGs. In 1981 and 1982, the Soviets delivered about 66,000 tons of military equipment to Cuba, more

⁵ Bruce Weinrod, "Security Implications of the Panama Canal Treaties," International Security Review, Vol. IV, No. III (Fall 1979), p. 256.

⁶ See Strategic Minerals: A Resource Crisis (New York: National Strategy Information Center, 1981).

⁷ Jiri Valenta, "Soviet Strategy in the Caribbean Basin," Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute, May 1982.

than triple the annual average of the past twenty years. The Soviets also supply transport and other logistical support.

Castro not only has intervened in Angola, but has been responsible for much of the insurgency in Central America. This is not to say that Castro created the conditions for unrest; they had existed for some time. What he has done, in Nicaragua and El Salvador, is unite the guerrilla factions (usually the price for any material support), train cadres, provide weapons, and encourage terrorism to stimulate general repression and weaken the targeted regime's legitimacy. This allows Cuba to influence guerrilla fronts, making a pro-Castro (hence pro-Soviet) line very likely if the guerrilla factions are successful. Having the Cubans do this involves less risk to Soviet prestige and personnel; it represents no less danger to the U.S.

Nicaragua is becoming a Soviet satellite. Four thousand Cubans are currently stationed there, along with smaller numbers of Russians, East Germans, and Bulgarians. Adolfo Robelo, former member of the Sandinista junta, recently called Nicaragua an "occupied country," where "no crucial decision [is taken] without the approval of the Cubans."⁸ This has been the case from the very start of the Sandinista revolution. Cuban advisers arrived in Managua three weeks after Somoza's fall to begin reshaping the state security system and implanting Cuban-style communism.⁹

Compared with the 7,500-man National Guard that Somoza maintained, the Nicaraguan army now numbers over 25,000 regular soldiers, with at least twice that number in reserve and militia forces. They are supported by 25 Soviet T-54 and T-55 tanks, armored personnel carriers, Hip helicopters, heavy artillery, Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles, and 800 East German army trucks.

Even more threatening are the four airfields which are being enlarged to handle MiG-23s. Located at the four corners of Nicaragua, they eventually will serve as bases for offensive Soviet weapons within easy reach of the Panama Canal, Mexico, and the southern U.S.¹⁰ Soviet TU95 reconnaissance planes from these bases could spy as far as the West coast of the U.S.

Grenada's potential usefulness to Moscow is illustrated by the interception on a Brazilian stopover of Libyan arms bound for Nicaragua. If the Grenadan airstrip had been completed, no stopover would have been necessary. Grenada also serves as a forward base threatening the northern tier of South America. Its proximity to the Guianas would make Soviet efforts to back guerrilla movements in these states logistically easier.

⁸ Westwatch, Council for Inter-American Security, May 1983, p. 2.

⁹ Miguel Bolanos Hunter, interview at The Heritage Foundation, June 18, 1983.

¹⁰ David C. Jordan, "U.S. Options--and Illusions, in Central America," Strategic Review, Spring 1982.

Ability to Strike the U.S. Directly

The danger from Soviet satellites is not limited to smaller Caribbean states. MiG-23 bombers with Soviet pilots currently based in Cuba and reportedly scheduled for future basing in Nicaragua¹¹ can strike an increasing number of civilian and military targets throughout the South and Southwest. Increases in Cuban and Nicaraguan military strength mean that the U.S. will have to commit more forces to block or retaliate against such an attack.¹²

Soviet TU95s with Soviet pilots have been visiting Cuba since 1969, and at least four of these have recently been fitted with bomb bays and Kangaroo nuclear missiles useful for anti-submarine warfare and capable of reaching the U.S. Nine Cuban airfields can handle these planes and Cuba's 40 nuclear capable MiGs.

Other offensive weapons in the Soviet/Cuban arsenal include Soviet submarines, which use the port of Cienfuegos and have been armed with Shaddock-type cruise missiles. Four of the 42 SS-4 medium-range ballistic missiles, which precipitated the 1962 crisis, are believed not to have been removed.¹³

Although the use of these weapons would probably lead to a full-scale superpower conflict, Soviet intermediate goals would avoid this risk. In general terms, Moscow seeks to reduce U.S. options incrementally and increase the amount of men, attention, and materièl the U.S. must commit to the Caribbean region.¹⁴ By focusing on the Caribbean, the Soviets can force the U.S. to change its traditional policy of concentrating on European security. No longer can Washington take for granted the security of the Western Hemisphere.

While the Soviets gain by fomenting instability, they incur little risk. Their commitment to Nicaragua and Grenada is indirect enough to protect their prestige in case of failure. At the same time, their support is clear enough to divert U.S. attention and to worry U.S. policymakers.

¹¹ "Nicaraguan Says Missile Sites Being Built," Washington Times, July 22, 1983.

¹² See also R. Bruce McCalm, "Central America and the Caribbean: the Larger Scenario," Strategic Review, XI, 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 28-41.

¹³ Sen. Steven Symms, Congressional Record, Vol. 129, No. 54, pp.S5233-5234.

¹⁴ See Sol W. Sanders, "Rapporteur's Report," in Western Hemisphere Stability--The Latin American Connection (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, 1983).

AMERICAN RESPONSES

U.S. Assets in the Region

The U.S. must build on its strengths in the region. Its most important assets are U.S. military bases. The largest are under the Southern Command in Panama--Fort Clayton, Fort Sherman, and Fort Gulick. Formerly part of the Canal Zone, they are leased from the Panamanian Government under the terms of the Panama Canal treaties. The U.S. is allowed to maintain them until December 1999, after which their status is uncertain. Fort Gulick serves as headquarters for the Southern Command, which consists of 9,000 Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel, including 300 Special Forces and the 193rd Infantry Brigade.

The U.S. also maintains two bases on Puerto Rico: Roosevelt Roads and the recently reopened Remy Air Force Base. Along with the base at Guantanamo, Cuba, the Puerto Rican bases extend U.S. reach in the northern Caribbean. While it is significant that the Caribbean Contingency Joint Task Force, headquartered at Key West, has been upgraded to a new U.S. military command, no troops have been assigned to it permanently.

The U.S. can count on the probable cooperation of some pro-West regimes in the area, such as Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras. The U.S. is currently resurfacing several airfields in Honduras to facilitate U.S. operations in Central America and demonstrate the American commitment to the area. The usefulness of these bases, however, depends on Honduran cooperation. Honduras and other small Caribbean states are subject to Cuban intimidation. Thus, these currently pro-West states may not remain so if the U.S. fails to counter Soviet inroads.

Policy Recommendations

No significant change in the Caribbean situation is likely to take place without clear recognition in the U.S. of the nature of the threat. U.S. security policy in the Caribbean must have two complementary objectives: relief of the immediate danger to the hemisphere; and the threat of appropriate, more direct measures against the Soviets themselves.

In the short term, the U.S. should increase surveillance, especially over Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada. Reconnaissance flights and satellite surveillance would allow the U.S. to determine whether the Grenadan airstrip really is being used, as pledged, only for tourist traffic. Closer surveillance of Nicaragua would alert the U.S. to any attempt by the Soviets to introduce offensive weapons, and also might uncover more evidence of Nicaraguan activities to promote insurgency in El Salvador.

The U.S. should oppose emphatically the existence of large, offensively oriented armies by Caribbean nations. Cuba and Nicaragua have forces far exceeding legitimate defense needs.

Substantial reductions in these forces should be a precondition for improvement of relations with the U.S. No steps toward normalization of relations with Cuba or toward a resumption of aid to Nicaragua should be taken before the size of their armies conforms to defense needs only. President Reagan is correct to exclude Cuba and its satellites from the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI). Economic sanctions against Cuba should also be maintained--to bring pressure on the Castro regime and to demonstrate continued American resolve.

In the long term, the U.S. must protect its territory and sea lanes as well as prevent more Caribbean regimes from falling under Soviet influence. For this, the U.S. needs a larger navy. It must be possible to station a carrier task force in the Caribbean permanently without drawing down U.S. naval forces elsewhere. A carrier task force would preempt Soviet inspired conventional military options by insuring a rapid and effective response.

The U.S. must become less dependent on Caribbean trade.¹⁵ Contingency planning to transfer some trade from the Caribbean to the Atlantic ports, out of reach of Soviet Caribbean installations, should be undertaken. In the meantime, the strategic stockpile of minerals must be enhanced to increase U.S. reaction time.

A long-term plan for avoiding future Cubas, Nicaraguas and Grenadas must include economic assistance and other development strategies such as those embodied in the CBI. Economic growth will enable the states of the Caribbean to avoid the types of problems that Castro can exploit. Yet not all revolutionaries are motivated by economic grievances. Ideology or commitment to violence also may be motivating factors. Because professional revolutionaries will always exist and because they have the promise of training and support from Castro and the Soviets, long-term economic vision must be accompanied by military measures to foster conditions that allow economic growth.

Chief among security related measures must be support for pro-West regimes. These states will be the targets of Soviet inspired subversion. They must be given the tools to resist. Attempts at subversion in any friendly state should be met with a firm U.S. response. Vacillation only encourages the radical forces.

The U.S. should also support regional self-defense efforts. Two attempts to overthrow the government of Dominica, for example, prompted the formation of a mutual security system in the Eastern Caribbean. A memorandum of understanding signed late last year by Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, and Dominica allows any signatory state facing internal subversion to request aid from the others. This is clearly a response to the Grenadan revolution and has received strong moral support from the U.S.

¹⁵ See James A. Miller, op. cit.

Material support is appropriate as well. The U.S. could provide transport vessels and technical assistance. Increased security assistance to these states is also needed, given the harsh and threatening rhetoric of Castro and Grenada's Maurice Bishop. Such assistance may require revision of the laws prohibiting aid to constabulary forces since some Caribbean states do not have standing armies.

To raise the U.S. military profile, more military advisers and trainers could be provided to states that request them. This would redress the enormous imbalance that currently exists between U.S. and Soviet advisers in Latin America. In 1981, Soviet advisers outnumbered their U.S. counterparts 50 to 1.

The U.S. should also assign permanent forces to the new military command at Key West. Earmarking soldiers to the Caribbean would help the U.S. respond more effectively, were a Caribbean crisis to occur while U.S. troops were engaged elsewhere. Some or all of these soldiers could be trained as a Caribbean Rapid Deployment Force to deter or counter the Cuban airborne forces currently threatening the region. The usefulness of such a force would be increased by strengthening existing U.S. bases and acquiring new ones. Improving the airstrips in Honduras is a step in the right direction; the possibility of taking similar steps elsewhere should be explored.

The plan to base a squadron of missile armed patrol hydrofoils at Key West is a good idea, but it is insufficient. It will take a carrier presence and more frequent military maneuvers to demonstrate U.S. strength adequately. The Soviets realize the importance of "showing the flag" and have sent increasing numbers of their warships to Cuban ports in recent years. As a last resort, the U.S. must be prepared to deploy troops to counter a Soviet or Cuban move that threatens U.S. security.

If the U.S. appears tentative or ineffectual, Caribbean states may seek an accommodation with Cuba and the Soviet Union, giving Moscow a political advantage without firing a shot. Even larger states such as Colombia and Venezuela may feel the need to gravitate toward strength. Colombia's efforts, which began last summer, to join Castro's "nonaligned" movement and the efforts of both states to welcome Cuba back into the Organization of American States are probably no-confidence votes for the U.S.

None of the measures suggested thus far, however, will completely solve the problem. The Soviet threat in the Caribbean cannot be dealt with exclusively by actions against Grenada, Nicaragua, or Cuba. Only when its policies of destabilization and military challenge are made more risky and expensive to the USSR itself will Moscow alter its ways.

The U.S. should take advantage of Soviet military weak points. Aid to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua, coupled with the repeal or modification of the Boland amendment that prevents

the U.S. from providing support for the overthrow of the Sandinista government, would take some pressure off the Salvadoran government by forcing the Sandinistas to use more of their vast military stockpile at home. Aid to the freedom fighters in Afghanistan would be an even more direct form of pressure. The result of these policies would be to confront the Soviets with a new reality: that Soviet expansion is going to entail risks and expenses. The record shows that Moscow moderates its behavior only in response to determined resistance.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet military threat in the Caribbean is mounting. The U.S. must redress the mistakes of the last twenty years which have allowed U.S. superiority to slip away. Unless Washington acts now, the Soviets may be in a position to demand a larger role in the Western Hemisphere. They could use their growing advantage in the region as leverage to force the U.S. to include the USSR in regional arrangements. Moscow could also demand that the U.S. sign nonaggression pacts with Soviet satellites on unfavorable terms. With each concession the U.S. makes, the Soviet presence in this hemisphere becomes more entrenched and legitimate in the eyes of the world.

Any significant change in the Caribbean situation is going to require bold leadership, a clear recognition of the threat, and creative and long-term solutions. Bold leadership entails assigning priorities and making allocations at a time when military and foreign aid budgets are under increasing attack. A recognition that the threat is Soviet inspired will help decision makers anticipate and perhaps forestall Soviet moves. This is where creativity, imagination, and long-term vision come in. The problem cannot be solved tomorrow nor will it go away tomorrow. But it is threatening U.S. survival today.

Edward Lynch
Policy Analyst

