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THE U.S. AND THE CONTADORA EFFORT FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN PEACE

INTRODUCTION

Like the Chimera, the puzzling Greek mythological creature with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a dragon's tail, the Contadora peace initiative comprises an assortment of motives and expectations. Initiated in January 1983 by Mexico, Panama, Venezuela and Colombia on the Panamanian island of Contadora, the negotiations aim at bringing peace to Central America through a comprehensive regional settlement. This effort has been endorsed by just about every world leader from Ronald Reagan to Fidel Castro and the Kremlin chiefs.

A professed desire for peace seems to account for the unanimity; differences emerge when concrete discussion begins about the means and terms of peace. Thus Mexico views the negotiations as a way to forestall U.S. intervention in the region and to pressure Washington into accepting power-sharing in El Salvador. Nicaragua has agreed to such Contadora objectives as a reduction in its military force, but balks at verification measures. Nonetheless, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas capitalize on the Contadora process to proclaim to the world their willingness to negotiate. Liberal groups in the U.S. and Europe welcome the process as a substitute for bringing political and economic pressure on Nicaragua to live up to its promises of democratic pluralism. And the Contadora countries believe that a negotiated political solution is the only way to achieve Central American peace.

The U.S. has reiterated its support for the Contadora negotiations on numerous occasions and by spokesmen at all levels. The goals of the Contadora group are compatible with Reagan Administration objectives in Central America. The chief difference between the two approaches is that U.S. policy stresses the legitimacy of the Nicaraguan opposition's demand for open elections and the need for realistic procedures to enforce the terms of an agreement.

U.S. support for the Contadora negotiations, of course, does not exclude other policy initiatives for peace in the region. The U.S. views the negotiations as complementary, rather than an alternative, to pressuring Nicaragua to fulfill commitments it already has made not to intervene in other nations' affairs, not to align with any superpower, and to guarantee internal democratic pluralism. Similarly, the Contadora talks do not require overturning the election results in El Salvador by forcing El Salvador's elected government to share power with the leftist insurgents. A Contadora peace would be short-lived indeed were it based on a consolidation of the Sandinista dictatorship and an unconstrained Nicaraguan military build-up, strongly supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union, and on power-sharing in El Salvador with the communist guerrillas who abstained from the election process.

BACKGROUND

What brought the foreign ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama together on Contadora Island in January 1983 was an effort to mediate the fighting in Nicaragua and, on its northern border with Honduras, between Sandinista army forces and anti-Sandinista rebels.

After a series of meetings that involved the Contadora countries and Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, agreement was reached in September 1983 on a "Document of Objectives." This was considered a first step toward a comprehensive regional peace treaty. The key elements of the Objectives are: 1) the establishment of democratic systems of government; 2) reduction of current inventories of arms and military personnel; 3) banning foreign military bases in Central America, 4) an end to support for subversion, and 5) reduction and eventual elimination of foreign military advisers and troops.

In January 1984, the five Central American governments jointly approved a further agreement setting forth the "Principles for the Implementation of the Commitments Undertaken in the Document of Objectives." They also established three working commissions on security, political and socioeconomic affairs. Their work was completed in May 1984 and their proposals were embodied in a draft peace treaty now under consideration by the five countries. The draft treaty reportedly contains many of the proposals articulated in earlier documents. It would commit the parties to providing an inventory of their arms and of foreign military advisers, bases and equipment, to accepting verification from an independent four-member commission appointed by the Contadora countries, and to halting hostile propaganda as well as arms flows to insurgent groups in neighboring countries. Whether these proposals will be accepted is uncertain. Prospects do not seem favorable in view of such statements by Nicaraguan Interior Minister Tomas Borge as: "To disarm for us is impossible now. To give information on the number and quality of our arms would be very sensitive."¹

¹ "Central Americans Pessimistic on Outlook for Negotiated Peace," The Washington Post, June 25, 1984.

CONTADORA POLICY OBJECTIVES

Mexico and Venezuela were the initial force behind the Contadora negotiations. For similar reasons, both had forged a more active foreign policy in Latin American affairs in the 1970s than they had had previously. First, the alienation of much of Latin America by the Carter Administration's human rights policy substantially diminished U.S. influence in the region. Second, Mexico's and Venezuela's new-found oil wealth and relative political stability afforded them the means and the opportunity to play a more assertive role in the region.

Of the four countries, Mexico has been the most outspoken advocate of the Contadora process and critic of U.S. policy. Colombia and Panama have been reticent because their political systems are sharply divided between center-left and center-right parties, making bold pronouncements politically imprudent at home. Moreover, Panama recently has been too absorbed in its presidential elections, and Colombia in its ongoing cycle of war and truce with its communist guerrillas, to pursue vigorously an international agenda.

Venezuela has a strong democratic left that long has been active in promoting democracy in Latin America. It threw its support behind the anti-Somoza revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, as did several other countries in the region. Along with Mexico, it sells subsidized oil to Nicaragua. Although Venezuela, like Mexico, welcomed the Contadora initiative as a means to forestall unilateral U.S. intervention in Central America, Caracas is far less sanguine than Mexico about the victory of the Cuban-supported Marxist governments in the region. Venezuela, however, has been discreet about its differences with the Mexican position, possibly to avoid being labelled a spoiler to an agreement.

As Mexico sees it, there are three elements in the Central American crisis. First, economic backwardness and oppression, rather than outside manipulation, account for the region's turbulence and insurrections. Second, the revolutionary left is not dangerous, and can be coopted by sympathetic policies in which economic largesse is prominent. Third, elections and democracy are less essential to stability and development than "ideological pluralism"--power-sharing and tolerance of leftist dictatorships. Specifically, these principles translate into a policy that centers on foreign economic aid and domestic power-sharing, precludes the use of military force, and accepts foreign-supported communist regimes in Latin America.

Mexico has criticized such U.S. actions as covert support for the anti-Sandinista rebels ("contras") and military exercises with the Honduran army, as the obstacles to peace in Central America. Yet Mexico remains silent on Nicaragua's support for the leftist insurgents in El Salvador and the substantial presence

of Soviet bloc personnel in Nicaragua.² During his May 1984 visit to Washington, Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid blamed "the almost total distrust" between the U.S. and Nicaragua as a "fundamental" cause of lack of progress in the Contadora negotiations.³ An anonymous Mexican official was quoted in the New York Times as saying that despite the Contadora group's request that military aid to Central America be limited, there has been a "notable increase" in the U.S. military presence.⁴ The Mexicans said nothing about the much more substantial flow of Soviet and Cuban aid to Nicaragua and to the insurgents in El Salvador.

The likely outcome of a settlement along Mexican lines would be consolidation of the one-party dictatorship of the Sandinistas, thereby denying Nicaragua's democratic opposition any hope of enjoying the rights and freedoms for which they fought the Somoza dictatorship. The stability and evolution of the rest of Central America would be largely contingent upon Nicaraguan willingness to observe whatever agreement they sign. Given the covert nature of Nicaraguan (and Cuban) activities in organizing and supplying local surrogates devoted to communist revolution, such a settlement is unlikely to produce more than a temporary truce in the region.

NICARAGUA'S ROLE IN THE CONTADORA NEGOTIATIONS

Nicaragua's behavior throughout the Contadora negotiations indicates that the Sandinista regime has no intention of making the accommodations needed for genuine regional peace. At the same time that the Sandinista regime has agreed in principle to the objectives most likely to allay the fears of its neighbors--reduction of its armed forces, noninterference in other countries, and establishment of democratic institutions--it has accelerated its arms buildup, expanded the draft of young men into the military, tightened one-party control of the electoral process, and continued to supply the leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

The Sandinista junta appears to view the Contadora negotiations as a way to buy time to consolidate its grip on the country and to stave off what they fear may be a U.S. plan for direct intervention. Ten months after the process began, Sandinista Commander Tomas Borge declared that "Contadora is a retaining wall and a pathway."⁵

² According to Timothy Ashby in "Nicaragua: Soviet Satrapy," Proceedings, July 1984, p. 51, "The approximately 3,000 Nicaraguans working under Lenin Cerna, de jure chief of the Sandinista Intelligence Security Directorate, are assisted by 400 Cubans, 70 Soviets, 40 to 50 East Germans, and 20 to 25 Bulgarians."

³ Robert McCartney, "Mexico Says Peace Moves at Impasse," The Washington Post, May 11, 1984.

⁴ "Obstruction of Contadora Efforts is Charged," The New York Times, May 13, 1984.

⁵ Christopher Dickey, "Quagmire to Cauldron?" Foreign Affairs, Vol. 62, No.3 (America and the World 1983), p. 687.

Managua seemed to accept the basic principles of a settlement in September of 1983 when it agreed to the Document of Objectives prepared by the Contadora group. Then two weeks later, it proposed four substitute treaties that changed the terms of a settlement substantially. The Sandinistas' proposals, for example, disregarded the objective of restoring military balance, and contained no reference to establishing democratic institutions.⁶ In effect, the treaties would advance the objectives of Nicaragua's Marxist-Leninist regime at the expense of its neighbors' legitimate security concerns.

Nicaragua also has exploited the negotiation process for its propaganda value. In May 1983, Nicaragua went to the United Nations Security Council to protest aggression against its territory, and emerged with a resolution that commends the Contadora effort and "reaffirms the right of Nicaragua and all of the other countries of the area to live in peace and security...."⁷ Nicaragua again turned to the United Nations in October, breaking its explicit commitment to the Contadora group not to involve the U.N. Similarly, by filing a claim with the International Court of Justice concerning U.S. support for anti-Sandinista rebels, Nicaragua presented itself to the world as an innocent, injured party, diverting attention from its own arms build-up and program to destabilize El Salvador.

With a Contadora draft treaty now under consideration, Nicaragua may be forced to reveal its real aims. Honduran Foreign Minister Paz Barnica reported that at a May meeting of Central American foreign ministers in Panama, "it was Nicaragua that vetoed all decisions intended to secure an overall and regional solution, in accordance with the Document of Objectives."⁸ According to The Economist, Nicaragua has rejected verifiable arms controls and specific measures to ensure free elections.⁹ Its rejection of verification procedures sharply contrasts with the other Central American countries' offer to reveal details about their armed forces to the Inter-American Defense Board, a section of the Organization of American States.

PITFALLS IN THE CONTADORA APPROACH

The major weakness of the Contadora prescription for peace in Central America is its reluctance to recognize the nature of the Nicaraguan regime and of Soviet-Cuban intervention in the

⁶ "Is Peace Possible in Central America?" Department of State Bulletin, March 1984, p. 68.

⁷ U.N. Security Council Resolution 530, May 19, 1983.

⁸ FBIS, May 18, 1984, P12.

⁹ The Economist, May 19, 1984.

area, and in its insistence that a "political solution" divorced from military power is possible, and even necessary. Instead, the Contadora group has construed the Central America problem as a traditional political conflict among competing states to be resolved by diplomatic negotiations alone.

To be sure, the Contadora documents call for democratic, representative and pluralistic governments that "ensure that various currents of opinion have free access to fair and regular elections." Yet the thrust of public statements by the Contadora group, especially Mexico, has been to mute the issue of elections in Nicaragua, while pressuring El Salvador's elected President, José Napoleón Duarte, to negotiate with that country's leftist guerrillas. In light of Mexico's policy of "ideological pluralism," or sympathy for leftist dictatorships, it is not surprising that the Contadora group largely has ignored the probable impact on Central America of the Sandinistas' continued undemocratic rule. Not only will the Nicaraguan people continue to be poor and oppressed, perhaps leading to more violent confrontation between the Sandinista junta and the armed internal opposition, but Costa Rica and the rest of Central America will continue to be threatened by Nicaragua's dedication to communist revolution. Misery and oppression under a leftist, revolutionary dictatorship is no better a prescription for peace between Nicaragua and its neighbors than are the same conditions under a rightist dictatorship.

The Contadora group's insistence that political accommodation with Nicaragua is possible without reference to the traditional instruments of power politics is short-sighted and ignores history. Nicaragua's intransigence on the question of control measures to ensure compliance with such elements of the draft agreement as a ban on foreign military bases and advisers and a restoration of military balance with its neighbors should suggest that Nicaragua is not willing to accommodate those countries' security concerns. The Sandinistas are unlikely to accept realistic checks on fulfillment of their obligations or free elections, which they risk losing, if they are convinced that they can refuse such conditions with impunity. Diplomatic and economic isolation from the West, fear of increased aid to its opposition, or military pressure may be necessary to persuade Nicaragua to negotiate seriously.

CONTADORA NEGOTIATIONS AND U.S. POLICY

Charges that the Reagan Administration is not backing the Contadora negotiations are puzzling. For one thing, the Administration has expressed repeatedly its support for the regional peace initiative. This includes President Reagan's letter of July 1983 to the Contadora presidents; his May 9, 1984, address to the nation in which he said "The United States fully supports the objectives of that [Contadora] process"; his recent speech welcoming Mexican President de la Madrid to Washington; and numerous statements by top U.S. diplomats at the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

For another thing, the Contadora initiative was hailed widely precisely because of its strictly regional origins. As such, the U.S. can do no more than give the process diplomatic backing. Were the U.S. to play a direct role in the talks, the process would cease to be a Latin American initiative and would become dominated by the U.S. Washington has shown that it shares the concerns of the Contadora group by following many of the recommendations of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (the Kissinger Commission), and by appointing a Special Ambassador to the region.

Criticism of tepid U.S. support for Contadora is yet more striking in light of the compatibility of U.S. policy objectives in Nicaragua and the objectives articulated by the Contadora group. What the U.S. seeks from Nicaragua is the establishment of a genuinely democratic government, an end to support for insurgencies and terrorism, severance of military ties with Cuba and the Soviet bloc, and reductions in its military forces to restore balance between Nicaragua and its neighbors. All of these desiderata are included in the Contadora Document of Objectives, which Nicaragua has formally accepted. Moreover, they are entirely consistent with the Sandinista regime's public commitment in 1979 to a policy of nonalignment, nonintervention, and democratic pluralism.

The emphasis of U.S. policy on democracy in Nicaragua is a necessary element of its efforts to promote peace and economic development in Central America. Nicaragua's conflict with its neighbors stems directly from the nature of its Marxist-Leninist regime. The Sandinistas, for example, publicly proclaim a "revolution without frontiers." The record of Cuban involvement in other nations should be an unambiguous lesson that communist governments are not content with being left alone. Any peace settlement, therefore, that fails to take into account the nature of Nicaragua's political system would be no more than an unstable truce. Only a democratic Nicaragua will be a peaceful Nicaragua.

The nature of the Sandinista regime is also the cause of confrontation with its own people, whose expectations of freedom and democracy have been dashed. Nicaragua's one-party dictatorship has forced the opposition to take up arms in a guerrilla war that spills over its borders and causes tensions with its neighbors. A principal source of Nicaragua's conflict with neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica would be removed if the rebels challenging the Sandinista Front were allowed to express their opposition through free elections.

Despite the urgings of the Contadora group, primarily Mexico, the U.S. should not press El Salvador's elected government to share power with the leftist insurgents. The Document of Objectives states the need "to promote national reconciliation on the basis of justice, freedom, and democracy," a goal that the U.S. endorses. El Salvador has held free and open elections, in which the insurgents refused to participate. The people of El Salvador

rejected the guerrillas' call to revolution by electing center-left José Napoleón Duarte as president. National reconciliation cannot be achieved by arbitrarily reversing a mandate that represents a majority of voters. It requires free elections in Nicaragua, not power-sharing in El Salvador.

A crucial element of U.S. policy in Central America is economic and political pressure on Nicaragua to dissuade it from backing the leftist insurgents in El Salvador and to abandon its goal of "revolution without frontiers." The imbalance of military power among the Central American countries, caused by Nicaragua's explosive military build-up, makes it unlikely that Nicaragua would make significant concessions to its neighbors' legitimate security concerns unless pressured to do so. Diplomacy not backed by power can do little more than confirm the status quo, to be disrupted by Nicaragua, the only country in the region with the power to impose its terms. U.S. policy is based, rightly, on the premise that only pressure will persuade Nicaragua to negotiate seriously and to accept realistic verification procedures. Without such control measures, a peace settlement will be an empty gesture.

CONCLUSION

The Contadora countries are making a worthy effort to negotiate a comprehensive Central American peace treaty. The U.S. shares the Contadora objectives of democratic pluralism in Nicaragua, military balance among the region's states, noninterference, and a ban on foreign military advisers and bases. The U.S. has consistently expressed its support for the negotiations. Lack of tangible progress toward peace is not due to insufficient U.S. backing, but to conflicting views among the negotiating countries and Nicaragua's refusal to accept any verifiable checks on its military growth or support of anti-government insurgents in El Salvador.

The U.S. should continue to lend its firm support to these efforts to bring lasting peace to Central America. Its support for the Contadora process should also continue to stress the central importance of free and open elections in Nicaragua and of realistic verification measures to monitor compliance with the terms of the peace treaty. A regional peace agreement that does not include these realistic conditions will be merely a truce that confirms the status quo in the region. Diplomatic legerdemain cannot substitute for concrete measures that give substance to the peace agreement.

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