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IN CENTRAL AMERICA, A DISMAL RECORD FOR THE CONTADORA PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

As the debate over U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan democratic resistance intensifies, the "Contadora Process" is receiving renewed attention.¹ Many opponents of U.S. military aid to the resistance contend that the U.S. should negotiate instead and that Contadora offers the only real hope for peace. Thirty-one Democrat Congressmen sent that message in a letter to the White House in January, arguing that U.S. assistance to the Nicaraguan democratic resistance "undermines" the Contadora Process, and hence, that the President should not request renewed assistance for the freedom fighters until the Contadora nations were given one last chance to achieve peace.²

But the efforts of the Contadora Group should have nothing to do with a U.S. government decision to resume aid to the resistance fighters in Nicaragua. To argue otherwise is to fall into what one analyst calls "the multilateral fallacy"--"the idea that for American foreign policy it is not only unwise, but somehow illegitimate, for the U.S. to act without allied support."³ The United States has

1. The "Contadora Process" refers to the Central American peace talks begun in January 1983, brokered by Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela.

2. Letter from Representative James Slattery, et al., to President Reagan, January, 1986.

3. Charles Krauthammer, "The Multilateral Fallacy," The New Republic, December 9, 1985, p. 18.

vital national interests at stake in the Central American conflict, which will directly affect its ability to meet its commitments around the world; the Contadora Group nations do not have such responsibilities. This fundamental difference in the posture of the two camps leads necessarily to the conclusion that U.S. policy should be decided wholly and unapologetically on the basis of U.S. interests and objectives, irrespective of Contadora Group criticisms.

The trouble is that the notion that U.S. assistance to the democratic resistance undermines the Contadora Process is illogical. This argument does not recognize the inextricable link between military power and successful diplomacy: that, in Clausewitz's famous dictum, war is the continuation of politics by other means.⁴ The idea that a group of four weak nations whose only sanction is international public opinion could change the policies of a communist regime ignores the hard lessons of history. What is needed instead is a sustained combination of diplomatic, economic, political, and military pressure to force Nicaragua's Leninist regime to liberalize its policies domestically and stop subverting its neighbors.

Even if the Contadora Process were in principle the perfect avenue for such pressure, there would still be serious questions about the integrity of the Process. In the time between November 1985 and January 1986, the Contadora Group missed a deadline for signing a treaty, extended it another month, decided to suspend the talks for six months, and then issued a call for an immediate resumption of the talks. This erratic behavior illustrates that the Contadora nations are uncertain about their own goals and methods.

As Congress debates renewed U.S. military aid to the Nicaraguan democratic resistance, therefore, doubts are mounting about the viability of the Contadora Process. A Central American peace treaty is as elusive now as it was when the Contadora Process began. It is fair to ask whether the Contadora nations are sincerely interested in Central American peace, or whether they merely are concerned with keeping alive a dying negotiating process.

Some observers argue that there are only three alternatives to Contadora: regional war, a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua, or both. There is, however, a fourth option: the Organization of American States. The OAS is the world's oldest international organization. It has a long history of successful mediation efforts. It has resources available which the Contadora Group lacks. Moreover, as the regional organization for the Western Hemisphere, it has the direct responsibility to deal with the crisis in Central America. If the opponents of renewed U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan resistance want to continue a diplomatic effort to achieve peace in Central America, they

4. Lenin rephrased it: politics is the continuation of war by other means.

should recognize the shortcomings of the Contadora Process and instead push to have the negotiations moved into the OAS.

RECENT PROBLEMS WITH CONTADORA

When the Contadora Group ministers presented a September 1985 draft treaty to the Central Americans for discussion, they announced first, that a meeting of ambassadors would be held, beginning on October 7; and second, that this meeting would last no longer than 45 days. After 45 days, they said, they would convene a joint foreign ministers conference to sign the document.⁵

Eight days before the final round of talks was scheduled to begin, Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega rejected the draft treaty. He claimed that Nicaragua could not sign and abide by any such treaty as long as the U.S. was funding the Nicaraguan freedom fighters. He made no mention of Nicaraguan support on a much larger scale for communist guerrillas throughout Latin America.⁶

The meeting broke up following a major argument on whether or not to continue the talks. A decision was made to extend the deadline for another 30 days.⁷

Over the following two weeks, there was a flurry of diplomatic activity, as the Contadora Group and Central American ministers flew to New York for the United Nations General Assembly, then to Cartagena, Colombia for the OAS General Assembly. While the ministers were in Cartagena, the Mexican government announced that it was "cutting back on its activist role in Central America" because it was frustrated by the lack of progress in the peace talks.⁸ Since the start of the Contadora Process, Mexico had been the Nicaraguan regime's in-house defender; its decision to decrease its role would have a damaging effect on Nicaragua's interests.

Further, there was a major diplomatic flap between Nicaragua and Colombia, as the Colombian government recalled its ambassador to Managua and considered breaking diplomatic relations entirely with

5. "Contadora Foreign Ministers Meeting Concludes," FBIS, Latin America, p. A2.

6. "Ortega Outlines Position on Contadora," FBIS, Latin America, pp. P12-22.

7. "Ministers on Nicaraguan Rejection of Peace Plan," FBIS, Latin America, November 12, 1985, p. A1.

8. Robert J. McCartney, "Quest for Peace Is Renewed in Central America," The Washington Post, November 20, 1985, p. A27.

Nicaragua. The reason: the Sandinistas' undeniable role in the November assault on the Palace of Justice in Bogota by Colombian M-19 guerrillas.⁹

THE CARABALLEDA INITIATIVE

With these two diplomatic body blows, the Sandinista regime asked the Contadora Group last December for a six-month suspension of the negotiations.¹⁰ Then just over a month after they accepted Nicaragua's request to suspend the discussions until this May, the Contadora Group ministers were meeting again, in Caraballeda, Venezuela, with the four Contadora Support Group foreign ministers.¹¹ Following the conclusion of these January 11 and 12 meetings, the ministers released the text of the "Caraballeda message for peace, security, and democracy in Central America."¹²

The Caraballeda message summarizes the fears and hopes of the Contadora ministers: "In the face of the growing threats against peace in Central America and in view of the risk of a diplomatic vacuum that would worsen tensions in the region, it is urgent and necessary to boost the process of negotiations...The process of negotiation must lead, as soon as possible, to the signing of the Contadora document for peace and cooperation in Central America, the only means for achieving a general political understanding that would allow a respectful, peaceful, and productive coexistence among the countries of the region."¹³

In other words, the Contadora nations knew matters were slipping away from them. The Sandinistas had imported massive amounts of arms and personnel from the Soviet Union and Cuba through December and

9. After the assault was over, Colombian authorities traced half the weapons used by the guerrillas to the Sandinista regime. Moreover, Nicaraguan Interior Minister Tomas Borge, known as one of the most ardently pro-Soviet of the nine Sandinista commandates, attended a memorial service for the dead guerrillas, adding salt to the wound.

10. "Astorga, Consalvi on Contadora Postponement," FBIS, Latin America, December 10, 1985, p. A4.

11. The Contadora Support Group is comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay.

12. "Prensa Latina: 'Text' of Contadora Document," FBIS, Latin America, January 14, 1986, p. 2.

13. Ibid.

January, convincing some experts that Nicaragua was just using the negotiating process to buy time until they could arm themselves.¹⁴

In early February a Contadora delegation travelled to the U.S. to meet with U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz. They urged the U.S. to support the Contadora Process. To demonstrate support, they said, the Administration should 1) to delay its request to the Congress for resumed military aid for the Nicaraguan democratic resistance fighters until after the March Contadora summit and 2) resume bilateral discussions with Nicaragua.

Acting on White House instructions, Shultz rejected their proposal. Instead, he offered "two cards you can use" to bring the Sandinistas back to the negotiating table: The U.S. would be willing to reopen talks with the Nicaraguan communists if they were willing to open discussions with their opposition, and the U.S. would "take into consideration" any change in Sandinista behavior toward its domestic critics.¹⁵

Four days after their meeting with Shultz, the Contadora ministers travelled to Panama City to meet with their Central American counterparts. Though Venezuelan Deputy Foreign Minister German Navas Carillo called the meeting "the most important moment" for the Contadora Group, the meeting broke up the next day without agreement. The participants, in fact, even failed to agree on the standard communique after the meeting. The chief of the Honduran delegation to the talks, Jorge Hernandez Alcerro, blamed the impasse squarely on Nicaragua: "The main obstacle to the achievement of a peace agreement continues to be the closed position of Nicaragua."¹⁶

THE INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS OF CONTADORA

The Contadora Process has been from the beginning a negotiating process riddled with problems. Even under the best of conditions, the governments involved would have found it difficult to compromise on the fundamental issues that divide the nations; under the spectre of war, those difficulties have been magnified. There are serious questions, moreover, as to whether or not the Process even takes into account legitimate U.S. interests in the region.

14. Jeremiah O'Leary and Mary Belcher, "Reagan Opens Campaign for Aid to Contras," The Washington Times, February 19, 1986, p. 1A.

15. Joanne Omang, "Latin Peace Talk Move Vetoed," The Washington Post, February 16, 1986, p. A25.

16. "Contadora, Central American Delegates Meet," FBIS, Latin America, February 19, 1986, p. A4.

The very notion, for instance, that a regional peace settlement could be negotiated without the U.S. presence at the table is unrealistic. The U.S. is the region's predominant power--militarily, economically, politically, and socially. Yet the essence of the Contadora Process is the idea that the crisis in Central America can be solved in a Latin American context, by the Latins themselves--or, in their words, that it can be divorced from the East-West conflict.

Clearly, this is not possible. The regional crisis became a central part of the East-West conflict when Moscow took the Nicaraguan communist regime under its wing, and then later decided to back Salvadoran communist guerrillas fighting the government of El Salvador. Whether or not the U.S. responded to this interference in what always has been considered a legitimate U.S. sphere of influence, the turmoil in Central America was by definition part of the East-West conflict. This fact then calls into question the central premise of the Contadora negotiations.

This premise was then almost immediately contradicted. No sooner had the Contadora Group issued its Caraballeda Message, calling for a "Latin American solution to a Latin American problem," than the Contadora ministers announced that they would visit Washington and Havana to seek the support of the U.S and Cuba for their initiative.

Of course the U.S. supports a negotiated solution to the crisis in Central America. The question is: what kind of negotiations, between which parties, over what issues? The fundamental cause of the crisis in Central America is not poverty and injustice, as the Contadora Group suggests; it is the expansionist nature of the communist regime in Managua, and the ideology of "revolutionary internationalism" that it espouses. Such issues are, for the Nicaraguan communists, non-negotiable--unless one can force the Nicaraguans to negotiate. The Contadora nations, are powerless to force the Nicaraguan regime to do anything.

There is considerable resentment, moreover, in the Central American countries over the composition and thrust of the Contadora Group. Asks an adviser to the Guatemalan government: "Who are the Mexicans and the Panamanians [where "democracy" is virtually non-existent] to teach us about democracy? Who are the Colombians [who have been fighting a communist insurgency for thirty years] to tell us how to handle communist guerrillas? And who are the Mexicans and Venezuelans [who owe, between them, roughly \$130 billion to Western banks and governments] to preach to us about how to run an economy?"¹⁷

17. Interview with the author, February 14, 1986.

THE OAS: AN ALTERNATIVE TO CONTADORA

By announcing a deadline, failing to meet it, extending it one more month, suspending the talks for six months, and then getting back together again five weeks later, the Contadora Group demonstrated the impotence of its entire negotiating process. The aim of the deadline was to pressure the Nicaraguan regime to sign the draft treaty. The Contadora ministers believed that Nicaragua, fearful of a U.S. invasion and reluctant to lose face in the international propaganda war, would rather sign a treaty with which it did not agree 100 percent rather than let it die. But when Managua balked, the Contadora ministers had no mechanism other than international public opinion to press the Nicaraguan communists to sign the treaty. This revealed that the Contadora Process has been little more than a discussion group.

It is for this reason that several nations want to move the stalled talks to the Organization of American States. The treaties forming the OAS legal and political infrastructure contain effective sanctions provisions with which to pressure recalcitrant nations.¹⁸ If the November negotiations deadline had been set within the OAS framework instead of the Contadora Process, something could have been done after Nicaragua refused to sign.

In addition to availability of sanctions, there is another reason to move the peace talks to the OAS: the OAS itself has a direct responsibility for Nicaragua's internal situation because of its involvement in the downfall of the Somoza government and the Sandinista rise to power.

In June, 1979, the 17th Meeting of the OAS Consultation of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs convened to consider the internal situation in Nicaragua. At the time, Anastasio Somoza Debayle was still in power in Managua, but increasingly was being pressured by the so-called Broad Opposition Front (FAO), which included moderate businessmen opposed to continued Somoza rule and to the communist Sandinistas. On June 23, by a vote of 17 to 2 (with 5 abstentions), the OAS stripped the Somoza regime of its recognition as the legitimate government of Nicaragua; in its place, the OAS recognized the Government of National Reconstruction, made up of members of the FAO and controlled by the Sandinistas.

18. These sanctions include: recall of chiefs of diplomatic missions; breaking of diplomatic relations; partial or complete interruption of economic relations or of rail, air, postal, telegraphic, telephonic, and radiotelephone or radiotelegraphic communications; and use of armed forces.

That junta then sent a letter to the Secretary-General of the OAS, promising to respect human rights, establish civil justice, and hold free elections.

Never before had the OAS taken such drastic action. Its effect was immediate: within one month, convinced that no one would support him any longer, Somoza gave up the fight against the Sandinistas. On July 19, they took power in Managua. Thus, the OAS is partly responsible for bringing the Sandinistas to power in Nicaragua and legitimizing their rule.

What is intriguing is that the 17th Meeting of Consultation of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs was never officially adjourned; it merely recessed. This was done to allow OAS nations to have a legitimate instrument to monitor internal developments in Nicaragua. Indeed, Violetta Barrios de Chamorro--one of the members of the original junta that replaced Somoza--wrote a letter in August 1985 to the OAS Secretary-General, proposing that "the OAS demand that the Nicaraguan government fulfill its previous pledge."¹⁹

CONCLUSION

The facts are clear: the Contadora Process has had no effect on the behavior of the Sandinista regime. It has not checked the Sandinista military buildup. It has not checked the Sandinista repression of Nicaraguan political and community life. It has not checked Sandinista support for the subversion of Nicaragua's neighbors. Nor has it checked the growth of the relationship between the Sandinistas and the Soviet Union and Cuba.

For the first 18 months after the Nicaraguan revolution, no country was more of a friend to the Sandinistas than the United States. Washington provided five times more aid to the Sandinistas in the first two years after the revolution than it had provided Somoza in the previous two years. Yet the Sandinistas launched a massive military buildup, imported thousands of Soviet bloc military and security advisers, set up a government modelled after Castro's Cuba, and began to subvert their neighbors.

The only reason the Sandinistas have moderated their policies at all is due to the military pressure put on them by the democratic resistance forces. This was admitted by FSLN commander of the revolution Bayardo Arce in a secret speech to the Nicaraguan Socialist

19. "La Prensa's Chamorro Urges OAS Action of FSLN," FBIS, Latin America, August 27, 1985, p. P14.

Party. He commented that the only reason the Sandinistas wanted to hold the elections they did in November 1984 was to remove a justification for U.S. pressure; absent such pressure, he said, "the electoral problem would be totally out of place in terms of its usefulness."²⁰

Diplomacy without military pressure backing it up almost always has failed. That is the lesson of world history. That is why the Contadora Process at the very best should have been seen as an adjunct to, not a substitute for, a self-directed, self-confident U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. Today, of course, Contadora negotiations appear with little hope and less value. In their place, the OAS offers a better diplomatic forum. It is an appropriate and legitimate venue. It would allow the U.S. to participate. Other Central American states too could be included.

After three years of ups and downs in the negotiations, it is clear that the Contadora Process has achieved all that it is going to--essentially nothing. For peace to be achieved in Central America, pressure must be applied to the Nicaraguan communist regime. This pressure must be military as well as diplomatic: it must include U.S. support for the Nicaraguan democratic resistance, as well as a sustained effort through the OAS. But do the nations of the Western Hemisphere have the will to accept responsibility for the actions they took in helping bring to power the Sandinista regime in 1979? And does the U.S. Congress have the will to take the actions necessary to bring democracy to Nicaragua?

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20. Bayardo Arce, "Comandante Bayardo Arce's Secret Speech Before the Nicaraguan Socialist Party," U.S. Department of State, March 1985, p. 4.