# Intelligence and Punta Huete Airfield: A Symbol of Past Soviet/Russian Strategic Interest in Central America

*By Robert Vickers*

***The status of the Punta Huete airfield and the possibility that Moscow might send jet fighters and other Soviet military aircraft there were key national security issues during the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989).***

About 60 km by road northeast of Managua, Nicaragua, sits an airfield with one of the longest runways in Central America. Officially known as Punta Huete, its presence is a little remembered but important legacy of the Cold War. It was constructed in the early 1980s—soon after the leftist Sandinista regime took power—with Soviet funds and Cuban technical assistance. Punta Huete was designed as a military airfield, with a 3,050 meter runway capable of handling any aircraft then in the Soviet inventory. It also had revetments for fighter aircraft.

The status of the airfield and the possibility that Moscow might send jet fighters and other Soviet military aircraft there were key national security issues during the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989). As a result, the US Intelligence Community (IC) monitored Punta Huete closely, and the administration made heavy use of intelligence to support its policy of attempting to limit Soviet influence and military presence in the region.

The airfield was never completed during the Cold War and the MiGs were never delivered, however, and Punta Huete lay abandoned and unused after the Sandinistas lost control of Nicaragua's government in February 1990 and after the Soviet Union collapsed the following year.

Nevertheless, the episode is an excellent example of the role that intelligence played in support of US strategic policy in Central America during a period of intense competition for global influence between Washington and Moscow. Since then, the Sandinistas have returned to power in Nicaragua, and Punta Huete has finally been completed with Russian financial assistance. Strange though it may seem, this raises the possibility that Punta Huete may once again become a high priority for US intelligence as Moscow renews its strategic interests in the Western Hemisphere.

## *The Beginning*

The Sandinista regime came to power in Nicaragua in July 1979 by overthrowing the country's long-time dictator, Gen. Anastasio Somoza.[1] The Sandinistas had already established close ties with Fidel Castro, beginning with a covert visit by insurgent leaders Daniel and Humberto Ortega and Thomas Borge to Havana in September 1978. Soon after the visit, the Cubans began covertly providing arms to the Sandinista insurgency via Costa Rica. Once the Sandinistas seized power, Daniel Ortega became head of the ruling junta. His brother, Humberto, became defense minister, and Borge became

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

chief of internal security as minister of interior.

From the regime's inception, the most important foreigner in Managua was Cuba's ambassador, Julian Lopez. The ambassador was considered Fidel Castro's personal representative and was in charge of all strategic aspects of military relations between the two countries. He was also included in all strategic decisions regarding the Soviet Union and Nicaragua, including military agreements. The Soviets preferred that all such agreements be handled by a tripartite commission of the three countries, and Havana's approval was required.[2]

Daniel Ortega and Fidel Castro review troops greeting the latter's arrival in Managua to help celebrate the regime's first anniversary in July 1980. The relationship with Cuba was Nicaragua's most important at the time. Photo © Bettman/Getty.

Thus, when Defense Minister Ortega led a delegation to Moscow in May 1980, the Soviets agreed to help train and equip the new Sandinista armed forces, but the details were to be worked out by the tripartite commission. In November 1981, after negotiations were complete, Ortega returned to Moscow to sign a full scale military aid treaty with the Soviet Union, the details of which remained secret. Nevertheless, the regime publicly announced that with foreign assistance, Nicaragua intended to build a military force of 200,000, including active duty members and militia.[3]

### *Growing US Concern*

When President Reagan took office in January 1981, he and his senior national security officials were already extremely concerned about what they saw as growing Soviet and Cuban influence in Latin America, especially in Central America and the Caribbean. They were particularly worried, in view of Fidel Castro's strong support to the Sandinistas, that Nicaragua could become another Cuba.

When William Casey became the director of central intelligence (DCI) a week after Reagan's inauguration, he made it clear that he wanted a strong, new intelligence focus on Cuba and Central America.[4] One immediate result was a national intelligence estimate (NIE) titled *Cuban Policy Toward Latin America*. Produced in June 1981, it was the first estimate in nearly a decade to cover the topic of regional Cuban influence.[a]

The estimate focused on what were seen to be more aggressive Cuban and Soviet policies in the region, which were judged to include more military support for leftist insurgents and greater assistance to the new revolutionary governments in Nicaragua and Grenada. It noted:

> *Castro has more influence and prestige at stake in Nicaragua than he has ever had in a Latin American country* [and] *Cuban support, especially in the military and security fields, is already increasing, including more sophisticated equipment supplied from Cuban inventories and transshipped from the USSR.*[5]

This NIE was followed by another in September 1981, titled *Insurgency and Instability in Central America*. Its key judgments included the following assertion:

> *The principal objectives of Cuba and the USSR in Central America are to consolidate the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and to use Nicaragua as a base for spreading leftist insurgency elsewhere in the region. Indeed, by virtue of its location, cooperation with Communist and other radical advisers, and support for Central American insurgencies, Nicaragua has become the hub of the revolutionary wheel in Central America.*

a. All the NIEs and intelligence products cited in this article have been declassified, with varying degrees of redactions. They are available in the FOIA Electronic Reading Room in www.cia.gov.

The estimate went on to state that a secret defense pact had been concluded between Managua and Havana, and that as a result, Nicaragua already had the largest standing army in the region. By this time, US intelligence satellites and aircraft had begun to detect the arrival in Nicaragua of Soviet heavy weapons, including tanks and artillery. Reports also began arriving of Nicaraguan pilots training in Bulgaria and of Soviet and Cuban plans to provide MiG-21s to the Sandinistas. The estimate added that the aircraft could arrive in Nicaragua by early 1982.[6]

Concerned about this intelligence, Reagan met with his National Security Council (NSC) in November 1981 to discuss countering the Soviet and Cuban actions in the region. Discussions were also held about Soviet provision of additional MiG-23 (Flogger) fighter aircraft to Cuba and the potential delivery of MiG-21 (Fishbed) fighters to Nicaragua. The results were two national security decision directives (NSDDs): NSDD 17—Cuba and Central America and NSDD 21—Responding to Floggers in Cuba issued in January 1982.

NSDD 17 tasked senior government officials to develop military contingency plans against Cuba and Nicaragua and a public affairs strategy to inform the public and Congress of the situation in the region. NSDD 21 explicitly stated that the United States "will not tolerate the introduction of fighter aircraft into Nicaragua."[8] Later in the year, Reagan and his security team agreed that if Nicaragua acquired MiGs, the US military would attack and destroy them. In addition, both the Nicaraguan and Soviet governments were warned that the United States strongly opposed the delivery of the aircraft to the Sandinistas.[9]

Daniel Ortega during a highly publicized visit in May 1982 to Moscow and a meeting with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who promised a visit to Nicaragua. None of the public statements alluded to any aid beyond diplomatic support to the Sandinista leadership. Photo: © Tass/Getty.

The next step was a press briefing at the State Department in March 1982, at which Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Bobby Inman and Deputy Director of Defense (Intelligence) John Hughes addressed the growing threat to the region of Nicaragua's increasing acquisition of advanced Soviet weaponry. They used declassified SR-71 imagery and other intelligence to make their case. They highlighted the reported training of 50 Nicaraguan pilots on advanced jets in Bulgaria, and they showed photos of the extension of runways at several airfields in Nicaragua that would make them capable of supporting MiG-21 fighters.[10] At the time, US intelligence was still unaware that construction of Punta Huete Airfield was about to begin.

Then in June 1982, DCI Casey approved two more estimates done at his request. The first was a special NIE (SNIE) titled *Short-Term Prospects for Central America*. It focused on the threat the IC believed moderate democratic governments in the region faced in the growing strength of the Sandinista regime and its "continued cooperation with Cuba in promoting Marxist revolution elsewhere in Central America, together with its military buildup toward dominance in the region." The SNIE added that, with Soviet and Cuban assistance, Nicaragua had already built the strongest ground force in the region and that once it received MiG fighter aircraft, it would have the best air force as well.[11]

The second SNIE was the first done on Soviet policy in the region in more than 11 years. Titled *Soviet Policies and Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean*, its key judgments began by stating that Soviet activity and interest in the region had ex-

panded significantly in the past few years and that Soviet leaders shared Fidel Castro's perspective that the prospects for the success of revolutionary regimes in Central America had increased. Moreover, both governments viewed the consolidation of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua as central to promoting leftist gains in the region. The estimate noted that, while recent US warnings to Moscow of the consequences of delivering fighter aircraft to Nicaragua may have prompted a deferral of the deliveries, "preparations for their arrival were continuing." These included on-going expansion and upgrading of some Nicaraguan airfields and reported training of Nicaraguan pilots to fly MiGs. The key judgments concluded that "over the longer term, there is a possibility that the Soviets will seek access to naval and air facilities in Nicaragua" and that "such access would have a significant impact on US security interests, especially with regard to the Panama Canal."[12]

As a result of administration concerns about the escalating threat to US strategic interests in Central America, Reagan addressed a joint session of Congress on the situation in April 1983. After stating that the region was of vital importance to the United States because of its location adjacent to the Caribbean Basin and the Panama Canal, he noted the continued Soviet military presence in Cuba, including a combat brigade and visits by Soviet submarines and military aircraft. He then warned that the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, assisted by Cuba and the Soviets, had become a destabilizing presence in the region as a result of its support for the Salvadoran guerrillas and other leftist insurgent groups and because of its continued military buildup. He noted that Nicaragua now had the largest army in Central America, equipped with Soviet tanks, artillery, and aircraft, and was assisted by 2,000 Cuban military and security advisers. He ended by calling for the withdrawal of all foreign military advisers and troops from the region, and he asked Congress to provide $600 million in new US economic and security aid to US allies in Central America to help them resist externally supported aggression.[13]

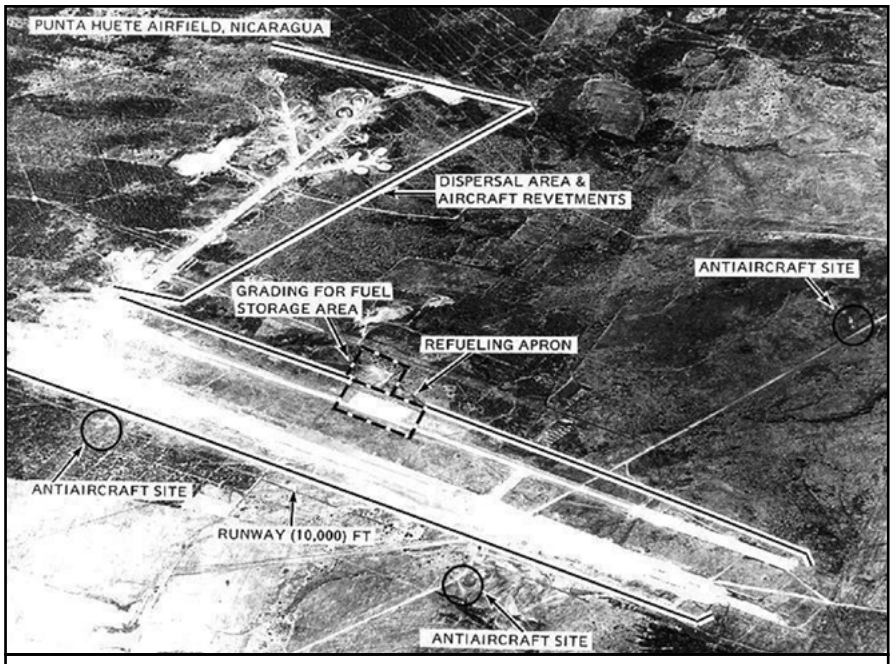
The inset map above shows the relative locations of Managua and Punta Huete—about 25 kms across Lake Managua. It appeared in SNIE 83.3-3-85, *Nicaragua: Soviet Bloc and Radical Support for the Sandinista Regime*, March 1985.

### *Discovery of Punta Huete Airfield*

In July 1982, US intelligence analysts examining images taken over Nicaragua by a recent reconnaissance satellite mission identified the beginning phases of construction of what by the end of the year could clearly be interpreted as a large new airfield.[14] Named Punta Huete, it was located on a peninsula on Lake Managua well away from large population centers (see map above).

The IC continued to monitor the construction closely, employing satellite imagery and photos taken by SR-71 reconnaissance missions. The development of Punta Huete was also brought to the attention of senior policymakers, who continued to see the delivery of MiG fighter aircraft to Nicaragua as a provocative Soviet and Cuban move to upset the regional arms balance.[a]

The construction of Punta Huete continued at a slow but steady pace over the next few years. By late 1984, pavement of a 3,050 meter runway and taxiway was complete, and 16 aircraft revetments were under construction. No support facilities had been built yet, but three antiaircraft artillery sites defended the airfield.[15]




An overhead image of Punta Huete airfield that was used in an unclassified joint State and Defense Department booklet on Soviet and Cuban military activity in Central America. The document was published in March 1985.

US warnings to the Soviets and Sandinistas against the delivery of the MiG-21s grew more public and intense as the airfield neared completion. In a defiant response, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega publicly announced in September 1984 that the military airfield at Punta Huete would be ready to receive both aircraft and the pilots to fly them by no later than early 1985 and that Nicaragua was seeking MiG-21s from the Soviet Union to station at the new airbase.[16]

The issue of MiG deliveries came to a public head soon after. On 2 October 1984, a US intelligence satellite monitoring the Soviet arms export port of Nikolayev in the Black Sea spotted the Soviet freighter *Bakuriani* moored near a dock on which were seen crates that could contain up to 12 MiG-21s. Several days later, the ship had left, and the crates had disappeared. Intelligence analysts came to a preliminary conclusion that the crates had probably been loaded onto the *Bakuriani* and that the ship was bound for Nicaragua. Their suspicions were heightened when the ship took a long route around South America, passing below Cape Horn rather than going through the Panama Canal, where its cargo would have been subject to inspection.

News of the potential delivery leaked to the press on the eve of the November 1984 US presidential election. The Soviets and Sandinistas denied the ship was delivering MiGs, and when the *Bakuriani* arrived in the Pacific coast port of Corinto, Nicaragua, on 7 November, no MiGs would be unloaded. Instead, the ship delivered Mi-24 (Hind) helicopter gunships, useful for the Sandinistas in their escalating conflict with US-armed Nicaraguan insurgents, the Contras.[17]

### *A Soviet Strategic Military Base in Nicaragua?*

Despite the false alarm, Reagan administration concerns about the military potential of Punta Huete airfield by no means diminished. In March 1985, as a continuation of the administration's effort to maintain public support for its regional policies as outlined in its NSDDs, the Departments of State and Defense jointly issued a monograph titled *The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America and the Caribbean*. The introduction to the 45-page document promised to provide "information about Soviet and Cuban military power and intervention in Central

a. The author of this article was involved in this issue during this period, first as the CIA's senior military analyst for Central America in the early 1980s and then as the NIO for Latin America from 1984 to 1987.

***Soviet Aircraft of Concern in Central America and the Caribbean.***

The MiG-21 (Fishbed) (above left) was repeatedly promised to the Nicaraguan Air Force. It never materialized. The Soviet Union had supplied fighter/interceptor aircraft—MiG-23 Floggers (above right)—to Cuba, and there existed concern that some would be shipped to Nicaragua. (Official US government photos)

(Above left) What was initially suspected in November 1984 of being a shipment of MiG-21s to Nicaragua turned out to be a delivery of lethal attack helicopters, Mi-24 (Hind), also known as Flying Tanks. (Above right) A US Navy F-14 fighter escorts a Soviet Tu-95 (Bear) reconnaissance flight as the Bear overflys US naval activity in the Atlantic. (Official US government photos)

America and the Caribbean." It went on to address its concerns about Cuba, Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Fidel Castro personally.

Richly illustrated with declassified photographs, it highlighted Soviet supply of more than 200 MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighter aircraft to Cuba and Soviet use of San Antonio de los Baños Airfield outside Havana as a base for the periodic deployment of Soviet long-range Tu-95 Bear-D naval reconnaissance aircraft. These aircraft, operating out of Cuba, collected intelligence on US military installations on the Atlantic coast and monitored US naval activities in the Atlantic and Caribbean.

The report included declassified photos of both San Antonio de los Baños and Punta Huete Airfields. It concluded that once the Soviets completed Punta Huete, its runway would be the longest military runway in Central America, one capable of accommodating any aircraft in the Soviet inventory. This included the Tu-95, which would then be able to operate in the eastern Pacific Ocean and reach the US west coast.[18]

At about the same time, the IC published another SNIE on the region, *Nicaragua: Soviet Bloc and Radical Support for the Sandinista Regime*. The estimate stated that Soviet Bloc military and economic support to Nicaragua had increased dramatically in 1984. It provided details of Soviet Bloc arms deliveries, Soviet Bloc military advisers in Nicaragua, and Nicaraguan military trainees abroad. It also stated that the

delivery of the Mi-24 gunships to Corinto the previous November was the first direct Soviet seaborne delivery of combat arms to Nicaragua. Previous arms deliveries had arrived primarily via Cuba, Bulgaria, and other Soviet Bloc countries.

The SNIE went on to update the status of military facilities in Nicaragua being built with Soviet Bloc assistance. These included Punta Huete Airfield. After noting that training on MiGs of Nicaraguan pilots continued in the Soviet Union, the estimate concluded that while "the Soviets have refused to provide the MiG-21 aircraft desired by Nicaragua because of concern about a US response," the Sandinista air force would be greatly strengthened should it eventually receive them.[19]

### *The NSC Reviews the Subject*

On 10 January 1986, the NSC met to review the situation in the region. In his opening remarks, NSC Staff Director and National Security Advisor John Poindexter noted that Nicaragua was the one significant problem area in the region and that it was a symbolic test of US ability to deal with Soviet influence in its own backyard.[20]

DCI Casey followed by observing that the meeting was the first the NSC had held on the subject of Central America in 15 months. He took note of the four assessments the IC had produced in that time and launched into a disquisition on the strategic significance of Soviet activities in Cuba and the danger of its gaining a military foothold in Nicaragua, particularly when Punta Huete Airfield and other facilities then under construction were complete and capable of handling all classes of Soviet aircraft. He further put Soviet activity in Latin America into a global context of Soviet efforts to consolidate and advance their positions around the world, including Afghanistan, Libya, Mozambique, Angola, and Vietnam.[21] Casey then gave the floor to the chief of the Central American Task Force for a detailed report on the US supported Contra insurgency in Nicaragua.[22]

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Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger added that Nicaragua was developing into a Soviet base and another Cuba unless the United States could restore it to a friendly government. Secretary of State George Shultz concluded that the United States had laid down a marker on the introduction of MiGs to Nicaragua, but the administration needed to do more with Congress to provide funding for covert military support to the democratic resistance to the Sandinistas.[23] The meeting ended with an agreement not to leak any of its contents to the public.

By mid-March, a vote had been scheduled on a military aid package for the Nicaraguan resistance and efforts to prevent a communist takeover in Central American. To urge its passage, Reagan went on nationwide television on 16 March and detailed the risks his national security team had discussed in January and closed with an appeal to the American people to support congressional passage of the $100 million measure.[24] The speech was an instant public relations success, but it took another three months, and one failed vote in the House of Representatives, before the president would win passage of the aid bill and end the cutoff that Congress had enacted in December 1982 under the first Boland Amendment.[25]

Meanwhile, the administration continued to try to get the Soviet Union to agree not to provide MiG-21s to Nicaragua, either directly or via Cuba. Elliott Abrams, who was the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs at the time, recalls at least three meetings in late 1985 and early 1986 with Vladimir Kazimirov, his counterpart in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At each meeting, Abrams warned of the negative consequences to US-Soviet relations if MiGs were delivered to Nicaragua. Each time, Kazimirov refused to even discuss the issue, saying it was an internal matter between Cuba and Nicaragua, and that Moscow had good relations with both countries.[26]

### *Another Assessment of Soviet Strategic Interests*

In response to policymaker concerns, the IC continued to monitor the MiG delivery issue and the status of Punta Huete closely. According to Peter Clement, a senior CIA Soviet analyst at the time, the continuing interest in Moscow's actions in Central America led in November 1986 to a new CIA intelligence as-

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sessment titled *Soviet Policy Toward Nicaragua*.[27] It presented a sober and cautious analysis of Soviet views and intentions concerning Nicaragua and the region.

Its key judgments provided the CIA view of Soviet strategic objectives in Central America—which remain relevant to this day—and an outlook on Moscow's likely short-term actions.

> *Over the last few years, the Soviet Union has seized new opportunities to increase its influence in Latin America at the expense of the United States. Nicaragua is a key element in this policy, second only to Cuba in importance. While seeking over the long term to establish a firmer strategic position in the region through consolidation of the Sandinista regime, the Soviets hope to exploit the Nicaraguan conflict to isolate Washington diplomatically and encourage the Latin American left.*
>
> *The Soviets are playing for time. They see short-term risks to their interests in precipitating a US military move against Nicaragua—and are thus wary of provoking Washington by allowing the Sandinistas to obtain jet fighter aircraft in the near term.... We expect the Soviets—in conjunction with their Warsaw Pact partners and Cuba—to continue, and indeed increase, their military and other assistance to the regime.*[28]

The assessment then detailed by-then-familiar perspectives on the Soviet strategic view of Nicaragua and the MiG-21 delivery issue. It stated that "Moscow seeks to build a Marxist-Leninist state in Nicaragua that is militarily strong…and responsive to Soviet political interests." It added:

> *In the longer term, if the Sandinista regime can be consolidated, it promises to create a platform for further extending Soviet influence and supporting the left in Latin America. Inevitably, Moscow will press Managua—as it has Cuba, Vietnam, and other Third World regimes—for military concessions, such as air and naval access rights.*

The assessment concluded by weighing the potential pros and cons to Moscow's strategic interests of eventually delivering the fighter aircraft, but it rejected the idea that the Soviets would be willing to trade off their Nicaraguan interests for US concessions in other theaters of regional conflict, such as Afghanistan.[29]

By mid-1987, the Reagan administration updated the press on the status of the Punta Huete Airfield and its continued concerns about its eventual use as a base for Soviet reconnaissance aircraft. Administration officials said the runway at Punta Huete was complete, but work on support facilities such as fuel storage tanks was still under way but that little current activity was apparent. While US officials doubted the Soviets would use the airfield anytime soon, they again reminded the press of the site's strategic importance, observing, as the March 1985 booklet had not, that from Punta Huete, Soviet long-range reconnaissance and antisubmarine warfare aircraft could fly missions as far north as Canada and even as far west as Hawaii. One-way missions from the Soviet Far East could navigate past the Alaskan, Canadian, and US west coasts to Punta Huete and refuel there for return trips. Nevertheless, the officials believed the Soviets still did not want to provoke the United States by delivering MiGs to Punta Huete to help protect the airfield, such as they had done in Cuba before they began deploying reconnaissance aircraft to San Antonio de los Baños.[30]

### *A Defector Provides New Insights into an Old Issue*

What the IC and the Reagan administration did not know at the time, but which would be revealed in greater detail in late 1987, was that it was not Moscow that was delaying the delivery of the MiGs to Nicaragua. Rather, the obstacle lay in Havana. In late 1987, Roger Miranda, a senior Sandinista official who was chief of the Defense Ministry Secretariat and a close aide to Humberto Ortega, defected to the United States. He soon revealed startling new details about the strategic relationship among Managua, Havana, and Moscow, including the construction of Punta Huete Airfield and the MiG-21 issue.[31]

Miranda said the Sandinistas wanted the Mig-21s for two reasons: to defend the country from a potential attack by the United States and/or US

allies and as a symbol of firm Soviet commitment to Nicaragua's defense, much as it had done for Cuba. He confirmed that the Soviet Union had agreed in the secret November 1981 treaty to provide a squadron of 12 MiG-21 aircraft by 1985, as well as to construct a new airfield to support them. Moscow would send special construction equipment for the airfield, which would be built near Managua with the help of Cuban advisers. Moscow also agreed to train Nicaraguan pilots to fly the aircraft. This would consist of three years of training in Bulgaria followed by a final year in the Soviet Union.[32]

Miranda said the construction of the airfield posed many problems. Cuba, which had much experience building military airfields at home and abroad, sent a team of advisers and some equipment but refused to provide cement. This critical component was in short supply in both Cuba and Nicaragua. The initial airfield construction phase began in late 1981, according to Miranda, but work proceeded slowly. He said that for years, the project used a high percentage of Nicaragua's production of cement at the expense of other important national projects.[33]

Nevertheless, Miranda said, everything went smoothly until early 1984, when Fidel Castro suggested to Sandinista leaders that they should forget the MiG-21s and have the Soviets deliver Mi-24 attack helicopters instead. Castro said the Mi-24s would be much more valuable fighting the Contra insurgency, which represented a growing threat to the government. Castro argued that the US invasion of Grenada in 1983 showed that the Cubans could not defeat the Americans in a conventional air war and that the Sandinistas should follow the leads of Vietnam and Cuba by changing its defensive military strategy to concentrate on an all-out conventional and unconventional ground conflict. He claimed that the United States was not going to kill millions of Cubans willing to defend their country. Castro added that if the Sandinistas agreed, he would send Cuban instructors to Nicaragua to retrain the MiG-21 pilots to fly the helicopters.[34]

***Miranda added that the MiG-21s came up again in late 1987, when Soviet negotiators turned up in Managua and offered to deliver the fighters in 1992 as part of a new military aid agreement.***

Miranda said that Humberto Ortega was the most outspoken opponent of Fidel's proposal. Ortega agreed the helicopters would be more useful in fighting the Contras but that it was far more important to receive the MiGs as a signal of Moscow's commitment. He added that if the United States attacked the planes, it would violate Nicaraguan sovereignty but, even more importantly, defy the Soviet Union. This might bring Moscow to a firm commitment to defend Nicaragua, much as the Cuban missile crisis had led to a firm Soviet commitment to defend Cuba. Ortega concluded that Managua should not let Castro decide the issue as an intermediary but instead should approach the Soviets directly to confirm their position. Ortega did so in March 1984, when he went to Moscow and got a Soviet commitment to deliver the MiGs in 1985 as promised. Nevertheless, the MiGs were never shipped, and Mi-24/25 helicopters began arriving instead. Obviously, Castro's influence on Moscow prevailed.[35]

Miranda added that the MiG-21s came up again in late 1987, when Soviet negotiators turned up in Managua and offered to deliver the fighters in 1992 as part of a new military aid agreement being negotiated among Moscow, Havana, and Managua. According to Miranda, the Sandinistas wondered what lay behind the new offer and even questioned its timing, but they nevertheless accepted it. The final agreement called for a continued supply of military aid to the Sandinistas through 1990 to help defeat the Contras and a massive expansion of the Sandinista armed forces between 1991 and 1995, including the MiG delivery. The objective on the Nicaraguan side, according to Miranda, was still to eventually obtain a Soviet defense umbrella. Miranda never stated what position the Cubans took on this latest Soviet offer, but presumably they did not object. Miranda added that the Sandinistas themselves were convinced that they now had the upper hand and that by 1991 both the Reagan administration and the Contras would be gone.[36]

### *The Soviet Arms Flow Continues*

As a result of the new military aid agreement, Soviet arms deliveries to Nicaragua in 1988 continued at the same high levels reached in 1986 and 1987. These were all closely monitored by US intelligence. At the same time, the US Congress voted to cut off all military aid to the Contras in early 1988, primarily because Daniel Ortega agreed at a summit of all five Central American presidents to open direct cease-fire talks with the Contras. The two Nicaraguan sides agreed to that cease-fire in March 1988 and

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agreed to negotiate a political settlement. After prolonged and inconclusive talks with the Contras during the rest of the year, Daniel Ortega agreed at another Central American summit in February 1989 to hold free and open democratic elections no later than 25 February 1990.[37]

During the last months of the Reagan administration and in the early months of the George H. W. Bush administration, US officials sought an agreement with President Mikhail Gorbachev and Soviet officials to end the arms flow from the Soviet Union and Cuba to Nicaragua and to leftist Central American insurgents, particularly in El Salvador. In the last meeting of Elliott Abrams and his new Soviet counterpart, Yuri Pavlov, Abrams urged him to reduce military aid to Nicaragua. Pavlov refused, saying Moscow would cut off arms to Nicaragua only if the United States stopped all military aid to El Salvador and the rest of Central America.[38] Gorbachev later agreed not to send new Soviet arms to Nicaragua, but the flow of older weapons continued, mostly indirectly via Cuba. Thus, despite repeated US efforts through the rest of 1989, Soviet arms deliveries to Nicaragua that year continued at the same high levels as the previous few years.[39]

Soviet arms deliveries to Nicaragua came to an end later in 1990, not because of US efforts but as a result of the surprising defeat of the Sandinistas in the promised national elections of 25 February 1990. The Sandinistas were so confident they would win that they invited international observers to observe election process. The winning democratic opposition formed a governing coalition headed by President Violeta Chamorro, widow of a prominent oppositionist, but as a result of a transition agreement with the Sandinistas, Humberto Ortega retained his position as the minister of defense.[40] Ortega held the position until he retired in 1995, but Soviet and Cuban influence in Nicaragua declined dramatically during his tenure.[41]

### *The Bottom Line*

The Punta Huete episode and the possibility the Soviets would provide Mig-21s to the Sandinistas and deploy their own strategic aircraft to Central America showcase the interrelationship of intelligence and policy. In this instance, that relationship was fraught with controversy because of the covert US attempts to undermine the Sandinista regime through the Contras and because of claims that national intelligence was being slanted and misused for policy purposes.

While the record of the IC—as seen in released US intelligence assessments, a number of which are cited here—shows a strong consensus among senior US policy officials about Soviet Union aims in the region, the record also indicates that IC support was both timely and generally accurate. Indeed, the revelations of Sandinista defector Roger Miranda and statements of senior State Department official Elliott Abrams indicate that the US Intelligence Community may have understated Soviet determination to gain a strategic military foothold in the region through the Sandinistas.

Ironically, the rise of President Putin to power in Russia in 2000 and the return of the Sandinistas to power in Nicaragua in 2006 renew the possibility that Moscow may again seek military access to Nicaragua for the same strategic reasons the Soviet Union sought access to Central America. As US relations with Moscow have grown strained, Moscow has shown new interest in the region. In September 2008, two Russian Tu-160 strategic bombers made a surprise visit to Venezuela, the first ever flight to the region of such an advanced aircraft. Soon after, a Russian naval task force, following a brief stop in Cuba, visited both Venezuela and Nicaragua for the first time.[42]

In 2010, the Sandinistas finally made Punta Huete operational as a commercial airfield, with Russian financial assistance.[43] Additional visits of ships and aircraft would follow. A particularly notable one was a second stopover of Russian Tu-160s in October 2013. After stopping in Venezuela, the bombers made a highly visible landing at Sandino International Airport outside Managua rather than at the more remote Punta Huete Airfield.[45] Moscow subsequently announced that it was seeking military air and naval access agreements with eight countries, including Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela.[46]

Putin made his first visit to Latin America in July 2014, stopping briefly in Havana and Managua on his way to Brazil. There he attended the World Cup soccer final and par-

ticipated in a summit of the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Putin made clear that the purpose of his trip was to demonstrate that Russia was a global power with strategic interests in the Western Hemisphere.[47] Since then, Moscow's attention has been focused on the Middle East and the Syrian crisis. But should he again turn his attention to gaining military access to ports and airfields in Latin America, Punta Huete awaits.

## Endnotes

1. Three excellent books provide detail on the rise of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the extent of Soviet and Cuban support, and US policy toward the regime. They are Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1997–1990* (The Free Press, 1996); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Roger Miranda and William Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas* (Transaction Publishers, 1998).
2. Miranda and Ratliff, 99.
3. Ibid. 102 and 115–17.
4. Interviews with Martin Roeber and Patrick Maher, former national intelligence officers for Latin America, 27 October 2014.
5. Director of Central Intelligence, NIE 85/80/90-81, *Cuban Policy Toward Latin America*, Volume I, 23 June 1981, 4; Volume II, 11. These and other unclassified US intelligence estimative products cited are included in *National Intelligence Council, Revolution and Subversion in Latin America: Selected US Intelligence Community Estimative Products, 1947–1987*, NIC 2010-001, September 2010.
6. Director of Central Intelligence, NIE 82/83-81, *Insurgency and Instability in Central America*, 9 September 1981, 1, 9.
7. These NSDDs are available on-line at https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/NSDDs.html#.V1HEyDZf0fk
8. Ibid.
9. LeoGrande, 376.
10. A full transcript of the briefing is available in the *New York Times*, March 10, 1982.
11. Director of Central Intelligence, SNIE 82/83-82, *Short Term Prospects in Central America*, 8 June 1982, 1, 12.
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14. Glenmore Trenear-Harvey, *Historical Dictionary of Air Intelligence* (Scarecrow Press, April 2009) 124. Trenear-Harvey wrongly states the airfield was first discovered in 1980 rather than 1982.
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20. National Security Council, "National Security Council Meeting, Subject: Review of US Policy in Central America," January 10, 1986, 2. The declassified (and slightly redacted) record of the meeting can be obtained at http://www.thereaganfiles.com/19860110-nsc-128-central.pdf .
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22. Ibid., 4–5.
23. Ibid., 5–8.
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25. Linda Greenhouse, "House votes, 221-209, to aid rebel forces in Nicaragua; a major victory for Reagan," *New York Times*, June 26, 1986. See also Kagan, 426–27.
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