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South America: Viewing the Turmoil in Central America



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An Intelligence Assessment

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*ALA 85-10001
January 1985*

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South America: Viewing the Turmoil in Central America



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An Intelligence Assessment

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 Office of African and Latin
American Analysis. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries
may be directed to the Chief, South America
Division, ALA, on 

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 27 November 1984
was used in this report.*

Most South American leaders view with mild and somewhat detached concern the protracted instability in Central America, the involvement there of outside forces, and the threat of military escalation. For the majority of South American countries, sheer distance, their own monumental economic problems, and dramatic ongoing domestic political change combine to make Central America largely a peripheral issue. Indeed, we expect the South Americans' preoccupation with local economic and political concerns to grow.

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Only Venezuela and Colombia—whose proximity to the volatile Caribbean Basin gives them the most to lose if instability and insurgency spread—have been consistently involved in Central American matters. These two countries, in addition to working with Mexico and Panama in the Contadora negotiating group, have undertaken a number of diplomatic and economic initiatives of their own. Leaders of both countries have made it clear that they regard Central American instability as a potential threat to their own democratic systems. They also view the Central American situation as an opportunity to enhance their countries' and their own personal reputations as mediators and peacemakers.

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Although their interest in Central American stability coincides with US goals in the region, the Venezuelan and Colombian Governments have sought to avoid being closely identified with Washington. They have done this because of politically powerful nationalist and leftist constituencies at home and to avoid compromising their positions within the Contadora group.

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At present, it is clear that many South American leaders, though suspicious of the Soviets, the Nicaraguans, and particularly the Cubans, do not fully share Washington's estimate of their troublemaking potential. The steady growth of Nicaragua's military capabilities and the major role of Cuban advisers have not occasioned a significant show of concern from most South American countries. If Moscow or Havana dramatically stepped up support for Salvadoran guerrillas or armed Nicaragua with substantial numbers of sophisticated new offensive weapons such as MIG fighters, we believe that most South American countries, including some that have so far remained silent, would protest but do little or nothing more. Only Venezuela and possibly Colombia would seriously consider providing substantial arms aid to a beleaguered Central American government.

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If the United States were to sharply step up its activity in Central America, South American public and probably governmental criticism—spurred by traditional Latin wariness of US intervention—would be considerable even if US actions were clearly in response to provocations by other outside actors. We believe the South Americans' reactions would be limited to rhetoric, as they were when the United States took military action in Grenada. A few countries, such as Chile and Paraguay, would probably applaud greater US activism in Central America, and the military in a number of countries probably would also favor such US action.

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Even at current levels of US activity, we expect official and private South American criticism of Washington's policies in Central America to rise, but without significant impact on day-to-day US relations with South American countries. A number of South American societies, most notably those of Brazil and Argentina, have been undergoing substantial relaxation of political conditions as they undertake or consolidate transitions from military to civilian rule. In such countries—where political spectrums range from rightwing nationalists to radical leftists—many national civilian leaders empathize with revolutionary movements struggling against military-dominated authoritarian regimes. These attitudes are counterbalanced—to a greater extent in some countries than others—by fears of Cuban-backed export of revolution from the isthmus. Under these circumstances, with public opinion and political groups in South America becoming a growing factor in national life, US policy in Central America will be a convenient political target.

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Scope Note

In preparing this assessment, we have reviewed public comment by South American leaders on Central American issues, examined classified and unclassified data bases, drawn on written material provided by eight country analysts, and solicited supplementary reporting from elements of the US Missions in each country. Collating and analyzing this material enabled us to portray the broad perceptual framework that South America, as a region, places around Central America. At the same time, we have attempted to balance the regional picture with illustrative details on the unique perspectives of the individual South American states. More in-depth analyses of single-country perceptions are available in other studies or from the Chief, South America Division, ALA, 

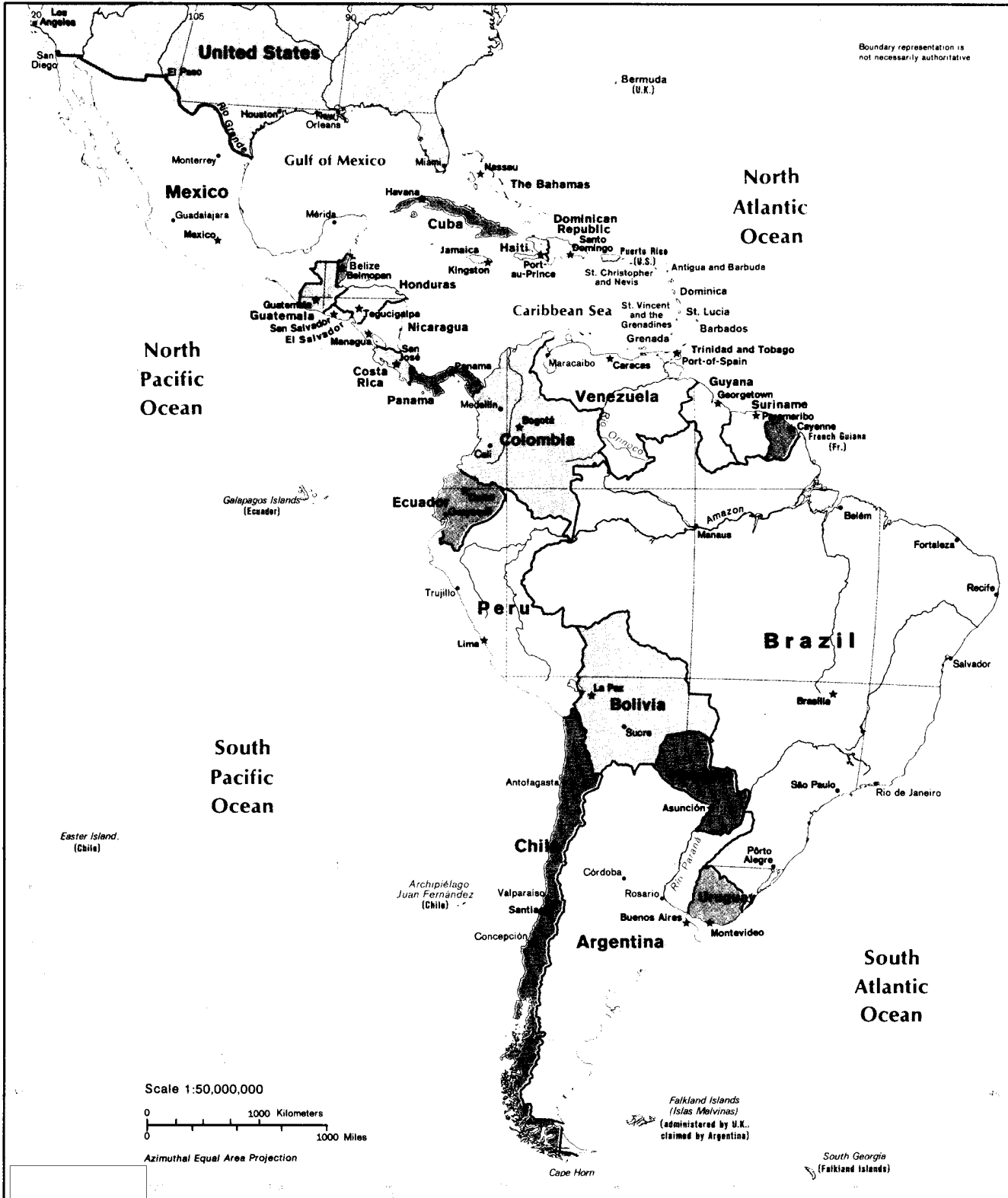
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Introduction

The nations of South America have traditionally tended to regard Central America as largely removed from their day-to-day interests. South America, like the rest of the world, long viewed Central America as a backwater and paid it little attention. As a measure of this meager interest, South American diplomatic missions have tended to be minuscule or even nonexistent, with state-to-state economic and political relations maintained at generally desultory levels. Even Colombia and Venezuela, though historically involved in Central America because of physical proximity, were not very active there prior to the mid-1970s.

Varying Responses to Crisis

The current protracted crisis in Central America has attracted greater attention from the South American countries because, in our view, of the impact of outside actors, the threat of military escalation, and the possible spread of insurgency. Virtually all South American countries have responded in some way. Many South American leaders—including the Presidents of Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina—have publicly voiced concern over various aspects of the situation. Central America is a recurring theme in the press of South American countries—such as Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil—as well as a subject addressed by politicians and intellectuals. Moreover, it has on occasion sparked demonstrations at US facilities, with incidents in Brazil and Uruguay among the most recent examples. But, all in all, Central American issues have been a serious foreign policy concern only in Venezuela and Colombia, and to a lesser extent in Argentina.

Venezuela and Colombia: The Activists. Venezuela and Colombia clearly have the most at stake in Central America. Their proximity makes them particularly vulnerable to the spillover of instability. Venezuelan officials—mindful that their country faced a Cuban-backed insurgency in the 1960s—have told US diplomats that revolutionary violence in Central America and the potential growth of still-minuscule

radical groups in Venezuela could threaten their country. Leaders in Colombia, which also has faced homegrown, Cuban-backed guerrillas, have voiced similar uneasiness.

Through their activism in Central America, Venezuela and Colombia, we believe, seek not only to limit the risks of spillover, but also have other goals and motives as well. Both are functioning democracies, and in our judgment their leaders are genuinely committed to preserving and advancing open government in Latin America. Moreover, Venezuela has tended to see itself as a regional power, with an obligation to guard and, if possible, expand its leadership role. We also believe, based on press interviews, that presidents of both countries have looked upon Central America's difficulties as an opportunity to enhance their own personal prominence. Both governments have worked outside as well as within the Contadora group—which also includes Mexico and Panama—to try to help resolve Central America's problems.

Regardless of the underlying reasons, recent governments in Venezuela all have tried to help strengthen moderate political forces in Central America. During the period 1979-83, Venezuela was—except for the United States—the most active supporter of El Salvador's Government. President Jaime Lusinchi, elected in 1983, also repeatedly pressed Nicaragua's rulers to hold elections and—partly to signal disapproval of the regime's authoritarianism—has refused to resume oil shipments to Nicaragua that were suspended in 1982,

The Venezuelan President has also given encouragement and advice to Nicaraguan opposition groups, according to US Embassy and he has publicly castigated the Sandinistas for their oppression of the Catholic Church. The US Embassy reported that Lusinchi took advantage of a visit by the

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Soviet Ambassador last June to emphasize that his government would view a decision by Moscow to supply MIG aircraft or other sophisticated equipment to Nicaragua as unhelpful to efforts to achieve a peaceful regional settlement. [redacted]

Although Lusinchi continues privately to criticize the Sandinistas, his recent congratulatory message to President-elect Ortega connoted official acceptance of the Nicaraguan elections by a Contadora group member, in our view. Lusinchi's message probably reflects growing concern that the United States may take military action against Nicaragua and may have been designed to distance Venezuela from such a move. Lusinchi, we believe, probably also hopes that by preventing relations with Nicaragua from deteriorating further, he can preserve some influence there to try to dissuade the Sandinistas from cracking down more forcefully on their domestic political opponents. [redacted]

In discussions with US officials on El Salvador, Lusinchi has repeatedly insisted that another Marxist-Leninist government in Central America in addition to Cuba and Nicaragua would be intolerable. His desire to promote democratic forces has led him to become a supporter of President Duarte. He hosted a visit by Duarte in September 1984 [redacted]

[redacted] and recently sent a team of military advisers to provide instruction to the Salvadoran security forces. [redacted]

At the same time, Lusinchi faces important domestic constraints that we believe cause him to shy away from becoming more deeply involved in El Salvador. Some leaders of his party oppose providing strong support for Duarte, according to the US Embassy, because of the Salvadoran President's longstanding links to the major opposition party in Venezuela, the Christian Democrats. [redacted]

[redacted] Lusinchi is constrained by the continuing loyalty to Salvadoran opposition leader Guillermo Ungo among members of the Venezuelan President's party [redacted]

Under Lusinchi's predecessor, President Herrera, Venezuela played a key role in the Contadora group, where it served as a balance against Mexico's pro-Sandinista leanings. More recently, however, Venezuela has been of only limited help in countering Mexico's activism in the group. This trend, we believe, stems partly from Lusinchi's deemphasis of foreign policy because of pressing domestic economic difficulties. But it probably also reflects his belief that Venezuela would be viewed as a cat's-paw of the United States if it were to champion in the Contadora group the cause of the four pro-US Central American governments. [redacted]

While Venezuela historically has displayed the deepest South American interest in Central America, Colombia maintains an equally high profile within the Contadora group. [redacted]

[redacted] President Belisario Betancur is determined to project both Colombia and himself as key elements in the search for peace. In January 1983, Betancur, publicly seeking Latin American leadership status for Colombia, ended his country's passivity toward Central America and announced his intention to act as a mediator. Shortly thereafter, the Contadora peace initiative was born. When the effort appeared stymied in April 1983, Betancur resuscitated it with a whirlwind 48-hour visit to the other Contadora countries. This ultimately led to the first negotiating session involving the Contadora four and the five Central American nations. A similar tour of Central America by Betancur in July 1983 also gave a boost to flagging peace prospects. [redacted]

Betancur, according to US Embassy reporting, favors a negotiated solution in El Salvador. Yet, he also fears that any scheme involving power sharing with the guerrillas or their representatives would set a dangerous precedent for Colombia. Concerning Nicaragua, Betancur's public statements suggest to us that he sympathizes with the Sandinistas' revolutionary fervor but fears their Cuban-backed expansionism, especially in view of Managua's claims to San Andres and other Colombian island possessions. More generally, according to the US Embassy, Betancur has emphasized that he believes Colombian interests are gravely

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endangered when the region's conflicts become enmeshed in East-West politics. Thus, he aims to diminish the involvement of the superpowers in Central America in order to reduce the risk of further internationalizing the conflict. [redacted]

According to US Embassy reporting, Betancur is also disturbed by the refusal of Nicaraguan leaders to honor their initial promises to permit political competition and by their growing reliance on Communist countries. In a meeting with Sandinista Directorate member Bayardo Arce in October 1984, Betancur strongly criticized preparations for the election in Nicaragua and warned that the USSR would not aid the Sandinistas in the event of a US military intervention, prompting the Nicaraguan to break off the conversation abruptly. Nevertheless, the Colombian Government did not publicly criticize the outcome of the election because of—in our judgment—a desire to avoid damaging Bogota's credibility in the Contadora group. [redacted]

In our view, an important consideration for both Venezuela and Colombia—even though their aims in Central America tend to coincide with those of the United States—has been to avoid close identification with Washington. According to US Embassy reporting, Lusinchi has indicated a concern that becoming identified with Washington—especially with the policy of using force against the Sandinistas—could be politically damaging at home and could undercut Venezuela's position in Contadora. [redacted]

Colombia's Betancur also has [redacted] expressed his intention to distance his administration's foreign policy somewhat from that of the United States. Betancur, according to the US Embassy in Bogota, has said that his predecessors' close ties to Washington isolated Colombia from other developing nations and fostered an image of the country as a "US satellite." [redacted]

Argentina: Would-Be Activist. Other than Venezuela and Colombia, Argentina is the only South American nation that has sought significant involvement in Central America, and its efforts to play a political role there ultimately proved fruitless. Argentina's initial interest in Central America was triggered by the fact

that the Montonero terrorists were receiving support, shelter, and training in Nicaragua following the Sandinista victory in 1979. As a result, the Argentine military, [redacted] provided training to the Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran security forces, as well as assistance to anti-Sandinista insurgents based in Honduras. [redacted]

President Raul Alfonsin, elected in late 1983, sought—in our view—to use Central American issues both to distance himself from the military regime that preceded him and to bolster his country's and his own reputation. By this time, the Montoneros were largely a spent force and Alfonsin, according to diplomatic reporting, had received credible assurances from Managua that its support to the remaining Argentine terrorists had ended. He decided that the time was ripe to declare an end to Argentina's aid to the anti-Sandinistas and to the Government of El Salvador, although he stopped short of canceling existing military sales contracts with the latter country. [redacted]

Alfonsin also attempted to join the Contadora group but was rebuffed by the group's members. We believe they resented what they saw as his effort to use such an association for image-building purposes. Undaunted, Alfonsin undertook bilateral efforts in Central America, dispatching high-level emissaries for talks with government and opposition leaders in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Because he regards Nicaragua as key to regional peace, he sought to improve ties with Managua, to diminish the Sandinistas' sense of isolation from Latin America and the West, and to encourage democratic processes in Nicaragua. Thus, he met personally with key Nicaraguan leaders and launched several trade and investment initiatives, including a multimillion dollar line of credit for Nicaragua. He urged outside powers, such as Venezuela, to be more supportive of the Sandinistas, and he criticized superpower involvement in Central America. [redacted]

By mid-1984, however, Alfonsin had begun to scale down these efforts. [redacted] Argentina [redacted]

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did not in fact have the financial resources to become a major player and that, in any case, the Caribbean Basin was not in his country's sphere of influence. We believe he also became more pessimistic about Argentina's ability to influence the Sandinistas. In addition, after President Duarte was inaugurated in El Salvador, Alfonsin began to seek improved ties with this regional adversary of Nicaragua. [redacted]

We believe that Alfonsin is unlikely to launch any further significant moves in Central America, given his lack of success to date and the growing press of domestic problems, particularly the continuing economic and financial squeeze his government faces. [redacted]

[redacted]

A civilian government is to be inaugurated in March, and we judge that in the increasingly open political environment the new administration will be more subject to pressure from political groups critical of US policies. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] we doubt that Central America will become a significantly larger issue for the Brazilians or that they will greatly modify their stance. The transition process itself, along with Brazil's ongoing financial difficulties, will more than fill the plate of the new administration. [redacted]

[redacted]

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The Other Countries: Staying in the Background.

The remaining South American countries appear to believe that there is little reason to focus on Central America. In our view, these countries have not sought significant involvement in Central American issues because of distance from the region and their own domestic preoccupations. In most cases, moreover, they have only meager resources to apply even if they did wish to be more active. [redacted]

Brazil, the region's major power, supports the Contadora process but has publicly made clear that it eschews a larger role for itself. Official comments on Central American issues have been limited to endorsements of nonintervention and self-determination. From diplomatic reporting and public statements, it is clear that the Brazilians regard the region as sufficiently far away that the advent of leftist regimes would not pose a danger. This view contrasts sharply with Brasilia's vigorous overtures in 1983 to Suriname, on Brazil's northern border. In addition, Brazil's commercial interests in the isthmus are small, and neutrality carries the benefit of demonstrating independence from Washington. As the military government of President Figueiredo nears the end of its tenure, we believe it is highly unlikely to alter this hands-off approach. [redacted]

The conservative, military-dominated governments of Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay have tended to support US policy in Central America. Chile's President Pinochet occasionally has publicly condemned the Sandinista regime, with which his government does not maintain relations, and according to a US diplomatic source has promised to help Honduras reequip its Air Force. Diplomatic sources note that Chilean Government and military officials view Central America as a battleground in the struggle against Communist expansion and support US involvement there. Chile has long had military ties, including exchanges and training programs, with the armed forces in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Pinochet's own domestic political and economic crises, however, have distracted him from Central America over the last two years. Uruguay has been quietly supportive of US policy and provided observers for the presidential elections in El Salvador. Incoming civilian President Julio Sanguinetti is cooler toward US policy in Central America, according to US Embassy reporting. We believe, however, that the transition to civilian government and Uruguay's economic problems will be his main concerns, at least during 1985, precluding major attention to foreign policy, particularly such remote issues as Central America. [redacted]

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Paraguay's actions have been limited to formally opposing the Contadora process on the grounds that a key participant, Nicaragua, is a Communist state. Judging from his past statements, we believe that President Stroessner—who hosted Nicaragua's President Somoza after his ouster from power in July 1979 and in whose country Somoza was assassinated—would endorse strong US intervention against the Central American left. [redacted]

Ecuador has a conservative new President, Leon Febres-Cordero, who, according to US Embassy reporting, has indicated he will be more supportive of US policies in Central America than were his two leftist predecessors. Febres-Cordero is highly concerned about a domestic Ecuadorean insurgent group which, according to captured documents, received promises of guerrilla training in Nicaragua. He has told US diplomats that he would like to work with the political opposition in Nicaragua, and he personally urged anti-Sandinista presidential candidate Arturo Cruz not to participate in the Nicaraguan elections last year without meaningful guarantees. His government also recently expelled one Nicaraguan diplomat. Nevertheless, Febres-Cordero is a strong nationalist who criticized the US invasion of Grenada, and we doubt he would support a major increase in US military involvement in Central America. [redacted]

Peru's President Belaunde has been far too preoccupied with domestic problems, including a thriving insurgency, to involve his administration in external issues. In any event, Belaunde has only a few months left in his term. His probable successor in July 1985, Alan Garcia, is a center-left nationalist who, we expect, will quickly try to establish his Third World credentials. We expect him to be more active in international forums than Belaunde, more inclined publicly to support the Sandinistas and Central American revolutionary groups, and more likely to take anti-US positions. [redacted]

Bolivia, also beset by serious political and financial problems, has limited its role in Central America to publicly supporting the Contadora effort and endorsing United Nations resolutions criticizing human rights abuses in El Salvador. Left-leaning President Siles sympathizes with the Sandinistas, who treated him well when he visited Nicaragua as an exile, and

he restored diplomatic ties with Managua soon after his inauguration in 1982. [redacted]

Views on Contadora

Despite the relative detachment of most South American countries from Central American issues, there is widespread public and governmental support for the Contadora process throughout the hemisphere—primarily, in our view, because it is internationally respectable, promotes dialogue, and entails no entanglements for South America. As reflected in numerous public statements by officials and others, all countries except Paraguay endorse the Contadora effort. The Contadora negotiations have received broad international support, and this in itself has generated a measure of pride among Latin nations generally. [redacted] a widely held perception in South America that the Contadora countries have been instrumental in keeping the peace process alive. Moreover, we believe that most South American countries find Contadora's "noninterventionist" approach consistent with their own efforts to chart independent foreign policies. [redacted]

Over time, however, we believe that other factors will militate against most South American nations giving energetic support to Contadora or to other multilateral efforts to resolve the crisis. Diplomatic reporting indicates that even Venezuela has become increasingly frustrated with the obstacles placed by both Nicaragua and pro-US Central American governments to achieving a regional settlement and wants to bring the process to a close as quickly as possible without losing face. The Colombian Government has demonstrated greater patience, largely because of Betancur's personal stake in promoting his image as peacemaker. We believe, however, that he may well be forced to divert his attention from foreign policy issues by pressure at home to deal with overriding difficulties, including a deteriorating economy and continuing terrorist-inspired rural violence. The importance of these issues to most Colombians, in our judgment, will not allow Betancur to use foreign policy initiatives as a diversion. [redacted]

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Historically, a tradition of distrust among the South American nations—stemming from nationalistic rivalries and longstanding boundary disputes—has made them generally reluctant to participate wholeheartedly in joint efforts. Thus, while Latin doubts about US motives may well have spurred the creation of the Contadora initiative outside established channels such as the OAS, the Latins' own differences will increasingly tend to weaken the group's effectiveness, in our judgment. Finally, it is always highly tempting for a South American president to choose a policy approach that potentially glorifies him personally, his party, or his country. [redacted]

Perceptions of Soviets and Cubans

Relaxed Attitudes Toward Moscow. The public statements of various leaders, along with diplomatic reporting from a variety of sources, make it clear that no South American government doubts the increasingly Marxist cast of the Nicaraguan regime or the reality of Sandinista aid to Salvadoran guerrillas. Betancur, for example, has told US officials that the Contadora group members work on the assumption that Managua clears its major policy moves with Moscow. Ecuador's Febres-Cordero, according to the US Embassy in Quito, also is highly wary of the Nicaraguan regime. [redacted]

Nonetheless, South American views of Soviet intentions and capabilities in Central America tend to differ considerably from those of Washington. Although many South American leaders and officials harbor some distrust of Moscow and, according to various diplomatic sources, fear the installation of pro-Soviet regimes in Central America, the Soviet role in the region has not been a major source of South American concern. Diplomatic sources indicate that many South Americans tend to believe US claims of Soviet involvement in Central America are overstated and politically motivated. [redacted]

In our judgment, this relaxed attitude is partly attributable to a South American perception that Soviet military activity in the Caribbean region is limited and nonthreatening. Moreover, we believe the Soviets have behaved circumspectly in the South American countries themselves, avoiding conspicuous support for opposition groups and stressing state-to-state diplomatic and trade ties. The two largest nations,

Argentina and Brazil, also maintain important commercial relations with the Soviets that they do not want to jeopardize, while Peru relies heavily on Soviet military equipment and training. Finally, we believe most South Americans tend to take the US security umbrella over the hemisphere for granted. [redacted]

Greater Uneasiness Toward Havana. While South American governments are relatively relaxed about Soviet intentions, [redacted]

[redacted] these governments have stronger views about the nature of Cuban activities in Central America. The more conservative leaders have voiced concern about Havana's military presence in Nicaragua. Yet there are significant variations among South American countries over how to deal with Cuba:

- *Colombia's* President Betancur likes to deal personally with Fidel Castro, according to US Embassy [redacted] and is close to such Colombian leftists as Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a fervent pro-Cuban sympathizer. Betancur, [redacted] has expanded his government's political and cultural contacts with Havana, even though formal diplomatic relations with Cuba remain suspended. These moves are generally in line with his policy of emphasizing the impartial treatment of all countries involved in the Central American region. Moreover, Betancur apparently believes that warmer ties with Havana will give him some leverage in seeking a peaceful solution through the Contadora process.
- In *Venezuela*, diplomatic sources report, opinion within the government and ruling party is divided between hardliners, who deeply distrust Cuban initiatives in the region, and more leftist groups seeking ways to minimize the chances of bringing Caracas into direct confrontation with Havana. President Lusinchi, himself a hardliner, has publicly expressed concern about Cuban meddling in the area.
- *Argentina's* new government has been openly critical of all foreign involvement in Central America, but has not singled out Cuba. [redacted] [redacted] Argentine bilateral relations with Havana have continued to improve since President Alfonsin took office in December 1983.

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- *Brazil* has perceived a serious Cuban threat only in Suriname, according to diplomatic [redacted] [redacted] sources. It has applied bilateral pressure on the Surinamese Government to lessen Havana's influence.
- Conservative South American governments, such as those in *Chile* and *Ecuador*, have been critical of Cuba's military presence in Nicaragua, but their opposition has been largely rhetorical. Chilean President Pinochet has openly criticized Havana's role in Central America, and Ecuador's Febres-Cordero almost certainly takes a dim view of Havana and will be watching for any signs of Cuban involvement with Ecuadorean terrorists. [redacted]

Prospects for Stronger Reaction

Given this relatively relaxed outlook toward Moscow and the differing attitudes regarding Havana, we believe that even a dramatic new escalation by the Soviets or Cubans—for example, a new introduction of large numbers of advanced offensive weapons systems such as MIG fighters—would not incline most South American nations to become more involved. To be sure, a Soviet or Cuban move on that scale would draw criticism. Nonetheless, we believe that, except for Colombia and Venezuela, no South American government would perceive a direct threat to its vital interests. [redacted]

This limited reaction is strongly suggested by the consistent lack of significant South American response to the steady increase to date in the size of Nicaragua's Army, the presence of thousands of Cuban advisers in that country, and the provision of large amounts of Communist military hardware to Managua. Moreover, whereas the United States was highly concerned in the fall of 1984 about the possible arrival in Nicaragua of MIG aircraft, South American officials generally did not express particular concern. We do believe that, in the event of a major escalation by Cuba or the USSR, Venezuela and possibly Colombia—if only out of concern for the potential threat to its island possessions—would seriously consider providing substantial arms assistance to one or more beleaguered Central American governments. [redacted]

Implications for the United States

By contrast, we believe that a major expansion of US activity—such as the presence of US troops to support the Salvadoran Government, or renewed support for anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua—would draw significant criticism from South American governments, even if such a move were clearly in response to a Cuban or Nicaraguan provocation. Latin nationalism would virtually guarantee this. We also judge, however, that official criticism would be limited to rhetoric and would prove to be only a temporary irritant in relations with the countries involved. [redacted]

[redacted] even in the event of US military action against Nicaragua, Buenos Aires would do no more than posture for political effect. Distance and the press of their own domestic problems make Central America largely peripheral for almost all South American countries. Moreover, we believe that leaders in these countries recognize they have little to gain by trying to challenge Washington. [redacted]

The mixed but predominantly circumspect reactions of South America to the US military action in Grenada in 1983 also suggest that, at worst, negative reaction to heightened US activity in Central America would be rhetorical and its effects transitory. Outright public condemnations of the move into Grenada were very few—emanating only from the leftist government of Bolivia and the then left-leaning administration in Ecuador. Venezuela carefully avoided condemning the United States, calling simply for an end to all foreign intervention in Grenada. President Lusinchi, then campaigning for office, privately referred to Grenada's previous rulers as a "pack of bandits," according to the US Embassy in Caracas. Colombia's Government publicly criticized the United States but did so only once and in relatively low-key fashion. Argentina, at the time still under military rule, issued a pro forma criticism, and Brazil, while publicly critical, was not strident and did not belabor the point. Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay all supported the United States. Civilian officials in Peru, according to the US Embassy, privately expressed sympathy with Washington on Grenada. [redacted]

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Although South American leaders will continue to feel obliged publicly to condemn much of what the United States may do in Central America, we also see some potential for South American support—in private—for increased US activism. We believe, for example, that the military in a number of countries would feel reassured by a still higher level of US activity against Central American insurgents. In fact, according to defense attache reporting, military leaders in Chile and Argentina privately applauded US actions in Grenada, and we believe that this attitude was shared by officers in numerous countries. [redacted]

We also believe that the present level of US involvement in Central America has the potential over time to affect, in subtle but noticeable ways, South American countries' perceptions of their fundamental relationships with Washington. The US presence in Central America and the US military action in Grenada provide vivid reminders that Washington can and will act vigorously in the hemisphere to protect its interests. Even though US actions in Central America to stem the spread of instability and insurgency benefit South America, from a Latin perspective they tend at the same time to deepen already existing wariness of the United States. [redacted]

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[redacted] The Governments of Chile and Paraguay would be likely to offer public support for a higher US profile in Central America, but backing from these internationally isolated regimes would, in our view, fuel criticism of the United States from abroad. [redacted]

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While the military's response could be positive, with the opening up of political systems—already accomplished in Argentina, Peru, and Ecuador and under way in Brazil and Uruguay—we expect to see an increasing tendency among political groups to criticize the United States on Central America, even if Washington does not step up its involvement. A leftist demonstration in late November at the US Consulate in Sao Paulo, Brazil, to protest Washington's stance toward Nicaragua is a recent example. South American governments considering supporting the United States on Central America will have to assess the growing political costs of doing so, in our view. [redacted]

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