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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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MOSCOW'S RESPONSE TO RECENT CENTRAL AMERICAN DEVELOPMENTS

Summary

Moscow's response to the escalation of US pressure in Central America has been consistent with its calculated exploitation of the situation there over the past few years. The Soviets are trying to protect Communist positions in Cuba and Nicaragua, to preserve the possibility of future Marxist advances elsewhere in the region while avoiding a confrontation with the US.

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In order to preclude the possibility of even stronger US moves and a further deterioration in US-Soviet relations, Moscow has sought to avoid the impression that its interests are being directly challenged. It has taken no action indicating it will provide Nicaragua--or even Cuba--anything more than qualified support in the event of US military actions. Although Moscow clearly does not want to put its prestige on the line in a possible confrontation with the US in an area so distant from Soviet military power, its public release of its 11 August protest over US surveillance of Soviet shipping suggests that it may remonstrate more strongly over any future US harassment.

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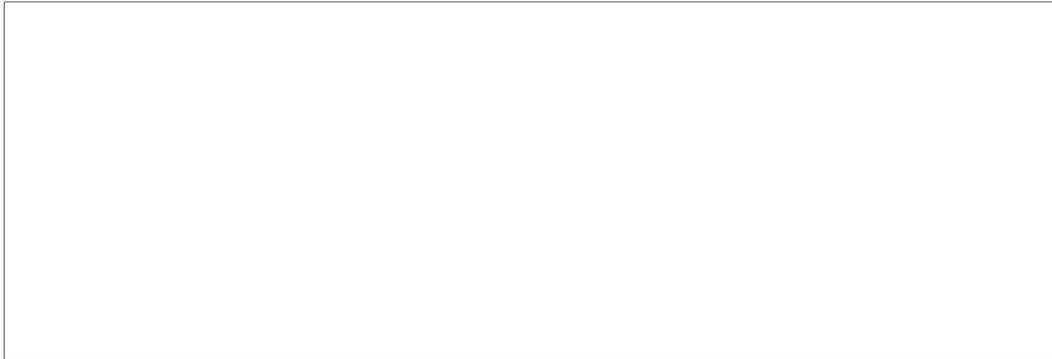
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In our judgment, Moscow probably thinks that the current situation--although carrying some risks--benefits the USSR by distracting the US, helping cause controversy in the US that impacts more broadly on foreign policy, diverting US military resources from areas closer to vital Soviet interests, and creating opportunities for Soviet exploitation with US friends in Latin America and Western Europe. The USSR probably thinks that its best course is to avoid any escalation of involvement that could lead to a showdown with the US or preclude movement on other issues of importance to the USSR such as arms control. The USSR is apparently hoping that the current phase of acute tension will ease, leaving it free to pursue its longer-term objectives in the region. 

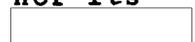
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Soviet Goals and Strategy

Moscow's long-term goal in Central America is to expand its influence there and weaken that of the US by working to increase the number of pro-Soviet and Marxist countries. The Soviets also want to distract and divert US strength from areas of greater Soviet security concern. The USSR has approached the recent intensification of US pressure on Nicaragua with an intention of protecting long-term prospects for spreading Marxism and Moscow's influence. At the same time, while probably pleased with growing US embroilment in the area, it wants to avoid a confrontation with Washington over it. 

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Continued Military Support

Despite the increase in US pressure over the past several weeks, Moscow has not appeared so far to reduce its direct provision of military support equipment to Managua, nor its indirect provision of weaponry through surrogates. 

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In reply to US statements that military supplies are being delivered to Nicaragua on Soviet vessels--including MI-8 helicopters on its freighter Aleksandr Ul'yanov--Moscow has

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insisted that the ships carry only normal commercial freight. Although Managua has in most statements taken the same position, Foreign Minister D'Escoto was quoted by a Sandinista newspaper on 30 July to have said, "The Soviet ships are carrying wheat and also some defensive arms."

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The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry said on 29 July that foreign journalists had been invited to look at the Ul'yanov's cargo, and Moscow Radio repeated several times, beginning 2 August, a false statement that such inspections had occurred. But when the ship began unloading on 4 August journalists were refused permits by officials who said the Nicaraguan government saw no need to prove the nature of the cargo. This reversal may have reflected a sudden decision to preclude discovery of the MI-8s, but it also could have been the result of a Soviet desire to avoid creating a precedent of having all Soviet cargoes to Nicaragua checked.

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[Redacted]

The Soviets have also publicly laid out a justification for continuing military-related shipments. On 10 August Pravda reported the statement of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega that the "Nicaraguan people are fully entitled to strengthen their defense and acquire weapons wherever they deem it necessary."

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Low Profile on US Actions

Moscow's military response to US statements and actions has been virtually non-existent. [redacted]

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Soviet public and private statements have also been carefully orchestrated to avoid the impression that the USSR has been challenged or that Soviet interests are deeply engaged in the situation. The Soviet media, for example, have ignored President Reagan's 18 July statement that the arrival of Soviet military supplies in Nicaragua "cannot be allowed to continue." And Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko has sought to soothe Washington. He told the US Ambassador a few days after the President's speech that Moscow has no intention of threatening US security from Latin America and denied that the USSR has military bases in Cuba or Nicaragua. [redacted]

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In a similar vein, Moscow initially sought to play down US surveillance of Soviet ships carrying military-related cargoes to Nicaragua. The USSR briefly mentioned in foreign broadcasts--but not in domestic media--the radio querying and subsequent shadowing of the Ul'yanov by a US warship off Nicaragua on 30 July. The Soviet Foreign Ministry told the US Embassy that the query was "unacceptable and impermissible" but did not formally protest. This complaint seemed intended to put Moscow on record as rejecting the precedent of harassment but without making a major issue of the incident in a manner that could force Moscow to choose between confrontation or a humiliating retreat. [redacted]

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Moscow, however, reacted more strongly to subsequent US surveillance after the ship left Corinto, Nicaragua, on 7 August. On 11 August it publicized a formal protest of the US actions, calling them "lawless" and saying that the US would be responsible for the consequences of additional similar actions. Although this protest was delivered at a relatively low level by the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, its publication and hint of a stronger Soviet response suggests that the USSR would react to further US actions with intensified diplomatic and propaganda efforts. [redacted]

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Soviet Exploitation

Soviet media, which have long sought to picture the US as following imperialistic policies in Central America, have seized upon recent developments there to intensify efforts to discredit this country. Main themes of recent Soviet commentaries have included attacks on US policy as "violating the international norms of interstate relations" by use of covert action, practicing "gunboat diplomacy," "feverishly preparing for intervention" in the region, deploying forces "for the purpose of committing aggression," and using the Kissinger commission as a smoke-screen for aggression. These themes seem intended by Moscow both to show support for Nicaragua and Cuba and to damage support for the US in the rest of Latin America and Western Europe. [redacted]

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No Expanded Commitment to Managua or Havana

Moscow has avoided any action over the past month that might link Soviet prestige more closely to Nicaragua and Cuba or to commit the USSR to greater backing for them. For example, published messages to the two countries on their revolutionary anniversaries last month were notably cool and non-committal. The Soviet leadership said on 19 July that "the Nicaraguans are courageously defending their revolutionary gains" against US "threats and crude pressure," and the "Soviet people are satisfied" with their relationship. This strongly implied that, despite escalating US pressure, Managua should not expect any additional Soviet help. [redacted]

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The Soviet wariness of any public suggestion of military support was also shown by Foreign Ministry Secretary General Fokin's answer to reporters' questions after his consultations in Managua on 3 August. Asked if the USSR would provide military aid in case of a Central American war, he replied, "We will support Nicaragua politically in all forms." [redacted]

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Similarly on 26 July the USSR told Cuba that, when US "aggressive circles" were continuing provocations, "the Soviet people again express their invariable solidarity with heroic Cuba" and will strengthen their friendship. In his anniversary speech, President Castro seemed to acknowledge this implicit lack of a firm Soviet commitment. He expressed only vague thanks to Moscow for "solidarity" and "constant support" without relating this directly to the perceived danger from the US. Castro's comments on the occasion reflect his continued inability to get from Moscow the explicit private or public pledge of Soviet defense for Cuba that he has been seeking for years. [redacted]

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Moscow's refusal to be drawn into responsibility for Cuba or Nicaragua is a reflection of its unwillingness to get into a confrontation in an area so distant from Soviet military bases and so close to US power. Despite changes in the strategic balance and substantial improvement in Soviet ability to project military power abroad since the Cuban missile crisis 21 years ago, Soviet leaders remain cautious about commitments that might test their strength in non-critical areas.

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Moscow's comments may also be designed to discourage Cuba from overextending itself in Central America and increasing chances of a confrontation with the US.

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[Redacted] Castro himself has been telling foreign officials that Moscow has been signaling him that it will not support Cuba in any confrontation with the US.

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Changing View of Contadora

In apparent response to the intensification of the situation, official Soviet statements and media commentary have begun showing more support for efforts of the Contadora group-- Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela.

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The USSR quickly voiced support for the six-point plan proposed by Sandinista Junta Coordinator Ortega on 19 July for multilateral negotiations under Contadora auspices. Nevertheless, the Soviets did not link this to support for the Contadora group's own proposals. But, after both Cuba and Nicaragua had publicly endorsed the Contadora effort, the USSR began cautiously to warm toward it.

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[Redacted] Pravda on 3 August said the group advocated "a just settlement of the conflict in the region." The same day Managua Radio quoted visiting Soviet official Fokin as supporting the group's efforts.

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Moscow's initial coolness toward Contadora settlement efforts probably reflected its view that the turmoil in Central

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America, if left to fester, would lead to greater Marxist control and Soviet influence. The Soviets probably also thought it was in their interests to keep the US politically preoccupied or even militarily embroiled. Furthermore, the Contadora negotiations would exclude the USSR and might force Managua to make concessions that would set back the long-term Soviet objective of the creation of anti-US, preferably Marxist regimes. This is suggested by recent comments to US Embassy officers by a Soviet diplomat in Moscow, who said he saw problems with the Contadora group's call for democratic processes and elections. He said these had been "imposed" on the group--an allusion to US initiatives. [redacted]

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As the situation heated up in recent weeks, however, the Soviets have seemed to become more concerned to avoid being out of step with Latin America. They may think that support for Contadora may win some credit with West Europeans who are uneasy with US policy. In the changing situation, Moscow may also think that the Contadora efforts could hamper US moves by creating pressure for diplomatic rather than military actions, thus furthering Soviet interests. [redacted]

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Soviet Calculations

This overall pattern of Soviet conduct suggests careful calculation by Moscow about its interests in the current Central American situation. In our judgment, the Soviets are probably uncertain about what course the US may eventually adopt. Although they recognize that there are serious international and domestic constraints against the US using force or resorting to a blockade in the region, we doubt that the Soviets discount these possibilities. This argues for Moscow's giving priority to avoiding any new action that would provoke or justify such actions or that would commit Soviet prestige to support Managua or Havana in the event they occur--while continuing military deliveries and other activities to strengthen the two regimes. [redacted]

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Moscow's deliberate efforts to downplay its commitments to Managua and Cuba as well as its cautious support for the Contadora efforts suggest the Soviets may even be thinking that some back-peddling now by Managua and Havana--such as engagement in negotiations--will help keep the situation from getting out of hand. We believe the Soviets may think this will ensure the survival of the Sandinistas, preserve long-term options of the Salvadorean insurgents, and protect US-Soviet relations from further deterioration. [redacted]

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At the same time, Moscow apparently sees advantages in continued US embroilment in the region, which could intensify US domestic discord and exacerbate Washington's problems with regional friends and NATO allies. The diversion of the battleship New Jersey and US carrier groups from Asian and Mediterranean waters of more intense security concern to the USSR is also viewed by Soviet leaders as a benefit. Moscow also sees US preoccupation with Central America as constraining the US elsewhere. Aleksandr Bovin, a prominent Soviet commentator and reputed Andropov consultant, for example, wrote recently that President Reagan had to pull back from his initial assertive posture on Chad because, in view of Central America, he would find it difficult to justify another "military adventure" at home. [redacted]

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Prospects

Despite the escalation of US pressure, over the next few months the USSR seems likely to continue efforts to strengthen the regimes in Cuba and Nicaragua. It probably will try to do this, however, in ways that avoid a showdown that might test distant Soviet power against nearby American strength. This could involve more military aid to Cuba, a possible naval visit to the Caribbean--although Moscow might see this as too provocative--an intensified effort to back regional talks, cautionary advice for Managua and Havana, and increased economic support to Nicaragua. [redacted]

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If Moscow feels that the risk of firmer US military action is reaching dangerous proportions it may temporarily slow down or alter Soviet shipments of military goods and urge its surrogates to do the same. The Soviets, for example, could dramatically reduce the number of military related shipments in Soviet vessels simply by consolidating the small deliveries they have been making on regularly scheduled cargo runs into fewer bigger shipments. Indeed, if the Soviets adopted this practice we could see an increase in total tonnage of military related shipments but fewer individual seaborne deliveries. Moscow could also begin using client countries' ships for all military-associated deliveries to Nicaragua, instead of continuing its past practice of sending major weapons through surrogates and delivering only small arms and military transport and support equipment itself. [redacted]

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If the US again harasses Soviet shipping, the USSR will probably protest more vigorously and seek to marshal world opinion against it. Moscow might see continued US naval shadowing of its shipping as playing into Soviet efforts to stir West European concern about US policy in the region, but it probably will remain reluctant to deliberately stir up incidents in a region where it is at a significant military disadvantage.

[redacted]

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Over the longer term, we doubt that the present level of tensions will deter Moscow from the calculated exploitation of the Central American situation that has characterized its policy over the past several years. Indeed, the current situation may well reinforce Moscow's perception that Central America is good ground for harassing and distracting the US without substantial investment of Soviet resources.

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DDI/SOVA/CS/C: [redacted] (22 Aug 83)

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