

---

## SOVIET MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO LATIN AMERICA

By

MAJOR NOEL HIDALGO, USAF

### Introduction

Until recently the progressive increase of Soviet military assistance to Latin America received little systematic attention in the news media. Widespread reports of recent events in Nicaragua, however, have highlighted the potentially destabilizing effect of Soviet military assistance to Latin America. One has only to look at the dramatic increase in Soviet military assistance in the last 25 years to fully understand that this increase is one of the critical factors that has promoted the loss of U.S. influence and prestige in this vital region.

This article will briefly cover the rise and current nature of Soviet involvement in Latin America. Soviet involvement is examined not only in terms of direct military assistance to the region, but also in terms of the indirect assistance the Soviets are providing through their surrogates, such as Cuba, and Soviet allies in the Warsaw Pact. In doing so, the article serves as a base for understanding why the U.S. has recently increased its own military assistance to the countries in this region, and why this is, in part, a reaction to an unprecedented increase in Soviet activity. Military assistance and arms transfers are principal elements of Soviet foreign policy, and this increased involvement in Latin America highlights their new focus on this area.

### Early Years

In the 18th century, Tsarist Russia had only sporadic contacts with the colonies that Spain had already established in the Western hemisphere. The primary contact was through traders moving south from Alaska along the Pacific coast. It was not until the late 19th century that diplomatic and commercial ties were established, first with Argentina in 1885, followed by Mexico in 1887, and then Uruguay in 1890.[1] The sheer remoteness of Latin America presented a significant barrier to establishing close relations, and this promoted the view that the region was not strategically significant.[2]

Since the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917, Latin American communist parties have been a vital link to the Soviets. The first such party in Latin America was founded in Argentina in 1918, followed by Mexico in 1919, and Uruguay in 1920. By 1930, 13 more countries had established communist

---

Editor's Note: The views and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the United States Government.

parties within the Comintern framework. In 1924, Mexico became the first country in the region to establish formal diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Uruguay followed in 1926, with several other countries taking the same step shortly thereafter. The trend toward closer ties with the Soviet Union, however, was adversely affected by the increasing subversive activities of the Latin American communist parties. For this reason, all the countries in the region that had previously established diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, had severed them by 1939.[3]

It was not until the Second World War when the Soviet Union, as a member of the Western Allies, began again to establish diplomatic relations with the nations of Latin America, starting with Colombia in 1941, and reaching a total of 14 countries by the end of 1945. The cold war had a chilling effect on relations with the region, and by 1953, only Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay maintained relations with the Soviet Union.[4]

### New Phase of Involvement

Up until the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, Soviet foreign policy was characterized by limited international contacts, and was restricted essentially to Eastern European client states and to mainland China.[5] In the past three decades, however, the Soviet Union has built a massive national military and economic force capable of projecting power into Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The increased Soviet thrust into the Third World is considered by some to be the result of the Western withdrawal from former colonies, as well as a reaction to their perceived threat of the containment policies of the United States and its allies. In addition to these factors, the changing political climate in strategically located countries throughout the world stimulated a rise in involvement in the region.

Specifically, the Latin American region has been a new target of Soviet efforts. Increased capabilities in power projection and the skillful exploitation of political developments worldwide have given the Soviets new confidence in increasing their involvement. The Soviets view power projection as a dynamic application of diverse tools of foreign policy, encompassing not only military forces, but also less visible elements such as: diplomacy and traditional state-to-state activities; military advisers and aid; treaties and legal ties; economic aid; and cultural, media, and educational diplomacy, such as the granting of scholarships for studies in the Soviet Union. More importantly, Soviet power projection also includes KGB (Soviet State Security Committee) and GRU (Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff) activities, as well as support for terrorists and pro-Soviet insurgent groups, and the use of what the Soviets call "active measures." This latter category includes disinformation, forgeries, manipulation of the media and mass organizations, the use of foreign communist parties and front organizations, and other political influence operations.

The mid-1960s was a significant period for Soviet involvement in the hemisphere because of two significant events. First, the Cuban revolution established a communist regime just 90 miles off the southern coast of the United States. After initial hesitation, Moscow -- aware of the strategic military and political implications -- fully supported the Cuban revolution in the early 1960s. Secondly, the rise in Soviet military power allowed the

Soviet Union to provide significant military support to any group that might be supportive of Soviet objectives.

The demise of Chilean Socialist President Allende in 1973 proved the correctness of Soviet skepticism about the viability of that regime and lent emphasis to the importance of a strong military faction within communist parties to insure the defense of socialist gains. In short, unless the revolutionary regime maintains control over the critical elements of national power, particularly the military, the new regime is likely to fail. The importance of a strong military that supports the principles of a communist government was underscored by the Allende episode in Chile.

### Geographic Distinction in Approach

While fashioning its policies according to the particular characteristic of each country, Moscow has made a geographic distinction in its approach.

Central America and the Caribbean: The severe economic deprivation and repressive governments in this region are generally viewed by the Soviets as fertile conditions for the emergence and growth of leftist revolutionary groups. From the Soviet perspective, these groups can be encouraged, directed, and exploited in the hope of bringing to power a revolutionary regime that would be supportive of Soviet policy. These conditions, as viewed by the Soviets, can bring about at least some Soviet gains. This area, as we will see shortly, has now become the major regional recipient of Soviet military assistance.

South America: With the exception of Bolivia in 1957, Uruguay in the late 1960s, and Argentina between 1976 and 1978, overall economic trends and relative political stability to date have not been conducive to repressive governments. Therefore, while not abandoning the support of political ferment and support of contacts with the left, Moscow has stressed government-to-government ties, and has engaged in economic aid and trade, as well as actual and proposed arms sales.

A visible indication of Soviet interest and military capability has been the increased presence of the Soviet Navy in Latin American waters. With the increased capability of its Navy, Moscow has conducted various forms of "naval diplomacy" in the region. The Navy's operational flexibility and value as a visible symbol of Soviet power have encouraged the Kremlin to make frequent port visits to Cuba and to request, unsuccessfully to date, support facilities for naval combatants in Peru, Ecuador, and Chile. Cuban ports provide Soviet ships with refueling, resupply, crew rest, and minor repair services. The Soviets have also shown great interest in the South Atlantic. In their view, this area is not only a strategic Western line of communication that carries petroleum from the Persian Gulf, but also would become a critical sea passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in the event of a closure of the Panama or Suez Canals.

## Diplomatic and Economic Initiatives

Signs of Soviet moves into Latin America include the growth of their embassies in the region and the extension of their Aeroflot airline flights to an increasing number of countries. Soviet embassies in Latin America have increased in the last 20 years from two to 14. This increase has enabled the Soviet Union to extend its overall influence and has paved the way for enhanced commercial and cultural exchanges.

Aeroflot, the national airline of the Soviet Union, did not serve any of the countries in the region prior to the 1960s; it now serves five countries -- Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Peru, and Argentina -- which are targeted for a high level of Soviet cultural and propaganda effort.

Along with the general increase in Soviet diplomatic and economic activities in the region, in recent years, U.S. arms sales have been decreased and now lag far behind those of the Soviets. Even though weapons contracts have quadrupled since the Carter Administration, overall U.S. sales fall behind even the Western Europeans. For 1983 alone, France, Britain, West Germany, and Italy together accounted for 25 percent of total sales.[6] U.S. sales agreements for the region in the 1980-83 period reached \$1.2 billion, or 12.5 percent of the total arms transfers during this period.[7] The Soviets, however, signed contracts worth \$3.4 billion, or 34.7 percent of the total.[8] Most of these sales have gone to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru.[9] A summary of Soviet military support to the region is shown in Table 1.

## Soviet Assistance to Cuba

The Soviet thrust in Latin America is most visible in Cuba. The Soviet Union delivered 63,000 tons of arms to Cuba in 1981, then the highest yearly total since 1962. In 1982, Soviet deliveries increased to 68,000 tons, worth about one billion dollars. At the same time, the number of Soviet military advisers in Cuba increased to 2,500.[10] The number of such advisers increased during 1984 by at least 300.[11] This is in addition to the 6,000 - 8,000 civilian advisers and an army brigade, estimated to number 2,600, presently stationed in Cuba. Soviet military advisers in Cuba alone outnumber American military advisers in all Latin American countries by a ratio of 25 to one. Soviet military arms assistance to Cuba alone is about 10 times the total American military assistance to all of Latin America.[12]

Cuba has well over 200,000 men and women under arms.[13] On May Day 1984, Roberto Veiga Menende, a member of the Cuban military politburo and the director of the Cuban Federation of Workers stated that in addition to the active-duty force, there were 190,000 reservists and one million members in the militia.[14]

The Cuban Army is bolstered by almost 1,000 tanks, 700 field artillery pieces, 208 surface-to-air missiles, and other vehicles, substantially increasing its mobility and firepower. The Cuban Navy has placed into operation two Koni frigates, three attack submarines, at least two or more amphibious landing craft, 50 torpedo and missile attack boats, plus a number of naval combat and surveillance aircraft.[15] The Cuban Air Force is now equipped

with 270 MiG jet fighters, 90 helicopters, and about three dozen troop transports. Last year alone, Cuba received ten advanced MiG-21's and MiG-23's.[16]

TABLE 1  
SOVIET MILITARY SUPPORT TO LATIN AMERICA

	CUBA	NICARAGUA	PERU
Tonnage of arms shipped from USSR:	68,000 metric tons (1982)	11,000 metric tons (1983)	Unknown
Soviet advisors:	2,500 military 6-8,000 civilian	100 military- (3-3,500 Cuban military) (9,000 Cuban Cuban civilian)	150 military 200 civilian (includes family)
Type of Soviet equipment supplied:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small arms</li> <li>- Tanks</li> <li>- Armored vehicles</li> <li>- Field artillery</li> <li>- Rocket launchers</li> <li>- Surface-to-air missiles</li> <li>- Koni type frigates</li> <li>- Attack submarines</li> <li>- Amphibious landing craft</li> <li>- Torpedo boats</li> <li>- Attack boats</li> <li>- Naval combat and surveillance aircraft</li> <li>- MiG jets</li> <li>- Helicopters</li> <li>- Troop transport aircraft</li> <li>- Other support equipment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small arms</li> <li>- Tanks</li> <li>- Armored vehicles</li> <li>- Field artillery</li> <li>- Rocket launchers</li> <li>- Anti-tank guns</li> <li>- Mortars</li> <li>- Patrol boats</li> <li>- Landing crafts</li> <li>- Helicopters</li> <li>- Troop transport aircraft</li> <li>- Other support equipment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tanks</li> <li>- SU-22 aircraft</li> <li>- Helicopters</li> <li>- Other support equipment</li> </ul>

Soviet economic assistance accounts for about 25% of Cuba's gross national product. Total Soviet aid pumps approximately \$13.7 million into Cuba every day of the year. This is up from approximately \$11 million a day in recent years. Over one-third of this aid is in the form of military assistance.[17]

That this formidable Cuban military machine poses a direct military threat not only to the U.S., but also to NATO, has not gone unnoticed by military analysts. This threat involves the potential for the Cubans to impede or stop the flow of supplies and reinforcements that would go through the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico in case of a conflict or crisis in either Europe or the Middle East. A recent Rand Corporation study pointed out that in the event of a U.S.-Soviet crisis or conventional war situation, the strategic calculus would be seriously complicated by the impressive Cuban arsenal built up by the Soviets. The study concludes that: "Cuba could represent a military threat too uncertain to justify a preemptive attack, but sufficiently plausible to tie down a large number of U.S. naval and air force units." [18] The Soviets also operate a huge monitoring station that can allegedly listen in on every commercial and governmental radio signal transmitted in the southeast United States, including communications via satellites.[19]

The massive assistance the Soviet Union has given to Cuba has also enabled Cuba to support 25,000 to 30,000 troops in Angola. Total Cuban involvement in Africa is estimated at 70,000 personnel, and includes Cuban personnel in such other countries as Ethiopia, the Congo, and Mozambique.[20] These troops will eventually return to Cuba, bringing with them extensive experience in guerrilla warfare, thereby providing Cuba with one of the largest battle-tested forces in Latin America.

As we can see, Cuban military forces are heavily armed with Soviet weapons that have given this island nation the power to intimidate other countries in the region. Its total armed military forces now exceeds those of either Mexico or Argentina. The charge is often made that the massive amount of aid Cuba receives, and its aggressive policies in promoting armed revolution in the region have in fact made Cuba a member of the Soviet Bloc and a surrogate of the Soviet Union. As we shall now see, the Cubans are playing an influential role in the development of Sandinista forces in Nicaragua.

#### Soviet Bloc Assistance to Nicaragua

With help from the Soviet Union and Cuba, the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua has developed a formidable fighting force that is already the largest in Central America and, with its present rate of growth, it will become one of the largest in all of Latin America. A recent statement from President elect Ortega on Nicaraguan intent to modernize their Air Force and U.S. charges that it is opposed to such a build-up have brought attention to the significant Soviet military assistance effort in Nicaragua.

More than 6,000 metric tons of weapons were shipped from the Soviet Union to Nicaragua in both 1981 and 1982. In 1983, the amount went up to 11,000 metric tons. Some of these weapons were shipped via third countries,

such as Cuba and Libya.[21] Additionally, the Soviet Union has approximately 100 military advisors in Managua who are believed to be providing assistance to Nicaragua's small Air Force by training flyers and ground crews.[22] Several airports in Nicaragua are being upgraded to handle military jets, and Nicaraguan fighter pilots have already been trained in Bulgaria.[23] Cuba also maintains approximately 3,000 to 3,500 military advisors in Nicaragua, in addition to over 9,000 engineers, builders, and teachers.[24] It is widely believed that almost all of these groups are "military capable," much like the "construction worker" in Grenada. The overall Cuban presence in Nicaragua is estimated at approximately 12,000 personnel. Along with Soviet and Cuban military advisors, there are substantial numbers of East German and Bulgarian advisors.[25]

Today, the Sandinista Army is estimated to be composed of 45,000 troops, of which 25,000 are reservists on active duty.[26] The Air Force has 1,700 members, and the Navy has approximately 400 members.[27] In addition, the government has trained 25,000 reservists who may be called to active duty to reinforce all three services. The border guards are under army control and consist of another 3,000 men. The Ministry of the Interior has a security force of about 2,000. An additional 30,000 men and women make up a civilian militia.[28] The goal of the Sandinista government is to build a ground force that will eventually number 250,000 men.[29,30]

The Sandinista Army is equipped with Soviet-made tanks, armored vehicles, howitzers, rocket launchers, anti-tank guns, mortars and an assortment of vehicles. The Navy has 17 Soviet-made patrol boats and one landing craft. Most of the Air Force is equipped with airplanes and some helicopters of Western origin. The Air Force also has ten Soviet helicopters and an unspecified number of Soviet military transport aircraft.[31] In addition to the large military force and substantial military equipment, the Sandinistas are building what some consider the largest airfield in Central America. This airfield is being built at Punta Huerte, across Lake Managua from the capital city of Managua. The significance of this airfield is that the runway will be 12,000 feet long, and will be able to accommodate all military aircraft currently in the Soviet inventory.[32]

There are approximately 70 Nicaraguans reported to be in Bulgaria receiving pilot and aircraft mechanic training. There are also five other Nicaraguan pilots in the Soviet Union receiving similar training on the MiG-21. Although the Nicaraguans have not received any MiG fighters for their Air Force, a number of Bulgarian-trained Nicaraguan pilots are now flying MiGs based in Cuba.[33] The Air Force helicopter build-up now includes not only Soviet MI-8 "Hip" troop transport helicopters, but also the larger MI-24 "Hind" attack helicopter which has been used in Afghanistan since 1979. The MI-24 can carry troops, rockets, and machine guns.

The Sandinistas serve as surrogates of the Cubans, much like the Cubans serve as surrogates of the Soviets. Nicaraguan intelligence agents reportedly have been involved in terrorist activities in Costa Rica, and are alleged to be the principal suppliers of weapons and ammunition to the Marxist rebels in El Salvador.[34] As a result of repeated incursions by Nicaraguan forces, on 6 May 1984, Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge requested emergency arms aid from the United States. This request constitutes a radical departure in policy for this country that is unique in Latin America;

Costa Rica has no standing army and has always followed a pacifistic policy, seeking accommodations through diplomacy rather than armed conflict.[35]

Fred C. Ikle', U.S. Under Secretary of Defense, Policy, has said that 80% of the ammunition and explosives used by Salvadoran guerrillas comes from Cuba and the Soviet Union through Nicaragua.[36] Only 20%, he reports, comes from what is captured from the Salvadoran Army. Some of the American-made arms being supplied to the guerrillas come from supplies previously captured by the Vietnamese. Additional weapons come from supplies that have been provided to the Nicaraguan National Guard before the fall of the late dictator Anastasio Somoza.[37]

### Soviet Presence in Peru

Peru is another of the countries in Latin America that has received a significant number of Soviet weapons. In recent travel through the Latin America region, several members of the House Armed Services Committee stated that Peru owes the Soviet Union more than \$1.5 billion for military equipment provided over several years. Peru has received a wide array of Soviet armament which includes fighter-bombers, tanks, attack helicopters, rocket-propelled grenades, surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank missiles, howitzers, anti-aircraft guns, multiple rocket launchers, and armored scout cars and personnel carriers.[38]

The Soviet presence in Peru is substantial, involving over 200 officials and their families, and 150 military technicians. The House Armed Services Committee reported that, "Even in the civilian sector [there is increasing] Soviet propaganda in the form of comic books and movies that have found their way into neighborhood centers. . . ."[39] The situation in Peru highlights the effectiveness of Moscow's influence in South America through its military presence and diplomatic initiatives. For example, in the last three years Bolivia and Argentina have demonstrated their interest in Soviet military equipment.

### Conclusions

Latin America poses a serious dilemma for the United States. On one hand the U.S. cannot afford to ignore the massive Soviet military assistance and involvement in the area; and on the other hand, the U.S. cannot afford to continue its past policy of military intervention at the cost of international and domestic concern. The U.S. has demonstrated, by actions taken in Grenada and by military exercises in Central America, that it has the capability and determination to act.

A critical point that cannot be ignored is that Soviet involvement in the Latin American region has entered a new and significant phase. The U.S., in defense of its interests in the region, is compelled to take actions to counteract the increased Soviet threat. First, U.S. actions must include economic assistance to address basic social inequities that have created a fertile ground for leftist revolutionary groups. Second, U.S. action must

also include diplomatic initiatives to facilitate the resolution of potential conflicts and to foster the trust and confidence of countries throughout the region. Third, in Caribbean Basin countries, U.S. military assistance needs to be provided to the democratic governments that are directly threatened by Soviet military assistance to Cuba and Nicaragua. This action must not only be calculated to adequately meet the increasing challenge of the Soviets, but it must also be initiated in time to prevent further deterioration of U.S. interests. Moscow's policies indicate an immediate need for American attention in order to stem any further Soviet advances. The U.S. can no longer behave as if ignoring the situation is in its or the region's best interests.

While pressure is placed on Congress and on the President to cut funds to anticommunist counterrevolutionaries (Contras) fighting inside Nicaragua, and to reduce military assistance to the region, Moscow continues to increase its presence in this hemisphere. The point is often made that past American interventions in this region have resulted in less than positive long-term results for the U.S.; however, the alternative, which would permit the progressive increase of Soviet influence through military assistance, seems far more threatening. Thus, a more active and more rational U.S. policy is clearly indicated.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Theberge, James D., The Soviet Presence in Latin America, Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., New York, 1974, p. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. Atkins, G. Pope, Latin America in the International Political System, The Free Press, New York, 1977, p. 187.
4. Ibid.
5. Duncan, W. Raymond, ed., Soviet Policy in the Third World, Pergamon Press, New York, 1980, p. 2.
6. "US Again World's No. 1 Arms Merchant," U.S. News and World Report, May 28, 1984, p. 59.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. "Pentagon Calls Soviet Arms A Threat to Central America," The New York Times, p. 10.
10. Ibid.
11. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," The Washington Times, 17 April 1984, p. 11.
12. "Pentagon Calls Soviet Arms A Threat to Central America," op. cit.

13. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," op. cit.
14. "Cuba Says Its Militia Forces Now Exceed a Million," The New York Times, 2 May 1984, p. 12.
15. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," loc. cit.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Rand Study cited in "A Growing Threat from the South," Los Angeles Times, 28 February 1983, p. 5B.
19. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," loc. cit.
20. "Cuba Said to Resist Leaving Angola," The New York Times, 10 May 1984, p. 3.
21. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," loc. cit.
22. "US Reports Sharp Rise in Arms Aid to Nicaragua," The New York Times, 2 August 1983, p. 8.
23. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," loc. cit.
24. "U.S. Reports Sharp Rise in Arms Aid to Nicaragua, loc. cit.
25. Ibid.
26. "Sandinistas Undertake Huge Military Buildup with Soviet, Cuban Aid," The Washington Times, 20 April 1984, p. 6.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. "Sandinistas Building Large Military Airfield," The Washington Times, 6 April 1984, p. 1.
30. Lowenthal, Abraham F., Samuel F. Walls Jr., The Central American Crisis: Policy Perspectives, (No. 119), The Wilson Center, Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington, D.C., 1982, p. 17.
31. Pentagon Calls Soviet Arms a Threat to Central America," loc. cit.
32. "Sandinista Building Large Military Airfield," loc. cit.
33. Ibid.
34. "US to Show Evidence on Latin Rebels," The Philadelphia Inquirer, 11 May 1984, p. 11.

35. "War Danger Prompts Costa Rican Request for US Arms Aid," The Washington Times, 7 May 1984, p. 6.
36. "Salvador Rebels Said to Use US Arms," New York Times, 28 March 1984, p. 3.
37. Ibid.
38. "Soviet Bolstering Military Presence in Latin America," loc. cit.
39. Ibid.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Noel Hidalgo joined the DISAM faculty in June 1984. He specializes in logistics aspects of security assistance management, and also serves as the Director of the Latin American Studies Seminar. Previous duty assignments include Politico-Military Affairs Officer and Security Assistance Development Chief at Headquarters, United States Southern Command. He holds an M.A. from Ball State University and a B.A. from the University of Puerto Rico.