

# **The Strategic Importance of Central America and the Caribbean**

**By**

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I welcome this opportunity to discuss the strategic importance of Central America and the Caribbean. This region continues to be one of the focal points of our foreign policy and the subject of frequent debate. Although the problems facing the region have not been resolved, some significant progress has been made--enough to convince us that our policies are working and can be successful in bringing peace and stability to the region. But we must remain committed to our friends in the region and continually demonstrate that commitment to maintain our reputation as a reliable ally.

The Soviet Union and its proxies--Cuba and Nicaragua--continue to take advantage of the social, political, and economic conditions of the region in hopes of expanding their Marxist-Leninist foothold in Central America and the Caribbean. Their "revolution without frontiers" respects no nation's borders. Despite the demise of their Marxist-Leninist friends in Grenada, they continue to want to impose their harsh totalitarian system on the vulnerable countries of the region. Communist penetration near our southern border and our Caribbean flank presents a direct threat to the security interests of our country and of our neighbors.

There are significant implications to the growing Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan threat to our southern border. The United States has major interests at stake in Central America and the Caribbean. Caribbean shipping lanes are vital to our security and economic prosperity. Nearly half of our trade and two-thirds of our imported oil, as well as many strategic minerals, pass through the Panama Canal or the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. The Caribbean Basin is the fourth largest market in the world for U.S. products. About one-third of U.S. investments in the developing countries are located in the Caribbean. About half of the total U.S. east coast refinery capacity is in the Caribbean Basin. In time of war, 50 percent of the supplies for NATO would depart gulf ports.

The Caribbean basin is the strategic crossroads of this hemisphere. Cuba, Nicaragua, and other Caribbean countries sit astride major sea lines of communication [SLOCs]. The SLOCs which flow from U.S. gulf coast ports and pass through the Florida Straits and up the east coast of Florida are especially important because much of the reinforcement and resupply for Europe must use this route. Major sea lanes extend from the Cape of Good Hope through the Caribbean Sea to U.S. gulf/east coast ports and the approaches to the Panama Canal. Small scale attacks on the Caribbean Sea lines of communication could cause considerable damage to allied shipping and tie down forces needed elsewhere. Despite advances in technology and tactics, the Cuban submarines, frigates, and missile-armed patrol boats, along with about 270 landbased jet combat aircraft and trainers, already threaten Caribbean transit lanes and choke points. They would present a serious threat to merchant and military operations, especially in the initial stages of conflict.

Soviet/Cuban strategy is expanding the threat to our Caribbean lifeline by the military build-up and construction in Nicaragua. The acquisition and deployment of several more new sophisticated radars indicate that preparations toward realizing the declared intentions of the Sandinista leaders to acquire advanced aircraft is underway. Punta Huete Airfield, located across Lake Managua from the capitol, is under construction by hundreds of Cuban workers. Its 10,000 foot runway will be capable of accommodating any Soviet aircraft. Three other airfields at Montelimar, Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields are also being improved. Why does Nicaragua need such capabilities? Certainly not for tourists; not to export coffee, cotton, cattle, and sugar; and not even to support a small air force. What concerns us is their potential use by Soviet Bloc and Cuban aircraft. Who envisioned 25 years ago that in 1985 we would see the reconnaissance variant of the Soviet bear bomber operating routinely from San Antonio de Los Banos, Cuba? The Soviets may decide that it would also be advantageous to fly the same kind of mission along our west coast from bases in Nicaragua.

We have seen how the military threat from Cuba has increased almost unnoticed with the addition of more sophisticated and more capable equipment. Cuba, with Soviet assistance, has created armed forces second only to Brazil in Latin America. The Soviets would like to repeat their success in Cuba in Nicaragua. Another Cuba on the continental landmass would pose more of a threat than from an island. Having experienced the nightmare of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, why should we not do everything possible to reduce Soviet presence and influence in this hemisphere and prevent more Cubas?

Let me give you some idea of the magnitude of the growing threat posed by Nicaragua. Soviet Bloc ship deliveries to Nicaragua over the past three years have destabilized the military balance in Central America. From six Soviet Bloc ship deliveries of military equipment in 1982, Soviet Bloc assistance grew to 25 ship deliveries in 1983 and 37 in 1984, and 1985 at the present pace will likely equal 1984 deliveries. More than 18,000 metric tons of Soviet Bloc military equipment were delivered to Nicaragua last year. The massive build-up in Nicaragua intimidates neighboring Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador. The Sandinistas claim that the build-up is for defensive purposes to combat the anti-Sandinista forces, but the build-up began before the democratic forces were forced to take up arms against the Marxist-Leninists who coopted the revolution.

Nicaragua is well on the way to becoming another Cuba. The growing repression by the Nicaraguan Government indicates that the Sandinistas have no intention of honoring their 1979 promises to the OAS to establish democracy, pluralism, and justice. In fact, the Marxist-Leninist orientation and the direction of the Sandinista regime are clear. The director of the CIA stated in a speech to the New York Metropolitan Club last spring: "There are 46 recognized indicators of consolidation of power by a Marxist-Leninist regime. Of those 46 indicators, Nicaragua in five and one-half years has accomplished 33. They have established control of the media, taken over radio and TV, censored the broadcasts of the Sunday sermons of the Archbishop of Managua, and subjected the only free newspaper, *La Prensa*, to a brutal daily censorship. They have taken control of the education system. Nicaraguan text books now teach Marxism. They attack the tenets of western democracy. They attack traditional religious teaching and encourage children to maintain revolutionary vigilance by watching for signs of ideological impurities in their neighbors, friends, and relatives. The Sandinistas have taken control of the military. They have taken control of the internal secret police and have established a directorate of state security. That directorate, according to our reports, has hundreds of Cuban Soviet, East German and Bulgarian advisers. There are Soviet Bloc advisers at every level of the secret police. In fact, it is safe to say that it is controlled by the Soviet Union and its surrogates. Block committees have been established to watch and control the people. The church has been persecuted. Witness the campaign mounted by the Directorate of State Security to harass and embarrass Pope John Paul II during his 1983 visit to Nicaragua. They have used political mobs (similar to the Red Guards of the Soviet and Chinese revolutionary history) to attack democratic politicians, union members, and religious leaders. And

finally, following Hitler and Krushchev, the Sandinistas have told the world that they would spread the example of Nicaragua beyond El Salvador to Honduras, Guatemala, and the entire region.

This assessment of conditions in Nicaragua by Mr. Casey was confirmed recently by a Nicaraguan defector who worked in the Interior Ministry. Alvaro Jose Baldazon told reporters that "life under the Sandinista Government was brutal." He said that "the Nicaraguan Government has executed thousands of people who do not cooperate with the Government."

Nicaragua stands in sharp contrast to the positive trends evident in the rest of Central America. When Guatemala holds its national elections scheduled for November 1985, every country in Central America, except Nicaragua, will have begun to build democratic institutions. We believe that our interests are better served if our neighbors are democracies because democracies protect the freedom and dignity of their citizens and do not attempt to impose totalitarian systems on others.

The development of democracy in El Salvador under the most adverse conditions has been impressive. We can and should take pride in the progress made in El Salvador. Against all odds, a popular and legitimate democratic government has taken office in El Salvador, greatly improving the situation. The Salvadoran Armed Forces have substantially improved their performance in every area. Today, the guerrillas are finding it increasingly difficult to operate. Their recourse to urban terrorism is a step backward for them. The number of guerrilla combatants has been reduced by one-third to about 5-6,000. More importantly, their support among the population has diminished substantially. We can see what can be achieved through a constructive policy that demonstrates U.S. commitment and determination.

In Nicaragua, there is growing opposition, both armed and unarmed, to the Communist regime because of its failure to honor the promises made when the Sandinistas came to power in 1979. There is also a growing awareness, among many groups, foreign and domestic, of the true nature of the regime in Managua. On the eve of the sixth anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, the President of the U.S. Episcopal Conference, Monsigneur James Malone, sent a telegram to the President of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, Monsigneur Pablo Vega. His message expressed solidarity with the Nicaraguan bishops whose efforts had been recognized by the Pope with the elevation of Archbishop Obando to Cardinal. The telegram also acknowledged many of the points made earlier by the Nicaraguan bishops such as the hopes unfulfilled by the Sandinista Revolution.

The action of the U.S. Congress in approving by a wide margin humanitarian aid for the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces indicated that the United States Congress better understands the nature of the Sandinista regime and the Nicaraguan threat.

The question of the proper role of the United States in the region is often raised. On the one hand, no policy that makes the U.S. an imperialist can succeed. On the other, the U.S. cannot remain passive. "Benign neglect" is not benign. The U.S. is a key actor in the hemisphere--especially in Central America and the Caribbean--and we cannot avoid playing a role, for avoidance brings significant consequences.

The United States cannot and should not attempt to solve the many problems of the region alone. Despite our great resources, we do not have answers to all of the problems, nor do we have unlimited resources. Currently, we devote between four and five percent of our security assistance worldwide to Latin America.

Likewise, it is not in our interest to be perceived as the superpower resolving an East-West conflict or the great power from the north imposing the "gringo's" solution.

Although we are frequently accused of pursuing a military solution in Central America, we have, in fact, participated in bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua and supported multilateral negotiations in the quest for peace. A prerequisite for peace and stability is the restoration of the military equilibrium in the region. We believe that the most promising approach to peace involves a church mediated dialogue that seeks a verifiable and enforceable agreement which achieves national reconciliation as called for by the unified Nicaraguan opposition.

We need to understand the complex problems facing many of our neighbors and help them find acceptable solutions. In the face of guerrilla wars and severe debt problems, solutions do not come easy. But we must take the initiative, not find ourselves on the defensive and forced to be reactive. Castro has tried to use the debt problem to create an image as defender of common Latin interests. Fortunately, most of the Latin leaders are not being taken in by Castro.

We must develop a long range policy to help our friends deal with their social, political, and economic root problems. Our policy must provide political, military, moral, and financial support to our friends in the region.

We need to continue to encourage participation in the Caribbean Basin initiative and other efforts such as those recommended by the Bipartisan Commission to encourage investment in the region and to bolster the productivity of the region.

In the long run, there is no alternative to the effort I have described--except the alternative of poverty, dictatorship, and Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan destabilization of the region. This is an alternative that our friends do not want and one that we find unacceptable. We have made a good start but we must continue our support to achieve a lasting peace in Central America.

Americans--North, Central and South Americans--and Europeans have both their security and their economic well-being at stake in this strategic crossroads of the Western Hemisphere. We must pull together for the benefit of all.