

**CONTADORA PEACE INITIATIVE AND THE CENTRAL
AMERICAN CRISIS**

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PREFACE

After years of relative obscurity, Central America has emerged in the decade of 1980 as a major focus of world attention. Comprising of five small countries, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, the Central American Isthmus has in the past been described as the "backyard" of the United States where North American companies raised bananas and US marines deposed and installed governments at will. Reluctantly and at an appalling cost of human and national resources, this traditional backwater area is being dragged into the world of the late twentieth century power politics. Armed violence, political flux, ideological tensions and the effects of the world-wide economic recession have conspired to give the Central American region its most uncertain prospects for over a decade.

What is more the Central American turmoil around the region obviously making it imperative for the regional actors to play a qualitatively new role to diffuse the crisis and seek political settlement to the crisis in the interest of the entire sub-continent. Popularly described as the Contadora peace initiative, four countries of Latin America, namely, Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela have demonstrated a surprising degree of political initiative, an ability to define a new agenda for Central America and a capacity to work

together in a forum of their own creation. The Contadora peace initiative has over the years secured the support of the countries of the entire Latin American sub-continent.

In the long tortured tradition of US hegemonic presumption in Latin America, there have not been many instances when the countries of this region have taken a unified stand on a regional issue in open defiance of the US. It is these elements that render the Contadora peace initiative as an important landmark in the history of inter-American relations.

While the success and effectiveness of the Contadora initiative to usher in regional reconciliation is still in dispute, scholarly analysis on the subject is distinctly substantial. Most Latin American observers agree that in the absence any other viable approach to conflict resolution in Central America, Contadora offers the only promise. For, it is the first-ever serious step primarily in search of a negotiated peace in Central America. That it is a regional approach, in effect, now a continental approach, it is argued that the initiative is most likely to contain the Central American crisis. Most analysts agree that Contadora symbolises the emergence of politically potent indigenous forces in the region that are not beholden to any extra-

hemispheric power, its chances of bringing the final reconciliation are promising. As against these prognostications there are those who seriously question the genuineness of the Contadora initiative. To them, Contadora and those who subscribe to this peace initiative, are using it as bargaining point essentially in terms of their relations with the United States and therefore, the Contadora peace initiative cannot be treated as one symbolising continental solidarity. Yet, there are those who suggest that even if the United States -- which at the moment appears to be the only serious stumbling block to the Contadora -- embraces and accepts the peace initiatives, it still will not be able to resolve the deeper contradictions of the Central American region. According to them, the dimensions of the Central American crisis are not merely military, but more importantly, economic and historical.

It is against these considerations that a modest attempt is made in the present dissertation to study the Contadora Peace Initiative and what it purports to achieve. What are the major objectives of the Contadora proposals and to what extent these proposals, if implemented, will meet the stated objectives? What are the differing motivations of the original Contadora members to initiate the collective multilateral device? What factors sustain their

efforts? Notwithstanding the collective concern expressed by the Contadora members and general acceptance of the peace proposal by the Central American countries involved in the crisis, why has it been the USA opposed to the proposals? Does Contadora peace initiative suggest that it has succeeded in developing a set of regional norms that would in the future provide a viable means of resolving regional problems in Latin America? These and related issues will be the major focus in the monograph.

In an effort to analyse these various issues, the monograph will concern itself at the outset to briefly survey the nature and dimension of the Central American crisis and attempt a description of the circumstances leading to the formulation of the Contadora Peace Initiatives. Also, an effort will be made to examine the motivations of the initial members of the Contadora group in resorting to the collective initiative. Further, a critique of the formal document of the Contadora initiative will be made focussing attention especially on the viability of the recommendations and the modalities of implementation. Responses of the Central American countries and the US involvement in the crisis will also be sketched. The study will conclude with the prospects Contadora initiative holds

for the future.

As has been mentioned before, Contadora constitutes the first-ever collective regional effort in the recent history of Latin America to seek a solution to a regional crisis without the support of any extra-hemispheric power. It is an indigenous initiative attempting a resolution to a regional conflict situation and its success obviously augurs well for conflict resolution in other regions of the world, especially when global security organisations such as the Organization of American States have become increasingly ineffective in meeting such crisis situations.

The study will be primarily based on such sources of material as the Contadora Documents, official statements and documents of the Governments of Contadora countries. Analysis of the relevant primary source materials will be the principal method used. Additionally, scholarly studies -- both descriptive and interpretative, will also be examined. The present researcher has adequate competence in Spanish language to read and understand Spanish source material.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my teachers Prof.R.Narayanan and Prof.Jose Leal Ferreira, Jr. for their un-stinting support, encouragement and guidance in the preparation of this dissertation.

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Chapter - I

THE ROOTS OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CRISIS

Unlike the other parts of Latin America, including importantly Mexico and Peru, the Central American region played an insignificant role in the Spanish American empire. Spain as a colonial power moved in stages into Central America by conquering a variety of indigenous communities -- the Olmec, the Nahuatl and the Maya. Each conquest of the natives called for a new government at different parts of time. The result was decentralization (or, more precisely, an absence of centralization). Authority, therefore, was vested in municipalities, and municipal councils became consequently the most important governing bodies.

Since Iberian colonisation was a process of controlling the natives by the "sword and the Cross", the church followed closely on the heels of conquistadores. The Franciscans and Dominicans in particular took active part in missionary efforts. By the late seventeenth century, there were hundreds of churches throughout the Central American region and the missionaries became thereby a powerful source of authority.

Economically speaking, the region's role during the Spanish colonisation was modest. The major export initially was cacao. Soon, when Venezuela preempted this market, indigo and tobacco became the leading commercial exports.

The social structure was dominated by a white elite, itself divided between Spanish-born peninsulares and locally born criollos. At the bottom of the social totempole was the labour force comprising indigenous peoples and some African slaves. There also emerged a stratum known as ladinos, people of mixed indigenous and white blood who worked as wage labourers or small farmers in the countryside and as artisans, merchants, peddlers, and skilled labourers in the towns. In the eighteenth Century they expanded their role as the backbone of an emerging middle sector that would gain political importance over the next two centuries. Near the end of the colonial era approximately 4 per cent of the region's population was white (either Spanish or creole), a two-third Indian, and the rest was ladino.¹

A Brief Survey of Early Central American History

Central America which for long been subordinate to Mexico achieved its independence in 1820s from Spain in a relatively peaceful fashion. Consequently, the colonial order survived almost intact, and the region began the independence period as a single political entity under the United Provinces of Central America consisting of Costa

1 Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., Central America : A Nation Divided (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.76-79.

Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

In 1838, however, the federated union fell apart but the ideal of unification nevertheless remained a goal among many Central Americans. There were occasions when countries of the region have tried to impose such unification by force, and there has always been a tendency ever since the 1830s to the present to intervene in one another's internal affairs either through border incursions and/or support for coups and revolutions. Also, there have been some positive attempts reflected in the efforts to build a common market in the 1960s that have underlined regional cooperation through negotiation. Equally, there has also been the tradition of the United States often playing a major role in resolving the inter-country conflicts and disputes throughout these years.

With the breakup of the federated union of Central American Provinces following the region's independence the political elite of the region became divided into two factions -- liberals and conservatives. Whereas the conservatives stood for order and the preservation of existing traditions, upholding Hispanic institutions, such as especially the church, the liberals, on the other hand, tended to draw their support from the middle class which was excluded from the higher circles of the landed creole aristocracy. Led by creole landowners, the conservatives first advocated free

trade, then reverted to protectionist stance when they felt the impact of British commercial competition. The liberals, in turn, called for increased restrictions on clerical power, for the abolition of slavery, and for the promotion of economic growth through laissez-faire policies.²

Decades of struggle finally led to the triumph of the liberals in the late nineteenth Century. They stripped the church of its power and prestige, confiscating lands and terminating the ecclesiastical monopoly on education. According to Ralph Lee Woodward, an acknowledged and distinguished historian of Central America : "The major role the clergy had played in rural Central America became minor. This was one of the most important changes ever to take place in Central America."³ Not until the 1960s and 1970s would the church emerge once again as a major influence on the direction of Central American social and political development, and then the church would play a very different role from what it had historically.

Through the promotion of free trade liberals generated growth and progress and thereby integrated their countries

2 For a detailed history of Central America see Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America ; From the Beginning to the Present (London, Jonathan Cape, 1954) and George Pendle, A History of Latin America (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books Ltd., 1983).

3 Woodward, n.1, p.169.

into the world economy. With this objective they forged alliances with merchants, financiers and investors from Britain, Germany and North America. They eliminated the traditional communal land rights that had given the native Indians at least some legal protection since colonial times. And by converting their lands into "private" property, they made it alienable -- and opened the way for evicting the Indians off their lands. The espousal of free-market economics did not mean a commitment to liberal politics. On the contrary liberals set up "republican dictatorships" that centralized authority and rigged elections in order to keep themselves in power for extended periods. Participation, when there was any, was limited to the landed elites. They modernized their military establishments and police forces which they indiscriminately used to intimidate and suppress the opposition. The militaries they created became forces in their own right and personalistic factions often removed governments only to find themselves soon challenged by the other rival faction.

The economic programme of the liberals stressed export-led growth -- agricultural products would be exported and, in return, manufactured goods would be imported. Over the years, coffee and banana production that the local governments encouraged came to dominate the regional economy.

And the way these plantation crops came to be produced in each country shaped their social and political structure as well.

Political Economy of Plantation Culture

While colonial Central America grew modest amounts of coffee, production in substantial quantities for export began in Costa Rica in the 1830s and after 1870, increasing demand in European markets further encouraged production elsewhere in the region. While coffee production never accounted for more than 15 per cent of the world supply, the exports of relatively high-quality Central American coffee were crucial to local economies. By the outbreak of First World War, coffee accounted for 85.2 per cent of exports from Guatemala, 80.4 per cent from El Salvador, 63.3 per cent from Nicaragua, and 35.2 per cent from Costa Rica. Bananas accounted for slightly over half the exports of Honduras and Costa Rica.⁴

Expanding production of coffee and the economic boom that it created in turn ushered profound social and political changes in the region. Much of the land in the highland slopes where good coffee could be grown was farmed by Indians tilling communal lands. In El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua the traditional elites seeking to cash in on the increasing export opportunities therefore attempted to

4 Ibid. p.160.

take over these lands, either through forcible eviction or coercion or state power. The resultant plantations, remained ever since largely in the hands of Central American nationals.⁵

The labour for coffee cultivation was drawn mostly from Indian and ladino peasants, especially of those whose lands had been taken away. In time, they fell into two groups -- colonos, who lived on the plantations and leased small plots of land for subsistence cultivation and jornaleros, labourers on daily wage who worked while living at home and retaining control of some land. In either case they had close contact with the land and kept the outlooks of traditional peasants, rather than forging class consciousness as a rural proletariat. To keep these workers under control, national oligarchs employed force -- private armies and, later, national militaries to create repressive authoritarian state apparatus.

The exact relationships between the elite, the state, and the peasantry varied from country to country because of differing geographic and social conditions, (colonos, for

5 In Guatemala, emigrants from Germany invested their resources on coffee cultivation and eventually became nationals themselves. Likewise, in other countries of Central America too foreigners came to play an important role in coffee production.

example, could usually be handled by para-military forces on the plantations themselves; hired or migrant labour often required use of the army or the police). Even so, the political economy of coffee produced one general rule : where strong, recalcitrant oligarchs, backed by hard-line officers, came to dominate, the chances for peaceful reform in later decades were slim.

In contrast to coffee plantation, banana production called for different organisation. For one thing, banana plantation demanded the soils and climate of the tropical lowlands and a modern system of transportation to get the highly perishable crop to markets thousands of miles away. Whereas coffee became the economic base for national elites who sold initially to European markets, banana production came to be controlled by US corporations with the capital to build the railroads and ports and to buy the ships to carry the fruit to North American markets. Enormous capitalist plantations, employing thousands of wage labourers, became foreign-owned "enclaves" in Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama. Of these, United Fruit Company (UFCo) was the oldest. Established in 1899 out of the merger of two railway and shipping companies already deeply involved in the banana trade, it was followed by other smaller companies, some of which merged into other firms like Standard Fruit Company. A company with many nicknames --

"the octopus" was one --UFCo established extensive vertical control over the production and distribution of bananas. Through government concessions and other means, the company acquired vast tracts of land in the hot, humid, sparsely settled Caribbean lowlands. It controlled a regional railroad network through its subsidiary, International Railways of Central America and built docks and port facilities. In 1913 UFCo created the Tropical Radio and Telegraph Company. Its ships ("the Great White Fleet") came to dominate shipping between Central America and the United States.⁶

The United Fruit Company ran its operations like a private government, with little interference from local governments. Within its enclaves it controlled transportation, communications, schools, and stores and maintained order. Its supervisors and managers came from the United States and it often imported black workers from Jamaica and the West Indies, altering the racial composition of the eastern lowland population. Because of natural threats from hurricanes and plant disease, UFCo also sought to keep substantial amounts of land in reserve. These could usually be obtained only by government concession, a fact that drew

6 For a detailed account of the United Fruit Company see Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of United Fruit in Central America (New York, Doubleday, 1963) and Walter LaFaber, Inevitable Revolutions (New York, Norton, 1983).

the company into politics.

No doubt, the United Fruit Company generated economic development by providing jobs and customs revenues. But its contribution to development was limited. Local elites had to ship their goods at rates fixed by the company on its railroads and shipping lines, buy its electric power, and use its telegraph and telephone lines. In the process, its regional power went largely unchallenged and the taxes were low on the enormous profits it took out of the country -- at least until the mid-twentieth Century.

The upshot of all these was that the influence that the UFCo exercised on local politics was enormous. To ensure a docile, non-unionized labour force, to get land concessions, low taxes, and so on, it bribed officials, made and unmade governments, and often called the US government to its assistance. But to the extent that government revenue depended on the customs duties from the banana companies rather than on taxes from local elites, the state had somewhat more autonomy from the local oligarchs. Furthermore, the banana companies did not require the strong, repressive military and bureaucratic apparatus created by some of the coffee oligarchies because the fruit companies were not taking land in highly populated areas, forcing peasants to work for them and suppressing popular revolt.. In comparison

to coffee, at least, the political economy of bananas created fewer obstacles to social reform.

In sum, coffee and bananas constituted the basis for the region's export economy for decades. They accounted for more than 70 percent of Central America's exports between the two world wars and nearly as much in 1960. The proportion began to decline only during the wave of growth involving agricultural diversification and incipient industrialization in the 1960s. Although the absolute value of coffee and banana exports increased, they accounted for only about one-fourth and one-tenth, respectively, of total exports in 1972.⁷

Impending Economic Crisis

Dependence on these plantation crops export system meant that the economic fortunes of the region were to be dictated almost entirely by the volatility of the international market. Equally its political fortunes depended largely on the constellations and power of interests associated with these two plantation crops. When coffee or banana prices plummeted export earnings were down and there was little room for flexible response. Land in coffee

7 Woodward, n.1, p.277.

could not be easily or quickly converted to the production of basic foodstuffs, since it takes three to five years before coffee trees begin to yield, making growers reluctant to cut them down, and the foreign banana corporations were generally content to leave land idle until the export price picked up once again. These agro-export strategies also led to heavy dependence on trade with a single partner importantly the United States. Although the coffee trade was initially with Europe, from the 1920s through the 1950s the United States purchased 60 to 90 percent of the region's exports and provided a similar share of imports. The North American predominance in international transactions faded to 30 to 40 per cent in the mid-1970s for most countries which were doing more trade than before with each other and western Europe. Nonetheless, the United States still had considerable commercial leverage over the Central American republics.

The predominance of plantation crop exports discouraged industrialisation because the population was small and income distribution so severely skewed that the vast majority was too poor to provide the purchasing power necessary for an adequate market. The agro-commercial elites could make adequate profits from exports and for many years saw little reason to invest in industry. Society remained predominantly rural. Around 1900 less than 10 per cent of the Central

American population lived in cities; by 1970 the figure ranged between 20 and 40 per cent. The delay in urbanization, in turn, meant that Central America never had a substantial urban working class. There are workers in the cities; there have been sporadic efforts at unionization since the 1920s; there has been migration from the countryside, increasing the number of slum dwellers. But the historical de-emphasis on manufacturing and the smallness of the cities did not yield working-class movements comparable to those in other Latin American countries. When urbanization accelerated in the 1970s, there were few institutions such as trade unions or political parties capable of absorbing the social and political tensions produced by rapid change. Furthermore, the historical de-emphasis on manufacturing meant that agriculture was never supplanted by an industry as the dominant sector of the national economy. Of course there were fledgling business groups, most conspicuously in Nicaragua, but they did not become powerful enough to alter the basic social composition of the country. The fundamental social antagonism remained therefore between land-owning class and peasants. When conflict occurred it would tend to follow class lines, and control of land would be the overriding issue.

In the post-Second World War years, however, some of the more developmentally-minded leaders in the region sought to promote agricultural and industrial growth by blending

infrastructural investments with progressive fiscal policies and, perhaps most importantly, by combining the small national markets into a larger regional one. In 1960, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and (two years later) Costa Rica joined to form the Central American Common Market (CACM). The objective of the CACM was to stimulate industrial growth by promoting free trade among member countries while erecting common tariffs to protect infant industries from the competition of lower-price foreign imports. The CACM seemed to promise a way to expand market size without facing the politically difficult task of internal, redistributive reforms that were strongly opposed by traditional elites. Initially, the regional common market effort did help spur industrialization and growth; trade among the five countries went from \$ 32 million in 1960 to \$ 260 million in 1969. Foreign capital, largely US, went in to take advantage of the new possibilities. But among the five member countries, the benefits of the new growth were unevenly distributed. Guatemala and El Salvador seemed to move ahead at the expense of Honduras and Costa Rica. These problems were exacerbated by the 1969 clash between Honduras and El Salvador when tens of thousands of landless and jobless Salvadorans that had been tempted by deteriorating economic conditions to move into less populated Honduras created a reaction among Hondurans that erupted in the so-called "Soccer War". Honduras withdrew from the CACM. Although it negotiated

bilateral agreements with the other countries, the common market lost a good deal of precious momentum.⁸

The efforts of the CACM to bring growth in the 1960s coincided with US aid under the Alliance for Progress, Forged in response to the Cuban revolution, the Alliance programme purportedly sought to remedy the causes of revolutionary upheaval by promoting long-term economic development, social reform and political democratization : "a common effort", according to its preamble, "to bring our people accelerated economic progress and broader social justice within the framework of personal dignity and political liberty".⁹ Apparently, it was an effort to place the United States on the side of reformist and democratic forces in Latin America which would, with US support, move against the intransigent right and push both growth and change. Top priorities included land redistribution to create a more equitable social structure and tax reforms to finance the agrarian

8 For details see William R. Cline and Enrique Delgado, Economic Integration in Central America (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution, 1978) and John Weeks, The Economies of Central America (New York, Hokmes and Meier, 1984).

9 Quoted in Simon G. Hanson, Five Years of the Alliance for Progress : An Appraisal (Washington D.C., Inter-American Affairs Press, 1967), p.162. See also Pat M. Holt, Survey of the Alliance for Progress : The Political Aspects (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1967) and Simon G. Hanson, "Notes on the Alliance for Progress", Inter-American Economic Affairs, vol.17, no.1, 1963, pp.85-97.

programme and other development projects. Ironically enough, the Alliance also included a military security component designed to defeat any revolutionary challenge that might pre-empt or disrupt attempts at reform. Security programmes came to dominate the Alliance under the Johnson administration and continued to do so into the 1970s under Nixon and Ford. Military training for "internal security" in the US-run School of Americas (in Panama's Canal Zone at the time) created an officer corps steeped in counter-insurgency doctrines but not particularly reform-minded.¹⁰ Alongside, the US Agency for International Development (AID) provided police forces with training as well as arms, anti-riot equipment, and communications and transportation technology. Civic action projects designed to improve the image of the military in the eyes of its people allowed many officers "to expand their personal power (and wealth), militarize former civilian sectors of the economy, and establish police networks that could suppress the peasants"¹¹. Highly trained and proud of their professionalism, the modern

10 For summary of activities regarding military training for the Central American armies see US Defence Security Assistance Agency, Foreign Military Sales and Military Assistance Facts (Washington D.C., 1977). Under the Military Assistance Programme and International Military Education and Training Programme in Central America as many as 696 in Costa Rica, 1925 in El Salvador, 3212 in Guatemala, 2888 in Honduras, 5167 in Nicaragua and 4389 in Panama were given training in "internal security" during 1950 and 1976.

11 Robert S. Leiken, ed., Central America: Anatomy of Conflict (New York, Pergamon Press, 1984), p.84.

officer corps acquired substantial power and potential autonomy from civilian elites; many grew very wealthy on corruption that was often institutionalized; with few exception, however, they tended to side with the oligarchs and other conservative forces to block reform on the pretext of stemming revolutionary upheaval.

The Alliance for Progress did support the efforts of the political and economic elites who sought to spur growth through the Central American Common Market. Trade and commerce among member countries multiplied and the total value of trade rose by an annual rate of 25 per cent in the 1960s and 15 per cent in the 1970s. Some light manufacturing flourished (processed foods, fertilizers, pulp and paper materials, pharmaceuticals, some electrical equipment) as the region embarked on the path of import-substitution industrialization.¹² But the Alliance and the CACM did not produce much economic or political reform. As the Kissinger Commission subsequently pointed out that "the other two goals of the Alliance, structural change and political democratization, proved much more difficult to achieve."¹³

12 Cline and Delgado, n.9.

13 Henry Kissinger, et al., Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1984), p.36.

Chapter - II

DIMENSIONS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

In the decade of 1970, all the countries except Costa Rica still remained under the rule of military governments. A rudimentary process of industrialization created job opportunities but did not increase substantially overall employment levels given the rural dislocations and rapid population growth. In fact, during the preceding years land concentration actually rose in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, as the spread of commercial plantation agriculture worsened further the problem of land scarcity. The number of landless increased dramatically to an average of nearly 40 per cent of the rural population by the late 1970s and wealth remained tightly concentrated in the hands of a few families. Per capita incomes in 1980 were still between US \$ 528 and \$ 1,512. The root of the problem was the failure of the Alliance programme to reform the rigid social structures that prevented the benefits of growth from even "trickling down" to the poor.

Evolving Political Crisis

Undoubtedly, the failure of the Alliance to produce enduring political and economic reform derived from a fundamental misunderstanding of Central America. US policy-makers gravely underestimated the power and resilience of the traditional upper classes. On the other hand, they seriously overestimated the capacities of the emerging middle sectors.

And in seeking to promise "democracy", Washington tended to give top priority to the holding of orderly elections. The major problem with this mistaken emphasis was that historically, elections were not a mechanism for transferring power in Central America. Rather than competitive contests, they were efforts to legitimize de facto power, often held by military officers. Except in Costa Rica, participation was low and margins of victory suspiciously high (from the 1930s to the 1980s many winners claimed more than 80 per cent of the votes and some have claimed an incredible 100 per cent). Consequently, few Central Americans put as much faith in elections as did Washington. By failing to comprehend this legacy, US policy-makers ended up focussing on the procedural forms of democracy in settings where it had no social content.

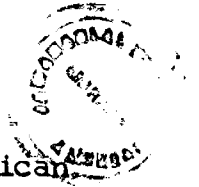
Perhaps, the most important US miscalculation concerned the role of the armed forces. It saw them, as "military modernizers" who would serve as allies of the middle sectors rather than as guardians of the status quo".¹ What in fact had happened was that once the "insurrection" was contained within Cuba, the traditional elites in Central America lost all interest in reform. Together, the expansion of the military capacity under the aegis of the Alliance programme

1 William M. Leo Grande, "Through the Looking Glass : The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America", World Policy Journal I (Winter, 1984), p.289.

enabled them to resist any pressures toward change and in the process, "guns were turned against the democratic reformers".²

Despite these shortcomings the Alliance programme and the regional common market efforts gave impetus to new social forces in rural and urban areas. Popular associations and political parties were organized and began pushing for the kinds of reform that the Alliance had envisaged. In rural areas, the successful blocking of land reform by traditional elites was accompanied by the expansion of export agriculture which worsened the inequities in the countryside. Land formerly dedicated to small-scale production of subsistence crops was taken over and turned into large-scale, commercial farms to produce new crops like cotton and sugar, and to expand coffee and banana production. Displaced peasants were forced to seek scarce work for low wages. Others moved to the towns and cities where they lived in sprawling slums. The economic downturn of the late 1970s and early 1980s made their bad situation even worse. It is in these tragic circumstances many areas, urban and rural poor began to be welded into a new social force by the Catholic church. The revitalization of the church was especially important in Nicaragua and El Salvador, but affected Guatemala and Honduras as well. Two events marked the shift in the role of the church -- one, the Second Ecumenical Council of the early

2 Ibid.



1960s (Vatican II), and the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. The Medellin Conference, particularly, denounced capitalism and communism as equal affronts to human dignity and placed the blame for hunger and misery on the rich and powerful. To redress these inequalities the bishops, called for more education, increased social awareness, and the creation of comunidades de base -- Christian base communities of not more than a few dozen people each. The communities became the nucleus for what the church called its "preferential option for the poor". Layworkers, nuns, priests, and some members of the hierarchy supported a new catechism, which raised the social consciousness of thousands of Catholics and was itself spurred on by the interpretation of the meaning of the scriptures for everyday life undertaken by the study groups in the local base communities. Convinced of the importance of social justice -- access to jobs and land to live "by the sweat of hair brows" and to educate and feed and clothe their families, many were spurred to organize local community self-help groups, cooperatives, peasants organizations, Christian-oriented unions and other popular organizations. It was often the repression of such popular and reformist organizations that antagonized their members and helped forge an alliance between them and more secular, radical, Marxist groups.

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While the new social forces stimulated by growth without reform were being organized by sectors of the Catholic church, important changes were also taking place among the urban middle and working classes. While urbanization was modest by Latin American standards, the growing state bureaucracies, the expansion of business and industry and the dislocation in rural areas rapidly enlarged the urban population. The most active groups in Central America's cities generally consisted of middle-sector merchants and professionals -- lawyers, journalists, intellectuals, and students. These groups now sought to organize reformist political movements, center and center-left political parties (e.g., Christian Democratic and Social Democratic parties). They expanded their base to include urban workers (who themselves were sometimes able to form unions) in the new industries as well as in more traditional sectors (transportation, utilities, communications). The reform parties frequently propounded improved minimum wages and land reform and produced a considerable number of civilian and political leaders. And in some instances, they sought alliances with popular organizations in rural areas.

The pattern of growth and deprivation thus exerted great pressure on Central American society as new social forces mobilized to push for justice and reform. At times, Cuba, Venezuela and other countries sought to involve

themselves, but the development of insurgency and revolution generally had little to do with such external interference. The new social forces -- unleashed by uneven economic growth and rural dislocations, fed on promises of reform, and organized into new associations by the church, by labour and peasant leaders, and by centrist and leftist political parties -- demanded change.

By the beginning of 1970 when pressures for reform became imperative, the organization of the emerging economic and social forces could not galvanise themselves to make effective demand for change in the established region. Whatever responses that the existing elites opted were largely confined either to open the political and economic system or to deny access and accomodation to those new social forces. In the process, two general patterns emerged. In countries such as Honduras, Panama and Costa Rica, less reactionary economic elites, together with less hard-line military officers, were open to at least some social change and implemented meaningful reformist policies. Consequently, revolutionary upheavals and challenges to that extent were avoided in these countries.

The traditional coffee elite in Costa Rica, less economically powerful and historically more open to change than the coffee oligarchs of its northern neighbours had reformist leaders powerful enough to eliminate the major

obstacle to democracy in the region namely, the military. In fact, Costa Rica traditionally had a small military which was weak enough to be disbanded, over the years. It had a large agrarian middle class and a broad, cross-class coalition gradually built legitimate political institutions that were able to respond to demands for reform. As a result, Costa Rica had to confront no revolutionary upheaval. To a significant extent, Panama and Honduras -- which for different reasons lacked well-organized, entrenched oligarchies and strong, repressive militaries -- were also able to leave open channels for reform, at least until the early 1980s. Although these countries experienced political instability, they were not confronted with armed revolution.

In countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, powerful elites backed by increasingly strong militaries, met efforts at reform with brutal repression that led to insurgency and revolution. Where the radical movements were strong and cohesive they were either able to overthrow the old regime such as in the case of Nicaragua where a cross-class coalition united against the Somoza dynasty, leaving it in a state of isolation both from its own society and from US support or, they were able to forge a paralyzing stalemate as in El Salvador, where a cohesive oligarchy with the support of the US military have offered harsh resistance.

where less well-organised insurgents faced a strong oligarchy and powerful military, as in the case of Guatemala, the result has been cycles of repression, and reform, followed by further repression and renewed insurgency.

US Perceptions and Responses

Until the outbreak of open insurrection in Nicaragua following Chamorro's assassination, the US government was oblivious to the gathering storm in Central America. Surely, the official violence perpetrated by the region's governments had produced some, if not, muted criticism in Washington. For long, except for the issue of the Panama Canal -- Central America was peripheral to the foreign policies of successive US administrations until Reagan's.

At the turn of the nineteenth Century, when the United States emerged as a global power, Central America assumed unprecedented importance in Washington. Instability in the border regions of the United States came to be regarded as intolerable -- a threat both to the growing US economic interests in the periphery and to the security of the Panama Canal. The "gunboat" and "dollar" diplomacy symbolized the resolve of the United States to exclude extra-Hemispheric influence, both economic or political, from the Central American and Caribbean region. That apart the Central

American countries themselves so small and weak were reduced to a virtual protectorate under US surveillance. US ambassadors acted as proconsuls, and the Central American governments were installed and deposed at will by the United States. When this was not sufficient, the US marines were sent to intervene in Central American countries.³

Exercising its power in favour of stability, the United States inevitably came to be identified as an ally of the existing elite namely, the landed oligarchy. The United States became, in other words, a partisan actor in Central American society since the turn of the nineteenth Century. In some cases, such as Guatemala, the partnership was real and profitable. In others, like Nicaragua, it was more a matter of Washington's indifference to the plight of the poor so long as their overseers were friends of the United States.

In the 1930s, the Good Neighbour policy enunciated by Franklin D. Roosevelt provided a brief respite from direct US intervention in Latin America. The advent of the Cold War in the 1950s, however, brought a revival of Washington's

³ For a comprehensive history of US postures, policies and relations with Central America see John L. Mecham, A Survey of US-Latin American Relations (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1965), Dana G. Munro, Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean 1900-21 (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964) and Julius W. Pratt, A History of United States Foreign Policy (New York, Prentice Hall, 1955).

fears about foreign penetration of its border regions and a return to the interventionist predilections of the past. Ironically, the new interventions were prompted by the collapse of regimes that were the legacy of "gunboat" diplomacy. The demise of dictatorships in the Caribbean (Cuba in 1959 and the Dominican Republic in 1961) ushered in populist and nationalist regimes that Washington feared would erode US hegemony in the region.⁴

In Dominican Republic, US intervention, covert and overt, was able to restore the old order. In Cuba, the effort at the Bay of Pigs failed, however, and Washington's worst nightmare was suddenly realized when an indigenous, nationalist revolution evolved into a communist regime allied with the Soviet Union under Fidel Castro. In the decades since the Cuban revolution, virtually all of US policy toward Latin America can be traced to Washington's obsession with preventing "another Cuba".

Just as in the Caribbean, US policy toward Central America has certainly been no exception. The revolution of

4 For a definitive analysis of post-war US policies towards Central America see Herbert Goldhamer, The Foreign Powers in Latin America (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972), F. Parkinson, Latin America, The Cold War and the World Powers (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publishers, 1974), and Cole Blasier, The Hovering Giant : U.S. Response to Revolutionary Changes in Latin America (Pittsburg, Pittsburg University Press, 1976).

1944 Guatemala brought to power a reformist coalition of the centre-left. For a time, it seemed as if the new regime might be able to consolidate itself and create a broadly based electoral system responsive to popular demands for change. But in Guatemala, where the local landed elite was in partnership with powerful agri-business interests in the United States, to attack the established social order meant to engender the wrath of Washington. The overthrow of the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1954 marked the defeat of the first reformist challenge in the region and set the pattern for oligarchic response to demands for change. To a certain extent, it also set the pattern for the United States' reaction to the spectre of instability that inevitably accompanied efforts to topple the old order. The defeat of Arbenz produced a generation of political turmoil in Guatemala. Despite the concerted efforts of the armed forces, demands for change unleashed during the brief interlude of the popular government have never been fully extirpated. Two guerrilla wars and a third presently gathering momentum have demonstrated the futility of seeking a military solution, not just to the conflict in Guatemala but to the Central America crisis as a

whole.⁵

The short-lived coalition government of October 1979 that combined moderate civilians and reformist military officers was the last hope for avoiding full-scale civil war in El Salvador. Blocked at every turn by the power of the oligarchy and the traditional right in the officer corps, the coalition government that came to power in adjacent El Salvador in 1979 collapsed just a few months after. For the already powerful radical left, the demise of the October regime was the last straw. Joined by many of the moderate politicians who had participated in the October experiment, the left gave up any hope of breaking the oligarchy's stranglehold on Salvadoran society without intensive armed struggle. For its part, the right abandoned all restraint in dealing with its political adversaries; over the next few years, over 40,000 non-combatant civilians suspected of dissidence lost their lives at the hands of the military and its associated death squads. As the war in El Salvador escalated, so too did the role of the United States. From

5 For developments in Guatemala see Thomas and Marjorie Melville, Guatemala Another Vietnam (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), Eduardo Galeano, Guatemala: Occupied Country (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1969) and Janathan L. Fried et al., Guatemala in Rebellion: Unfinished History (New York, Grove Press, 1983).

only marginal involvement in 1979, Washington had become by 1985, the principal architect, financier and strategist for the Salvadoran government in general and armed forces in particular. Paradoxically, though the regime in San Salvador came to rely more and more crucially upon the Washington for its survival, the ability of the United States to control events in El Salvador seemed to improve hardly at all, even to the present time.⁶

No country in Central America has had a longer but bitter relations with the United States than Nicaragua. Occupied by the marines almost continuously from 1912 to 1933, Nicaragua was left with Somoza family dynasty when the United States finally departed. The revolutionaries of the 1970s took their name and inspiration from Augusto Cesar Sandino, a guerrilla hero who resisted the US occupation during the 1920s and 1930s, only to be assassinated by the first Somoza after the marines had withdrawn.

Admittedly, Nicaragua had the first successful revolution in Central America, and so has become a symbol of hope for revolutionaries throughout the region and a symbol of apocalypse

6 A comprehensive reader on El Salvador is provided in Marvin E. Gettleman et al., El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War (New York, Grove Press, 1982).

for defenders of the status quo. The Nicaraguan upper class, part of which joined with the Sandinistas to oust Somoza, has not been willing or able to accommodate itself to a new regime in which it has little or no influence, and that it suspects of harbouring plans for the ultimate dissolution of private enterprise. Nor have the Sandinistas had much tolerance for a private sector that shares none of their objectives regarding the radical redistribution of wealth and income in the new Nicaragua.

Whatever may be the outcome of the domestic power struggle, Washington has not accepted its loss of influence in Nicaragua either. After trying mightily to keep the Sandinistas out of power, the Carter administration resolved to try to find a way with the revolutionary government. The Reagan administration, however, proved less tolerant of ideological pluralism, at least on the left, and launched a covert war in the hope of ousting the Sandinistas and restoring a regime more congenial to the interests and influence of the United States.⁷

7 On the early history of the Sandinistas and US policy towards Nicaragua see David Nolan, The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution (Coral Gables, University of Miami, 1984). Thomas W. Walker, Nicaragua Five Years Later (New York, Praeger, 1985), John Booth, The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution (Boulder, Westview, 1982) and George Black, Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua (London, Zed Press, 1981).

In Central America, Honduras has received the lion's share of increased military assistance after El Salvador from the United States and has become a key staging area for US military operations directed toward both El Salvador and Nicaragua. Honduras, like Costa Rica, has always been exceptional among the nations of Central America. Though it never developed democratic political institutions like those of Costa Rica, it nevertheless managed to avoid the political polarization and violence that engulfed all its neighbours. Underdeveloped even by Central American standards, Honduran inequality was never so acute nor its social structure so rigid as in El Salvador, Guatemala or Nicaragua. As political turmoil spread through the region in the late 1970s, Honduras seemed to be the one country in the northern tier that might find a peaceful evolutionary path to democratic political development and socio-economic reform. The United States initially tried to promote such changes and had some success. But as the war in El Salvador escalated and the covert war against Nicaragua was launched, these conflicts came to dominate US policy toward Honduras. Strategically located in heart of the region, Honduras was the perfect site for an expanded US military presence, and this objective was given priority over political and economic reforms in Honduras

itself.⁸

Among the countries of Central America, Costa Rica has always been so different that it seems to belong somewhere else in the hemisphere. Since 1948, Costa Rica has had a functioning democracy that seems to lose none of its legitimacy even in times of intense economic stress. A series of social welfare programmes smooth out, to some extent, the extremes of wealth and poverty in Costa Rican society and give the average citizen a sense that government is responsive to his basic needs and demands. In one sense, Costa Rica embodies all the virtues the United States would like to promote elsewhere in the region. So much so, the United States has always sought to draft Costa Rica into the covert war against Nicaragua -- against the better judgement of many Costa Rican politicians and the traditions of Costa Rican foreign policy.⁹

Role of Soviet Union and Cuba

Having dwelt at some length on delineating US postures and policies towards Central America, an attempt is made here to describe the role of two other actors in the

8 Mario Posas, "Honduras at the Crossroads", Latin American Perspectives, vol.17 (Spring/Summer, 1980), and Philip B.Wheaton, Inside Honduras: Regional Countries Insurgency Base (Washington, D.C., Ecumenical Program for Inter-American Communication and Action Task Force, 1982).

9 See Charles D.Ameringer, Democracy in Costa Rica (New York, Praeger, 1982) and Harold D.Nelson, ed., Costa Rica: A Country Study (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1983).

region -- one the Soviet Union and the other, Cuba, a regional actor which has intensely been interested in the Central American crisis.

According to most Western observers, the Soviet Union, unlike in the past, apparently seems to attach considerable attention to Central America especially since the revolutionary victory of the Sandinistas in 1979. The major thrust of Soviet Union's Latin American policy since the Cuban revolution, in their view, has been to reinforce its hold on Cuba, while at the same time striving to expand Soviet and undermine US influence in the 'strategic rear' of the latter in the Western Hemisphere. To that extent, they argue, Soviet policy-makers no more regard Latin America as an area of remote and limited concern in respect of their global policy. It is for these considerations, this line of argument suggests that Moscow welcomed the Sandinista triumph in deposing the Somoza regime in Nicaragua as a historic watershed in the struggle of Third World countries against colonialism and imperialism. ¹⁰

¹⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of Western view of Soviet postures in Central America see C.G.Jacobsen, Soviet Attitudes Towards Aid to and Contacts with Central American Revolutionaries (Washington, D.C., mimeograph, 1984) and Joseph G.Whelan, Latin America in Soviet Third World Policy (Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service Report No.85-40,1984).

Contrary to these assertions, the Soviet Union's record so far in Central America hardly suggests any such grand design. Also, the Soviets for their part, seem to be proceeding with considerable deliberation in making their presence felt in the region. Notwithstanding Sandinista leaders' unqualified and loud adherence to Marxism-Leninism, Soviets are less drawn and more guarded in their willingness to make security commitments to Nicaragua even under threatening military postures of the US.

There are more than one explanations that can be offered to explain Soviet perceptions and policies. One is the remoteness of the region together with the enormous cost in underwriting these countries. The other relates to possible US counteraction to Soviet initiatives in the region. Ever since Moscow forged relations with Cuba, it pursued a dual policy of steadily building up its military presence in the Caribbean country while exercising care that this effort would not generate any untoward US counteraction. From the Soviet perspective, the positive development has been the increasing US acceptance not only of the existing regime in Cuba but also the regime's increasing military relationship with the Soviet Union. It is for these considerations, the Soviet Union is reluctant to plunge into

Central America too quickly too soon.

A third plausible argument that explains the Soviet leaders' studied circumspection in underwriting the Sandinista regime is that, from the Soviet perspective, a manageable threat to the present regime in Nicaragua is perhaps a useful tool for rallying the people of Nicaragua around the Sandinistas' leadership. At the same time, given the open and increasing hostility of the US to the present ruling elite in Nicaragua and given also the continuing turmoil in the entire Central American region, the Sandinistas will be forced to remain acquiescent to Soviet overtures. That this is imperative has a great deal to do with what Soviet Union envisages in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America.

What then are the motivations of Soviet Union in adjacent El Salvador. Since in El Salvador the various peasant insurrectionists factions have not yet been united to wage a concerted war against the ruling elite, it is necessary for the Soviet Union to transform gradually the numerically small communist party of El Salvador into a leading force in the guerrilla struggle in that country. That, in fact, explains why the Soviet Union, contrary to its earlier promise of supplying weapons to the fighting peasants have since offered no more than military training. In other words, the

Soviet involvement in El Salvador is bound to be long-drawn and this is the reason why it considers its hold over the present Nicaraguan regime should continue. The other obvious argument in respect of Soviet motivations in El Salvador is to pin down the US in its 'strategic rear' by creating an 'American Afghanistan' in its geographic proximity and using the issue as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with its Super Power adversary.¹¹

The nature of Cuba's role in Central America is more complex than that of the Soviet Union. While Cuba has an interest in promoting revolution, in its own interest, it is keen to avoid and avert a regional war. Although often playing the role of a Soviet surrogate, Cuba's interest and policies in the region are not necessarily identical to, and at times even conflicts with, those of the Soviet Union. It is true that Cuba would like to weaken Washington's influence in the region. But it is equally well aware that the geographic fate has placed it next door to the US and therefore it should eventually find a way to co-exist with the Colossus of the North.

11 Cole Blasier, The Giant's Rival : The USSR and Latin America (Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, 1983).

Given these realities, Cuba's policy towards Central America has had two fundamental objectives : one, to avert a US military attack against Cuba growing out the Central American conflict and the other, to consolidate the revolutionary momentum in region. To achieve these objectives, Cuba has pursued a two-track policy of strengthening its own armed forces and those of Nicaragua, while at the same time to build a diplomatic bridge against direct US intervention. In explaining Cuba's objectives on Central America, two points needs to be emphasised. First, the Central American conflict is taking place very close to Cuba. Second, Cuba has a historical interest in the region. The success of the Sandinista revolution has been a great gain to Cuba, for it enabled Cuba to escape for the first time its own isolation in Latin America. At last there has emerged a second regime in the American continent similar at least outwardly to Cuba's outlook and perspectives. The Cubans are much more interested in the consolidation and the survival of the Sandinista revolution than the Soviets, as it guarantees Cuba's own survival. Further, although Cuba's commitment to liberation struggle and protection of progressive governments has a long history beginning soon after its own revolution, there is a growing realisation among the Cuban leaders that the survival of the entire revolutionary process in the

region calls for a cautious and moderate approach in pursuing the objective. That is why Cuba shows a great sense of pragmatism by moderating its stance on armed struggle in the region which helps to maximise Cuba's influence in the whole region. At the same time, by seeking to build an anti-US regional bloc of Latin American countries, Cuba aspires to be accepted both as a revolutionary symbol and a leader among the Caribbean and Central American countries.¹²

12 For a fuller discussion of Cuba's perception and policy towards Central America see Seweryn Bialer and Alfred Stepan, "Cuba, the United States and the Central American Mess", New York Review of Books (27 May, 1982), pp.17-21.

Chapter - III

EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL INITIATIVE

We...reject, without exception, all military plans that would seriously endanger the security and development of the region. This continent must not be the scenario of generalised violence that becomes increasingly difficult to control, as has occurred in other parts of the world.(1)

So stated President Miguel de la Madrid of Mexico on 16 May 1984 while addressing a joint session of the US Congress. The forthright and unambiguous assertion of Mexico's President in the very heart of Washington admittedly reflected a striking break from past foreign policy behaviour of Mexico. Other neighbouring countries such as importantly Colombia, Panama and Venezuela too, before long, had joined ranks with Mexico and warned against foreign military intervention from any source insisting on respect for the fundamental principles of international law namely, the peaceful solution of conflict, the sovereign equality of states and the right of self-determination. The obvious reference to foreign intervention by these countries was the major US military build-up in Central America and the open commitment of the Reagan administration to undermine the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Undoubtedly, the unified and uncompromising stand on the part of Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela

1 New York Times, 17 May 1984.

surprised those accustomed to understanding their past foreign policy behaviour within frameworks of dependency and pragmatic realism. Many predicted that the effect of a massive US military commitment to the region together with the heightened economic vulnerability of Latin American countries to their external debt problem and falling oil prices would force these countries to acquiesce rather than challenge US postures and policies in its backyard. Given the obvious differences in power, neighbouring countries such as Mexico and Venezuela, it was hoped, would follow the general policies of a United States willing to resort to military or, at best, would remain uninvolved in the Central American crisis. Yet rather remaining aloof from Central America, they had unexpectedly done the reverse -- as the danger of a full-blown conflict increased and US military pressure on the region mounted, they had united their foreign policy positions through what eventually came to be known as the Contadora initiative underlining a non-military solution for Central America.

What accounted for their initial decision to get involved in the Central American crisis? How have they managed to unite as a group in Contadora despite strong policy differences? Most important of all, what are the possibilities and limitations of their action either

multilaterally or individually to influence US policy and seek a resolution to the Central American crisis ? These and related questions will be the focus of the present and the following chapters.

Mexico's Attitude Towards
Central American Crisis

During a luncheon given in honour of the president of Costa Rica visiting Mexico city in May 1979, president Lopez-Portillo commenting at length on "the horrendous genocide in Nicaragua", announced that his country would sever relations with the government of Anastasio Somoza. His decision stunned observers of Mexican foreign policy because there were no precedents of Mexico breaking established diplomatic relations with any country. He went even further. In June, at a meeting of the Organisation of American states, his ambassador openly defended the "sacred right [of the Nicaraguan people] to rebel against tyranny." Also, he shipped substantial quantities of ammunition to the Sandinista southern front, and on 9 July let his official plane carry the newly formed Junta into Nicaragua.²

These and related actions of Mexico, however, were not so unusual. Since the Mexican revolution of 1910, its

2 Jorge G. Castaneda, "Don't Corner Mexico !", Foreign Policy (Fall, 1985), pp.80-81.

foreign policy has been based upon and consistent with its own definition of state interests such as the security of its borders and the stability of the regime both of which depended upon preventing foreign military interventions by political means rather than the use of force, as well as a development strategy of limited reform. In fact, the Mexican revolution formed the basis for toleration of a wide variety of political forms in other countries as well as a relatively low fear of the outcomes of violent social change. So much so, even subsequently Mexico never shared the Cold War preoccupation with the Soviet Union or other external sources of instability that influenced US perceptions toward Central America. Given its own revolutionary heritage, it had consistently identified political stability, both internally and regionally, with the ability to come to terms with what are seen as inevitable forces for change. It is these very considerations that were applied with a vengeance to the crisis on its borders. Mexico favoured structural changes within Central American countries because the resulting stability will ultimately contribute to the maintenance of Mexico's own regime. Already threatened by flows of refugees into its territory and Guatemalan soldiers along its southern flank, Mexican officials felt that their country's institutional arrangements would be badly shaken

by a regional war. Also, revolutionary upheaval in the neighbouring region would require the expansion of Mexico's armed forces and their concentration along its southern border. This in turn would entail an increase in military spending at the expense of development, thus creating a change in the current balance of civil-military relations and the possibility of domestic radical activity.³

Besides, the historical memory of its bitter relations with the US was another central preoccupation of the Mexican government. The overwhelming hegemony of the United States, which seized over half of Mexican national territory by force in the last century and threatened to invade during the 1938 Mexican oil nationalization, created a long-term requirement to support international norms of nonintervention and peaceful resolution of conflict as an important means of self-preservation. Although observers

3 Mario Ojeda, "Mexican Policy Towards Central America in the context of US-Mexican Relations", in The Future of Central America : Policy Choices for US and Mexico, ed., Richard Eagen and Olga Pellicer (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983), p.138. See also Rene Herrera Zuniga and Mario Ojeda, "Mexican Foreign Policy in Central America", in Central America : International Dimensions of the Crisis, ed., Richard Feinberg (New York, Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1982), pp.160-86. Peter Smith, "Mexico : The Continuing quest for a Policy", in From Gunboats to Diplomacy, ed., Richard S.Newfarmer (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp.37-53.

often consider Mexico's firm defense of international law and the sovereignty of nations to be motivated by the need to appease the nation's radicals, this pillar of foreign policy is far more real than rhetorical.

It is these considerations that had deeply exacerbated the Mexican regime's sense of threat at a time when the US had resorted to the militarisation of the Central American region. Historic conflicts with the Guatemalan military and possible decision of US to rearm the Guatemalan military heightened further its vulnerability especially in view of important Mexican oil fields located in the south. To this effect, one high official of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) hinted saying : "We already share one border with the United States. We do not want to share two".⁴ Added to these was the new-found oil riches of Mexico which altered its global role by generating enormous export revenues that could be used to support foreign policy commitments in Central America. In addition, its oil resources enabled Mexico to expand its markets in the region. Oil bonanza itself infused a policy confidence that led the country to boldly into

4 Adolfo A. Zinzer, "Mexico and the Guatemala Crisis", in Richard Fagen and Olga Pellicer, ed., The Future of Central America Policy Choices for the US and Mexico (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983), pp.161-86.

arenas that they had previously not dared to enter. Nicaragua was the first of these new arenas.

In 1979, president Lopez-Portillo initiated an international diplomatic offensive against Somoza that was joined by other Latin American countries. This international ostracism laid the groundwork for blocking the United States proposal to the OAS for a "peacekeeping force" to intervene in Nicaragua in order to prevent a Sandinista victory. Mexico's initiative marked a historic moment in US-Latin American relations -- the first diplomatic rebuff from the OAS to a US request for the use of force on the continent. Once military action was effectively circumscribed, Mexico continued to give political support as well as quiet financial assistance to the resistance against Somoza until the dynasty was defeated.⁵

Soon after Sandinista assumption of power, Mexico promptly emerged as an outspoken defender and a strategic ally of the new government, implementing a Mexican definition of "containment". Fearing that intense hostility from the United States would ultimately force the Sandinistas into an undesirable radicalization process under Cuban tutelage, Mexico under Lopez-Portillo administration attempted to create

5 Jorge G. Castaneda, n.2, pp.75-90.

a third path by almost standing guarantee to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua by underwriting Nicaragua's external debt, becoming a major aid donor, and supplier of much-needed petroleum.⁶ For three years Nicaragua received all of its oil under long-term credits, as part of the 1980 San Jose Accord sponsored jointly with Venezuela. Unlike Venezuela, which cut off oil to the Sandinista regime in 1981, Mexico remained a reliable supplier through 1983.⁷

Together with economic aid, Mexico offered staunch political support. The Lopez-Portillo administration formed close personal ties with the Sandinistas.⁸ When the US-sponsored counter-revolutionary war against the Nicaraguan government began on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border during the Reagan administration, the Mexican president sought to build a broad Latin American united front against a possible future US intervention. In May 1981, he personally mediated

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- 6 On the basis of an agreement signed in San Jose, Mexico offered to supply 75,000 barrels per day to Nicaragua and also granted a 30 per cent credit that could be repaid in five years at 4 per cent interest rate.
- 7 Under pressure from the US as well as the threats from domestic quarters in 1984 Mexico suspended oil deliveries to Nicaragua. See "San Jose Terms to be Tightened", Latin America Weekly Report (London) 22 April, 1983.
- 8 Jorge G. Castaneda, n.2, p.83.

a cross-border dispute between Honduras and Nicaragua, thus preventing the initiation of a dangerous spiral of conflict.⁹

Although the strong personal ties that characterized relations with Nicaragua were absent in the case of El Salvador, Mexico lent a base of operations to the political front of the Salvadoran insurgents during the height of right-wing repression by withdrawing its ambassador and repeatedly issuing statements supporting the right of the Salvadoran people to decide their own destiny just "as the people of Nicaragua were able to do a year ago."¹⁰ As US hostility to the opposition grew and El Salvador was declared a "test case" for the defeat of communism in Latin America, the Mexican government took stronger action in order to avoid a possible military confrontation between the rebels and the Reagan administration. On 28 August 1981, Lopez-Portillo presented a joint communique with the Mitterrand government of France to the UN Security Council that recognized the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) as "representative political forces" and called upon the international community to "facilitate an understanding among the

9 This pattern of mediation, later adopted by Contadora, remains a substantial part of Mexico's contribution to peace in the region.

10 "Central America : A Key Failure of the President's Latest Grand Tour", Latin America Political Report, 18 July 1980.

representatives of the opposing political forces in El Salvador with the aim of reestablishing peace in the nation and avoiding all outside interference in Salvadoran affairs".¹¹ The French-Mexican communique had an instant impact granting important diplomatic and political legitimacy to the Salvadoran opposition while promoting the idea of a political settlement.

Towards the end of the year, the Lopez-Portillo government directly opposed the United States in both Nicaragua and El Salvador. It initiated high-level talks between US Secretary of State Alexander Haig and foreign minister Jorge Castaneda to seek ways of mitigating conflict with its powerful neighbour. These talks marked a shift from Mexico's previous role of advocate to a new stance of mediator between the United States, Cuba, and Nicaragua. As the foreign minister explained: "Mexico is prepared to serve as a bridge, as a communicator, between its friends and neighbours".¹² In February 1982, during a state visit to Managua, Lopez-Portillo announced a specific formula for political negotiations that involved a three-part dialogue between the United States and Cuba, the contending parties in El Salvador and Nicaragua and its neighbours. The so-called Declaration of Managua led

11 New York Times, 29 August 1980.

12 Jorge Castaneda, "Caribbean Basin Security", New York Times, 10 March 1982, p.81.

to new momentum for broadly linked negotiations throughout the region. Haig and Castaneda met again and according to the latter's own admission "some progress was made in identifying both sides' grievances and aspirations".¹³

Firmly committed to the newly announced Caribbean Basin Initiative of Reagan and to his administration's newly designed electoral strategy in place of negotiations in El Salvador, Washington succeeded in halting the dialogue. On 15 March Secretary Haig killed the diplomatic effort. The international success of the Salvadoran elections later that month reinforced the US decision to avoid negotiations. Although Mexico persisted in its efforts to arrange some form of dialogue throughout 1982, the Reagan administration made "no secret of its desire to eliminate Mexico as an intermediary in the region".¹⁴

The sense of independence and confidence infused by the increasing petroleum revenues began to collapse with falling oil prices in 1982. Mexico's assertive stance on Central America necessarily took a back seat as government attention focussed upon such emergency economic measures as monetary controls and the nationalization of the banks and

13 Jorge Castaneda, n.2, pp.83-84.

14 New York Times, 18 May 1982.

the IMF to rearrange its finances. There was a general perception that confrontation over Central America could be even counter-productive.¹⁵ Economic problems brought domestic opposition to Mexico's foreign policy into the open. Although there had been some quiet grumbling about Lopez-Portillo's activist role, public criticism of continued aid to the Sandinistas in light of Mexico's own financial troubles soon surfaced. The government treasury searching for every possible peso to resolve the country's immediate crisis, fought with the policy-makers over whether to demand a settling of petroleum accounts with Nicaragua.¹⁶

The upshot of all these was the heady days of oil-fueled activism had been replaced by caution, circumspection and a policy retreat. The strength of external and internal opposition to Central America policy was reflected in the subdued positions of president-elect Miguel de la Madrid during the 1982 campaign. reportedly unhappy with ties to Central American revolutionaries, disinterested in international relations, and wishing to distance himself from the policies of his predecessor, de la Madrid sought to shift the emphasis

15 Bruce Bagley, "Mexican Foreign Policy in the 1980s : A New Regional Power", Current History (November, 1981), pp.353-54.

16 Ibid.

in foreign policy. While Mexico would not retreat from its past goals of nonintervention and the insulation of its own polity from regional turmoil, the country was under siege and could no longer afford to stand alone against the United States. Be that as it may, it was precisely when Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama were waiting in the wings.

Venezuela and the Central American Crisis

Very much like that of Mexico, Venezuela too has had twin foreign policy preoccupations -- the defense of its sovereignty and the protection of its political stability. Separated from the events in Central America geographically speaking, threats to Venezuela's stability on account of events in Central America seemed remote. Given this lower level of threat, individual party interests have been able to dominate the making of foreign policy. In 1978, President Carlos Andres Perez -- of Accion Democratica (AD) -- coordinated an unprecedented arms operation that involved at least three countries in the sandinista effort to overthrow the US-backed Somoza dictatorship. A mere two years later, the Christian Democratic (COPEI) administration of Luis Herrera Campins threatened to withhold aid to the Sandinistas, while generously supporting the US-backed government in El Salvador.

By the election year of 1983, Venezuela switched.

Venezuelan leaders irrespective of their political affiliations have nevertheless viewed a politically disruptive Central American region as a security threat that could eventually endanger the stability of petroleum shipping lanes to the United States or even the country's democratic arrangements. This security emphasis, founded on fears of Cuban-inspired communism is something that Venezuela shared with the US for long. However, the 1973 oil price hike and the election of Carlos Andres Perez of Accion Democratica dramatically changed the context of Venezuelan foreign policy. The oil-fed expansion of the country's foreign policy horizons solidified the emphasis on the Caribbean basin while adding a new economic dimension. Convinced that this area represented Venezuela's natural sphere of influence and a trade outlet for domestic production, Perez established formal diplomatic relations with Cuba, worked with Omar Torrijos of Panama and Jimmy Carter for the approval of the Panama Canal treaties, promoted Belize in its claims against Guatemala, and helped to prevent a military coup against the incipient democracy in the Dominican Republic. In a creative display of oil diplomacy in 1974, he initiated the first programme of

subsidized oil for Central America and the Caribbean, later joined by Mexico in the San Jose Accord of 1980. Perez's personal intense political involvement won the gratitude of president Carter who, in his own pursuit of regional stability and human rights, referred to Perez as "my best friend in Latin America."¹⁷

Based upon Venezuela's own experience in defeating its former dictator Perez Jimenez, the Accion Democratica administration believed that Somoza's demise ought to be encouraged, since a long and brutal struggle could only produce radicalization and the defeat of democracy in Nicaragua. Venezuelan president Perez -- supported by his party, the government of Panama, and a network of Socialist International contacts -- committed his administration to substantial aid to the Sandinistas. By 1979, Venezuela was coordinating an unprecedented arms operation between three countries to overthrow Central America's most despised dictator. Without the knowledge of the Carter Administration, the governments of Venezuela and Panama mounted a campaign to supply the Sandinistas, using Costa Rican territory as a base. When Somoza threatened to bomb unarmed Costa Rica, Venezuela offered

17 Arturo Borju and Terry Karl, "La administracion Carter Y las relaciones Venezuela/Estado Unidos", in Carter Y America Latina (Mexico City, 1978).

to send in its own air force as a counterweight.¹⁸ In a quiet but all-out effort, Perez, Panama's president Omar Torrijos and Costa Rican president Rodrigo Carazo organized massive arms shipments to the rebels, eventually becoming their principal source of weapons in the crucial period before their victory. Venezuelan petro-dollars covered much of the cost of this unprecedented endeavour. Cuba also sent weapons and continued to supply the Sandinistas once Perez stepped down from the presidency in March 1979.

Venezuela's 1979 elections, held in the midst of rapidly spiraling events in Nicaragua, produced a victory for the Christian Democratic Party's Luis Herrera Campins and abrupt foreign policy changes. The change was felt immediately in Nicaragua. Upon taking office in March 1979, the new Venezuelan government attempted to construct a non-Sandinista opposition by specifically tying aid to the fate of its Christian Democratic counterparts. When Mexico, the Andean countries, Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic sent their congratulations to the Sandinista victors, Herrera Campins greeted the revolutionary government with suspicion. Venezuela pressured for early elections, reportedly delayed aid payments as a means of obliging the

18 New York Times, 19 July 1979.

Nicaraguans to bring a moderate Christian Democrat into the governing junta, conditioned oil grants upon the political behaviour of the Managua regime, and finally stopped supplying petroleum altogether. The pressure was necessary, a former Venezuelan ambassador to Nicaragua explained: "We should make them democrats. We should nail the democratic masks to their faces".¹⁹

The new Venezuelan government adopted a twofold strategy to achieve its own version of democratization. On the one hand, it sought to use economic aid to maintain its influence and prevent the isolation that had previously pushed Cuba into the Soviet camp, generously providing approximately \$ 150 million in credits and donations in the first two years of the junta's existence. On the other hand, it attempted to support the forces inside Nicaragua that it considered to be the "institutionalization of liberty" -- the Catholic church, the private-sector association (COSEP), certain political parties and the La Prensa press group.

Venezuela's policy toward El Salvador demonstrated still greater tensions between the principle of nonintervention

19 "Nicaragua : Strings and Arrows", Latin American Political Report (17 August 1979), p.232.

and Christian Democratic concepts of exporting democracy. In 1980, when the Christian Democratic Party of El Salvador was widely criticized for breaking with other opposition parties to form a shaky alliance with the military, the Venezuelan government rapidly came to the aid of its fellow Christian Democratic Party. The strong personal tie between President Herrera Campins and Jose Napoleon Duarte was fundamental. "I would do anything for him", Duarte once explained. "If he had asked me to meet with the guerrillas I would have done it."²⁰ The Venezuelan administration linked its foreign policy directly to the fortunes of the Salvadoran party leader. Venezuelan aid to El Salvador was substantial. The Herrera government gave generous grants, a hydroelectric plant, and outright cash payments. Caracas was also forthcoming in its diplomatic support. In the tense days following the death of four US religious workers, Venezuela helped to negotiate a political compromise between the armed forces and Duarte's wing of the Christian Democratic Party in El Salvador that could satisfy US requirements for continued aid. In mid-1981, the Herrera Campins administration took the lead in denouncing the French-Mexican agreement by refusing to buy French Mirage jets, threatening to suspend all commercial

20 Terry Karl, "After La Palma : The Prospects for Democracy in El Salvador", World Policy (Winter, 1985) pp.305-60.

links with France, and mounting a Latin American campaign largely aimed at Mexico to defeat the endeavour.

Using both direct governmental relations and indirect party links, the Venezuelan Christian Democrats, became involved in covert military and intelligence activities in El Salvador -- often working in tandem with the United States. These covert activities in the name of democratic promotion pulled Venezuela deeply into Salvadoran affairs, just as they had in Nicaragua. Venezuela trained Salvadoran soldiers in counterinsurgency, an activity which the Herrera government officially denied.²¹ It helped to improve the Salvadoran intelligence system, whenever possible channelling its aid through Duarte in an attempt to enhance his precarious position vis-a-vis the armed forces. Also, Venezuela established the Institute for Popular Education (IVEPO) which did campaign work for Napoleon Duarte without charge, produced television and radio advertisements on his behalf, and conducted political polls.

Venezuela's involvement in Salvadoran politics was largely welcomed by the United States, since it coincided

21 "Enders Puts Venezuela on the spot over El Salvador",
Latin American Weekly Report (4 February 1983), p.1.

with the views of the Reagan administration, but there was a moment of policy divergence in early 1981. When the Reagan administration first took office, it appeared to abandon the partnership that Carter officials had carefully constructed with Salvadoran Christian Democrats for a support to Roberto D'Aubuisson. In February, as the Reagan team talked openly of war and an alliance with the ultra-right forces in El Salvador, the Venezuelan government made an abrupt change and made its first policy approach to Mexico. Mexico and Venezuela mutually agreed to support non-intervention in Nicaragua and a political settlement in El Salvador, the compromise that formed the eventual basis of the Contadora agreement.²²

Reactions of Panama and Colombia

The growing threat of a regional war and the implications it had on the domestic and external political problems of Panama and Colombia led these countries too join in unison with Mexico and Venezuela to seek peaceful resolution to the evolving crisis in Central America. For Colombia, faced, as it had been, with a domestic political crisis largely on account

22 "Coming Down on Both Sides of Diplomatic Fence",
Latin America Weekly Report (29 May 1981).

of a strong internal guerrilla movement, any negotiated settlement between the warring factions in Central America would open up possibilities for and facilitate a national reconciliation effort within its own borders. The frequent offensives of M-19 especially since the election of Belisario Betancur had almost created a civil war situation in Colombia making it imperative for his government to seek a cease-fire agreement with the guerrilla movement.

In addition to these domestic compulsions, there was yet another factor that led Colombia to join hands with Mexico and Venezuela in their initiative regarding the Central American crisis. That related to Colombia's role in the so-called South Atlantic War between Britain and Argentina on the question of Malvinas/Falklands. Whereas most Latin American countries had taken a unified stand supporting Argentina in its conflict with Britain over the future of those islands, it was Colombia which took an isolationist position neither condemning Britain nor supporting Argentina. Consequently, Colombia's failure to support Argentina led Betancour's government take a positive initiative on the Central American crisis in which again most Latin American countries shared a common concern especially regarding US military interventionist posture in the region. So, when Mexico and Venezuela openly offered their good offices to

help bring peace in Central America, Colombia readily expressed its solidarity with these countries for a negotiated settlement.²³

If immediate domestic and external imperatives led Colombia to join Mexico and Venezuela in the Contadora move, Panama's interest in the regional initiative has a long history dating back to the administration of Omar Torrijos in that country. In sharp contrast to the previous Panamanian governments, it was Torrijos who initiated a period of open neutrality in Panama's foreign policy. In the process, Panama made a departure from its previous governments' more passive support to the US. Torrijos' consistent support to Cuba and for Third World positions in multilateral organizations gained for Panama sufficient reputation in the international arena to allow it to play important roles on issues beyond the Panama Canal in the Central American region.

It is this independence of action that led Torrijos to extend direct support to the Sandinistas with arms, munition and transportation during their insurrection. In

23 For a detailed analysis of Colombia's interests in joining the Contadora peace initiative see Bruce Bagley, Regional Powers in the Caribbean Basin: Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia (Washington D.C., Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

this effort, he co-ordinated frequently activities with Venezuela, Costa Rica, Colombia and Mexico. However, this policy of independence from the US since the demise of Torrijos had somewhat been threatened by an apparent and growing fear of the Sandinista government. So much so, in 1983, Panama went as far as threatening to break diplomatic relations with Nicaragua and Cuba if they would not "moderate their activities in the region". And once General Manuel Antonio Noriega began asserting himself in Panamanian politics, he went further to renew an earlier alliance of coordinating military activities of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Panama under the US-sponsored Central American Defense Council (CONDECA).²⁴ Such a reorientation in terms of Panama's relations with the US, although offered General Noriega the much-needed military assistance, however, was shortlived when the country's military was reorganised into a "Defense Force" under US prodding. For, 'nationalist' elements both within the military and the civil society of Panama feared that the growing militarisation and aggressive regional military stance of their country would lead the country into a Spanish Civil War situation in the Central

24 James Aparicio, "El CONDECA", Dialogo Social (February, 1984), pp.50-51.

American crisis. Consequently, the rifts between the "nationalist" and the hard-core elements within the military led the policy-makers to revert back to the Torrijos' tradition of neutrality and a policy of independence from the United States. Above all, with a view to achieve the orderly transfer of Canal at the end of 1999 when the Carter-Torrijos Panama Canal Treaty would expire, the 'nationalist' strongly felt that a multilateral effort with the support of the Latin American countries is more welcome than a closer identification with the US at this juncture. It is with these considerations, Panama too joined Mexico and Venezuela in their cause of seeking a negotiated settlement on the Central American crisis.

The slow convergence of the foreign policies of the countries -- Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama came to fruition on the island of Contadora in January 1983. Primarily, in their view, their effort should be one of "intensifying dialogue on the Latin American level" in order to "reduce tensions and establish the bases for a lasting climate of peaceful co-existence and national respect between countries".²⁵ They merely hoped that an independent all-Latin American diplomatic initiative could provide an impartial forum for conflict resolution.

25 Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores de Mexico,
"Documentos Relacionados con la Gestion del Grupo
Contadora", (Mexico City, September 1983), p.2.

Chapter - IV

CONTADORA AND THE SEARCH FOR PEACE

The threat of a widespread regional war and direct military intervention by the United States becoming imminent, Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela although not directly involved in the conflict held a meeting of their foreign ministers in January 1983 in Contadora, one of the Pearl Islands in the Gulf of Panama. The meeting called upon all nations involved in the Central American crisis to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict through multi-lateral negotiations. Thus Contadora became a political instrument based on a process of consultation which would lead to the creation of peaceful conditions into the region. In this chapter an attempt is made to describe the different stages through which the process of consultation took place among the four countries and underline the important provisions of the Contadora peace proposals. Also, an attempt is made here to survey the responses and reactions of the US to the Contadora initiative.

The Contadora Processes

Following the first meeting of foreign ministers of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela in January 1983, in April they called on the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador,

Honduras, Guatemala and the Coordinator of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and proposed for "the withdrawal of all military advisers as a first step towards the re-establishment of peace in Central America".¹

On 16-17 June, the presidents of the Contadora countries met this time in Cancun, Mexico. The reasons for that historic meeting were just cause for alarm. The Contadora group warned that as the conflict in Central America expands there is likely to be greater military escalation and border tension. But, even more important in their view, was the increasing militarisation of the Central American countries. The meeting admittedly was a step forward for, it led to the first synthesis of agreements, the Document of Objectives issued on 9 September 1983. The document known as the "Cancun Declaration", divided into two parts -- a preamble of considerations and a list of twenty-one objectives -- called for the initiation of bilateral as well as regional negotiations among all the Central American countries.

The basis of such negotiations the Document stated should be on the following eight point agenda: 1) putting an end to all conditions of existing hostilities; 2) maintaining

1 Latin America Weekly Report, 2 May 1983.

the existing levels of arms, 3) initiating negotiations on how to control and reduce the actual inventory of armaments by evolving adequate mechanisms of supervision, 4) proscribing the existence of foreign military installations, 5) carrying out, as the case may be, joint border patrolling or international supervision of borders, 6) establishing internal mechanisms for controlling arms transfer from one country to another, 7) promoting climate of detente in the region thereby desisting from making declarations or indulging in actions that might endanger the essential climate of political confidence, and 8) coordinating the system of direct communication among various governments in order to prevent armed conflicts.²

In terms of negotiations, the "Cancun Document" considered the most important task as that of establishing suitable mechanisms for the implementation and control of agreements. Urged by the Contadora group, the Central American foreign ministers accepted in January 1984, the "Norms for the Fulfillment of the Commitments" contained in the Documents of Objectives.

From January to April 1984, the peace effort was particularly intense. Three commissions were set up to

2 Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores de Mexico, "Documents relacionadas con la Gestion del Grupo Contadora", (Mexico City, September 1983).

discuss political, security, economic and social matters. The group of negotiators which had started with four Contadora foreign ministers was expanded to more than hundred persons during that period. On several occasions, emphasis was placed on the fact that commitments should be based on agreements that are known and endorsed by the people of respective countries. In addition, the advisability of directing the tasks towards the drafting of a genuine and legally binding international treaty became apparent.

To complement such activities, the Contadora Group began promoting economic support for Central America. In March 1984, the Action Committee to support Economic and Social Development in Central America (CADESCA) was established and its Constitutive Act was signed in Panama by 17 member nations of the Latin American Economic System (SELA).

Contadora's work on its first comprehensive project, which is known as the Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America, was completed in June 1984. This document was prepared with respect to the commitments and recommendations adopted by consensus in the group's working commissions. In cases where no agreement had been reached, the draft sought to reconcile the various criteria.

A special effort was made to express in the agreement the diversity and complexity of the matters under consideration. Also in June 1984, the Contadora Group's foreign relations ministers submitted the act to the governments of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama. Contadora's mediating role was beginning to take shape and to acquire increasing significance.

During the month of August, the observations and suggestions made by the Central American countries were carefully and jointly examined, and a revised version was submitted on September 7. Initial reaction to the new document was favourable and positive. This was no coincidence, as the document embodied the delicate balance of positions achieved in extensive consultations with the Central American governments. Contadora's Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America contains legal principles and norms, as well as specific commitments, regarding conditions in the Central American isthmus.

This document offers a precise guide to an understanding of the problems in Central America, as well as a valuable instrument for peacefully settling differences between countries lacking economic, political or military power. No one, not even the most optimistic, ever expected the regional crisis to be solved simply by the signing of this document; it is

nevertheless true that acceptance of the act is indispensable to overcoming the crisis.

It was, however, necessary to continue negotiations as late as September 1984. When Nicaragua announced that it would sign the act, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras decided to retract their decision to sign the document, explaining that changes needed to be made in the original text in order to make it more specific on certain issues.

The foreign affairs ministers of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras met in Tegucigalpa, and on 20 October, 1984, they issued a document requesting several modifications. They insisted that it was not a case of adding new commitments; rather, the modifications were an improvement of those included in the act, and an assurance of simultaneous compliance and reciprocity by all.

Several parallel actions and efforts were carried out during the second half of 1984 to remove obstacles. There were also some political endeavours complementary to the diplomatic negotiations. Specifically, Mexico expressed its conviction that direct communication between the United States and Nicaragua should be encouraged. It was thought essential to establish a general dialogue, so as to find a way to decrease military escalation, reduce conflict pressures and

generally make it possible to achieve peace in the region.

The governments of the United States and Nicaragua held a total of nine meetings between June and December 1984. Nicaragua stated that US proposals were leading to the suppression of their revolutionary project; the United States indicated that the Sandinista proposals did not provide sufficient guarantees to US national security. Mexico insisted that it was necessary to initiate genuine negotiations. However, the dialogue was suspended by the US government at the beginning of 1985.

At the same time, there were contacts between the government of El Salvador and representatives of both the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front and the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FMLN-FDR) to examine the possibility of a negotiated solution to the conflict. The tenets of the Franco-Mexican declaration of 1982 were needed, although without explicit acknowledgement of this fact. The first meeting was held on 15 October 1984, in the village of La Palma; the parties met again on 30 November, in the village of Ayagualo. The insurgents submitted a document that proposed a halt to hostilities and the participation of both fronts in the country's government and armed forces. Salvadoran president Jose Napoleon Duarte rejected the proposals, indicating that they were a threat to the legitimacy of his

government. He urged these revolutionary organizations to lay down their arms and to join the electoral process through organized political participation.

US Responses and Relations

The Reagan administration, seemingly unaware that its own actions did more to promote collective action of the Contadora group than any other factor, greeted the regional diplomatic initiative with quiet hostility. Angry at the Contadora countries' exclusion of the United States, the administration unsuccessfully sought to prevent any form of independent multilateral activity on the part of regional actors by launching its own Forum for Peace and Democracy. Ostensibly promoted by Honduras and Costa Rica to unite the democratically elected governments in the area, this so-called Enders Forum was widely viewed as a US ploy to isolate Nicaragua and block the first successful united efforts of Mexico and Venezuela. When it received little regional support, it was ultimately abandoned.⁴ After the announcement of the formation of Contadora, the Reagan administration insisted that all discussion regarding Central America take

4 New York Times, 16 April 1983.

place in the Organization of American States (OAS), where it could influence outcomes directly, but this effort also ultimately failed.⁵

The US government consistently undermined the intent of regional diplomacy despite public statements to the contrary.⁶ The overall thrust of US policy promoted militarization, which ran counter to the Contadora proposals. Immediately following the formation of Contadora in January 1983, with its publicly proclaimed platform of non-intervention and disarmament, the United States initiated the Big Pine I exercises in Honduras which brought the first mass landing of US troops to the area. In July, when the presidents of Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia met in Cancun to call for a prohibition on the installation of foreign bases in the region, the Reagan administration began the construction of eight bases in Honduras and launched five thousand new US troops into that country through Big Pine II. In September 1983, when the twenty-one-point Contadora

5 Most Latin American countries took the view that since Cuba was not a member of the OAS and Nicaragua had no competence in the forum, the OAS can not be the appropriate organisation to discuss the Central American situation.

6 US State Department, Bulletin, 19 April 1983.

peace plan was made public explicitly calling for a policy of non-aggression in the region and the rejection of force in international relations, the Reagan administration attempted to revitalize CONDECA, a Central American military alliance. In October, it invaded Grenada.⁷

By 1984, the subversion of the regional peace effort by the Reagan administration was even more direct. The United States strongly pressured Mexico to lower its profile. A National Security Council memo warned Mexico that future economic aid from the United States could be contingent upon the country's support of US policies in Central America. In a speech that deeply disturbed Mexico, US General Paul Gorman declared that Mexico itself, with its unacceptable foreign policy position, was perhaps the greatest single threat to US security interests. While Mexico received the brunt of US displeasure, Panama, Costa Rica, Spain, and even Honduras also reported pressures.⁸

Finally, the Reagan administration tried to scuttle the Contadora effort at the very moment when successful peace

⁷ For a background study on US invasion of Grenada see David E. Lewis, Reform and Revolution in Grenada (Havana, Casa de las Americas, 1984), Gordon Connell-Smith, "Grenada Invasion in Historical Perspective: From Monroe to Reagan", Third World Quarterly (April 1984), pp.432-45 and Maurice Waters, "Invasion of Grenada 1983", Journal Peace Research (September, 1984) pp.227-46.

⁸ Susan Kaufman Purcall, "Demystifying Contadora", Foreign Affairs (Fall 1985), pp.74-95.

negotiations seemed imminent. In September 1984, the Nicaraguan government unexpectedly announced its unconditional acceptance of a Contadora draft treaty. The treaty included provisions for amnesty for political dissidents, impartial elections under international auspices and the termination of support for groups fighting to overthrow Central American governments -- the key demands raised by the Reagan administration to justify its efforts to dislodge the Sandinista regime.⁹ Stunned by Nicaragua's actions and unwilling to negotiate, the Reagan administration encouraged its Central American allies to block progress on accommodation. Although a consensus to accept the treaty previously had been reached among all five Central American countries, US pressure led to new objections from Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica regarding the timing for the withdrawal of foreign military advisers, the closing of military bases, arms and troop reductions, the verification process and the signing of a protocol.¹⁰ This ended the diplomatic momentum until April 1985. A background paper to the National Security Council later boasted: "we have effectively blocked Contadora group efforts to impose a second draft of a revised Contadora

9 New York Times, 23 September 1984.

10 Ibid, 9 November 1984.

Act."¹¹

Notwithstanding US opposition, the results of collective regional action to date have been impressive, even if they fall short of a peace. The Contadora countries have succeeded in capturing the moral high ground by becoming the symbol of a negotiated settlement to the Central American conflict. Their stance for peace, neutrality, and the rule of law has enabled them to win widespread international support for non-intervention and negotiations.¹² International support highlights the advantages of collective action. Mexico and Venezuela, working with Panama and Colombia, have been able to bring together two strong transnational networks that had previously been deeply divided in Central America : the Socialist International and the International Christian Democratic Movement. Through their links with these different party forces, deeply at odds in Central America, they have encouraged consensus building as well as a greater level of European pressure on the United States for a political solution than might otherwise have existed among NATO allies.¹³

11 "Contadora : A Text for Peace", International Policy Report (Washington D.C.) November 1984, p.15.

12 Washington Post, 6 November 1984.

13 Nadia Malley, "Nicaraguan Relations with Western Europe and the Socialist International", Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science (Washington D.C., 1984), pp.202-217.

International support has spread the risk of confrontation with the US helping thereby regional actors to sustain a consistent long-term presence while dedicating considerable resources to peace.

More important, Contadora succeeded in influencing the US Congressional debate over foreign policy in Central America. This is especially evident in the controversial votes in the House of Representatives over US aid to the contras. In 1985, one of the compromise bills presented by House Democrats in an attempt to block the Reagan's request for \$ 14 million for the contras proposed that these same monies be allocated to the Contadora group instead. By 1986, Contadora had become, in the view of US Congress the only viable alternative to administration policy in Central America. The new surge of interest in the regional peace initiative was not surprising. In late 1985, four Latin American countries -- Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay -- formed a "support group" for their four original counterparts, giving the multilateral peace effort a badly needed shot in the arm. For the first time, these eight countries took a tough public stand : they explicitly stated their opposition to US aid to the contras, asked the administration to set aside its militaristic emphasis and called for the resumption of bilateral talks between Nicaragua

and the United States. Thus, by the spring 1986 Congressional vote over aid to the contras, the debate had been framed by two sharply opposing alternatives : the contras or Contadora.¹⁴

Salient Aspects of the Contadora Plan

Exactly a year after the conception of the Contadora initiative, a 21-point Peace Plan was made public by the Contadora nations which included political security and socioeconomic measures for achieving regional peace and prosperity.

Politically, the Peace Plan sought promoting national reconciliation on the basis of justice, liberty and democracy thereby creating the mechanisms for regional dialogue. It also called for guaranteeing full respect for human rights and compliance with international juridical obligations. Fixing electoral schedules and adopting measures for guaranteeing full participation of all political parties in the electoral process, were also some of the other priorities of the Contadora Peace Plan.

For regional security, the plan envisaged some very concrete measures including elaboration of an inventory on

14 "Contadora Group Calls for Peace", Central America Bulletin, 8 September 1985.

military installations, armaments and armed forces for each one of the Central American nations, so as to establish criteria for controlling the same and achieve a reasonable equilibrium of forces in the region. Besides, it called for the preparation of a list of the number of foreign military advisers and other elements participating in the military activities in all the countries and fixed a time-table for their eventual withdrawal. The eradication of irregular groups or forces that participate in the destabilising acts against other governments using the territories of a Central American nation as well as the location of areas, routes and methods used for illegal arms traffic, in the region, with a view to eliminate them, were importantly the other objectives of the 21-point Peace Plan.

The socioeconomic measures to revitalise the Central American economies as contemplated by the Contadora Peace Plan included the obtaining of external resources to invigorate the Central American integration process, establishing intra-regional commerce, promoting greater access to their products to international markets, and implanting just social and economic structures to consolidate the region's economy.¹⁵

The Contadora treaty contained specific provisions for regional security, disarmament, and democratization -- the

15 See n.2. Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores de Mexico.

underlying issues of the Central American conflict. In the elaboration of this treaty, the disparate and sometimes conflicting interests of neighbouring countries that proved to be a disadvantage when acting alone have become an advantage in multilateral activity. Intense negotiations have succeeded in defining the inevitable trade-offs necessary for conflict resolution. Carrying domestic practices of bargaining and pact-making to the international arena, each nation has been able to deliver a different trusted constituency to the bargaining table -- i.e., Mexico with Nicaragua and Venezuela with El Salvador -- and therefore forge some form of compromise, while guaranteeing the compliance of their "special" ally.

The first successful breakthrough, an implicit agreement to defend the sovereignty of Nicaragua, was adopted during the July 1983 meeting in Cancun. This took the form of a commitment to non-intervention and the sovereign equality of states, in exchange for an agreement to keep the Soviet Union out of the isthmus while stopping armed subversion against existing governments. In principle, all Central American countries agreed to the creation of demilitarized zones, the elimination of foreign advisers, arms control, the proscription from using the territory of one state to destabilize another, the eradication of arms trafficking,

and the prohibition of any interference in the affairs of another country. These treaty obligations would not only guarantee the survival of the Sandinista regime through provisions that would terminate contra activity but lead to the withdrawal of US bases in Honduras. In return, Nicaragua's ability to aid the FDR-FMLN against El Salvador's government or to forge military alliances with the Socialist bloc would be clearly curtailed.

The second major achievement, accomplished in the September 1983 Declaration of Objectives, involved the recognition of democracy as a preferential type of political regime for Central America. Although Mexico, Nicaragua, and Guatemala considered a democracy clause to be interference in internal matters and therefore contrary to the Contadora mandate of non-intervention, the insistence of Venezuela, Colombia, and Costa Rica and persistent pressure from the United States led them to concede ground.

The most important accomplishment of the Contadora initiative came in July 1984. In a departure from the past, Contadora announced that it would address "national reconciliation" within countries suffering from internal strife as well as government-to-government relations in Central America. Previously the group's initiative had been directed at

Nicaragua and had ignored El Salvador, in recognition of the overwhelming role of the United States. Realizing that a settlement in El Salvador was a requirement for any viable regional peace, it abandoned its "hands-off" policy and publicly offered to help negotiations in El Salvador. Since this had been the position of Mexico and Venezuela the statement underlining the renewal of negotiations in El Salvador represented a diplomatic victory for these countries.

Above all, the final package of agreements, presented an important set of trade-offs: In exchange for disabusing US fears of Soviet bases or external armed subversion by circumscribing the traditional sovereignty of Central American states to choose their own foreign alliances, the United States and its allies, the Contadora plan proposed, would agree to refrain from destabilizing the Nicaraguan (or any other) Central American regime and to withdraw its military presence. The provisions to implement this trade-off was to be subject to verification by neutral parties to ensure long-term compliance.

In the process, the Contadora countries have played a qualitatively new role in Central America. They have demonstrated a surprising degree of political initiative, an ability to define a new agenda for the region and a capacity

to work together in a forum of their own creation. While Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama initially became involved in Central America for different reasons, ranging from personal friendships, economic interest, oil exuberance, party loyalties, or fears about their own internal peace, they have each sustained their efforts due to a common concern namely, their common belief that peace in Central America is vital to their national interests and that they must help bring about a political solution because the alternative, a potentially uncontrolled and uncontrollable regional war, threatened their influence in the area.

In a sense, it may even be argued that the convergence of the foreign policies of four countries into the Contadora initiative was largely the unintended consequence of the threatening behaviour of the Reagan administration in Central America. As the experiences of Mexico and Venezuela demonstrated, the United States created the overall incentive to engage in multilateral activity -- even among countries with different foreign policies -- as a means of containing the continent's dominant power. While the wisdom of international relations generally dismisses the ability of small states to "contain" larger powers through united action, Contadora's actions are part of a long, Latin American tradition of overcoming differences in bilateral relations

by joining forces and seeking to force the United States into multilateral treaty obligations.¹⁶ Admittedly the Contadora countries have constructed a tight and intricate web of political relations that maintains and legitimates the choice of a peaceful resolution of conflict while also raising the political costs of direct military intervention to the United States.

16 Viron P.Vaky, "Reagan's Central American Policy : An Isthmus Restored", in Central America : Anatomy of a Conflict, ed., R.Leiken (New York, Pergamon Press, 1984), pp.232-57.

Chapter - V

CONCLUSION

The major focus of the monograph has been to analyse the nature, origins and factors and their relationships of the present Central American crisis. To the extent possible, the two major hypotheses -- one, attributing the current regional crisis in Central America to the historic consequence of the backwardness, political intrasigence and repression experienced by the countries of the region since their independence and, the other of relating it within the general framework of Super Power confrontation -- have also been modestly examined. It is against these analyses in this concluding Chapter an attempt is made to examine critically the efficacy of the Contadora peace initiative and, to the extent possible, identify the principal obstacles which impede Contadora's search for a negotiated peace settlement in Central America.

Looked at in either way, the fundamental expressions of the on-going historic struggle for power in the Central American region seem to be, fatally though, one of revolution and counter-revolution. Whereas in the past the revolutionary forces have remained dormant or have consistently been demented, the advent of the Sandinista movement with the fall of the Somazo regime in Nicaragua has turned the basic socio-economic conflict into a regional one transcending the political

boundaries of the nation-states of Central America. However, this phenomenon is not, as is often suggested, due to a revolutionary epidemic or to an "exported" revolution but rather to the fear, irritation and sudden awakening of the traditional status quo powers. The counter-revolutionary reaction is pronounced today, more than before, because in the political history of Central America -- from colonial times to the present -- no organised and well-defined force had succeeded so violently and triumphantly in overthrowing a well-entrenched regime such as the Somoza regime has been overthrown by Sandinista movement.

So much so, in Central America, the Sandinista revolution is regarded either as a disaster or, perhaps, the real alternative. So the reactions to the success of the sandinistas have been two-fold: one, spearheaded by the defenders of status quo who have attempted to regionalise the conflict for the defence of specific political and economic interests; and the other, the opponents of status quo fully identifying with the historic justice having committed themselves to fight irreconcilably. Thus none of the two groups can be accused of lacking basic autonomy. None of them, by the same logic are motivated to obey the dictates of a foreign power, no matter how subordinate the the relationship that each group maintains with any foreign power.

The issue of the role of foreign powers immediately poses a variety of questions : are the two Super Powers with their proxies really intervening in the Central American conflict? Is the struggle for regional power a matter of special concern to the bi-polar balance? Do the Super Powers have, in essence, anything to lose or gain in Central America?

The respective roles of the two Super Powers in Central America can by no means be compared. Lack of political historical ties alongwith the distance of Central America from the Soviet Union makes it an area of costly risks as Cuba's case has already shown. Again, the Central American revolutionaries, the so-called proxies of the Soviet Union, as perceived and projected by the United States, are national forces who are struggling with indisputable conviction for such objectives as self-determination and redistribution of economic power. No matter how much they would seek support from a foreign power, including Cuba, they do so in order to strengthen their own struggle rather than surrender abjectly to the foreign power. Therefore, the problem consists of recognising that no matter how great the volume of Soviet and Cuban presence in Central America, it does not influence the actions and aspirations of the revolutionary forces decisively. The role of Cuba and the

Soviet Union must be regarded as real but in all cases only marginal. Neither, power will automatically belong to the Soviet Union if the revolutionaries win nor, if the revolutionaries were defeated, the Soviet Union would mark it as a loss on its own strategic scoreboard.

On the other hand, for the United States, the Central American backyard is an issue that involves its power and hegemony. Whether or not, the Soviet Union is the cause of the conflict, the result would be the same. The overthrow or restructuring of regimes allied to it in favour of greater political autonomy and new economic and social forms in the countries of the region is undoubtedly considered as a threat to the traditional forms of US hegemonic presumption in Latin America. Therefore, it is logical to expect the US to do everything in its power to prevent the emergence of new poles of power in Central America.

What emerges of the above analysis is that there are three different dimensions to the Central American crisis : one, the social-historical dimension underlining the savage struggle for power based on the historical events of the region; two, the regional dimension involving the original conflict becoming region-wide and which, among other manifestations, appears in the form of confrontations and disputes among the nation-states of the region; and the

third, the geopolitical dimension emanating from the commitments and strategic interests of the United States.

Any analysis in terms of success or otherwise of a negotiated settlement of the crisis in the region which is what Contadora purports to achieve will have to take into consideration all the three dimensions. It is apparent that the principal obstacle to any peace initiative including the Contadora is the lack of interest, purpose and will of the US to negotiate its participation in the conflict. Without a US presence no initiative for a dialogue would be productive or purposive. US power is what is needed to open up the political and diplomatic channels which are blocked today by its military presence.

What is more complicating the Contadora process is US persistence in regarding the Central American conflict as an East-West scenario. This decreases, and even nullifies, the political importance of the Contadora. At best, the United States is willing to regard Contadora as a goodwill diplomatic exercise, however flawed, because it excludes the premise of a Soviet strategy in the area. That was the fundamental premise on which the bi-partisan Kissinger Commission argued when it stated that a material and tangible threat against US national interest backed by Soviet intervention is evident in Central America at the very

time when the Contadora countries initiated their peace process. It is however clear that the myth of Soviet influence as an intolerable threat and cause of instability is only an ideological label to justify the reaffirmation of US hegemony. For the Contadora to become effective, basically what it calls for is a willingness and desire on the part of the US to redefine its national security interests vis-a-vis Central America. Such a definition needs to be necessarily divorced from its long-cherished hegemonial interest.

Be that as it may, the positive features of the Contadora initiative are the basic political premises on which it is seeking a negotiated settlement in the region. They are: (a) from a global perspective, the Contadora has characterised very realistically the conflict as an issue divorced from any East-West confrontation. It perceives the crisis as the inevitable result of the profound economic and political under-development of the region and also, arising from an existing social and political struggle to achieve the transformation of old structures. The most important and distinctive feature of the Contadora is, for the first time, the four regional countries -- Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela -- are proposing a genuine

Latin American solution to these problems. This explains the massive support given to the Contadora by the international community. (b) The Contadora bases its negotiations on the supposition that all regional actors in the conflict are, in principle, independent autonomous entities acting for their own interests and not at the behest of external forces, be it the United States or the Soviet Union and/or Cuba. and (c) as a mediating mechanism, Contadora has been committed to seek agreement of the governments of the Central America region to resolve their disputes around the negotiating table and abstain from aggression against the sovereignty of others. The search by Contadora for concrete non-aggression agreements and its strivings for disarmament constitute a truce that could prevent the war from escalating.

Given the self-imposed limits of the Contadora, the principal obstacle it faces is the lack of willingness on the part of the Central American countries to commit themselves to the truce proposed by the Contadora. Thus it is clear that as long as the forces against insurgency and aligned with the United States do not regard the Contadora's efforts as promising specific advantages to their objective, they are unlikely to commit themselves sincerely to its overtures. Rather, as they are doing now, they will continue to impede its progress by means of all types of dilatory tactics and delay the process of peace in the region.

Despite these difficulties and obstacles, the Contadora continues to be the best instrument to bring about a truly significant process of peace. If its present efforts culminate in a formal pact or, at least a substantial commitment, there would be a legal and internationally recognised frame of reference in which the role of the various actors in the conflict can be assessed. At the same time, the Latin American multilateral example would lend it prestige and allow it to attempt negotiated effort in the area of social conflict. To date, the efforts of the Contadora are moving painfully through their different stages and, although there are still many difficulties, the road travelled so far constitutes a degree of progress not to be disdained.

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