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SOVIET STRATEGY IN THE THIRD WORLD AND NICARAGUA

Alex Alexiev

The Reagan Administration's reaction to the deepening crises in Central America has come under heavy attack from a variety of critics, questioning the rationale and tactics of American policies in the area. The present polemics increasingly resemble the divisive Vietnam era debate and reflect two fundamentally different attitudes on American national security interests and responsibilities in an increasingly unstable world. The Administration's declared determination to prevent the further spread of Marxist regimes in Central America has been interpreted by its liberal and leftist detractors as another example of unwarranted overreaction by a myopic superpower unable to understand or tolerate the legitimate political aspirations of aggrieved peoples. In the process of castigating Washington's objectives and methods the critics have again resurrected some of the most enduring liberal myths regarding Communist-sponsored revolutionary movements in the Third World.

Most prominent among them is the notion that such movements are led by genuine revolutionary nationalists of democratic propensities and honorable intentions, who, however, are even forced into Moscow's embrace by American hostility and intransigence. Based on this interpretation any U.S. involvement--and particularly a military one--is deemed counterproductive, immoral, and threatening to draw the country into another Vietnam-like debacle.

Such views have become characteristic of a wide spectrum of public opinion ranging from liberal legislators and responsible national media to the radical left. For example, a group led on a fact-finding mission

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by former Attorney General Ramsey Clark--a veteran apologist of repressive regimes as long as they are of the anti-American variety--after spending three days in the country denied any Communist influence on the Sandinistas and found them to be Marxists who "believe in democratic processes" and are, therefore, capable of "evolving into Social Democrats." The New York Times, in a spate of recent articles sympathetic to the Nicaraguan revolutionaries, has sought to portray them as dedicated to human rights and democratic values and implicitly justified the militarization of the country as a response to U.S. hostility and policies "grounded in ideology." In much the same vein it has described the Democratic Revolutionary Front of El Salvador, the political organ of the guerrilla insurgency, as ranging from liberal priests and dissident Christian Democrats to Trotskyists--implying a popular political base while crediting the Marxist guerrilla groups themselves with "anti-Soviet origins," an approach much reminiscent of the Times' unabashed glorification of Fidel Castro as the selfless champion of the downtrodden during the early phase of the Fidelistas' takeover. Even responsible political figures who can hardly be said to favor Marxist rule in Central America increasingly appear to subscribe to this myth. Thus, Republican Senator Hatfield of Oregon, along with several Democratic legislators, has sponsored legislation that would cut off military aid to El Salvador and restrict other assistance with the declared objective of avoiding unnecessary bloodshed and preventing "handing El Salvador over to Fidel Castro."

Such glaring misperceptions of the political upheavals in Central America are conditioned by the liberal world view of many of those that harbor them, and therefore remain largely immune to a dispassionate consideration of the facts. Their stubborn persistence and continued popularity

among some influential circles, however, can gravely undermine American national interests in the area and, more importantly, the intrinsic interests of the Central American peoples themselves. For the strife in Nicaragua, though originating in legitimate grievances against the oppressive Somoza regime, has long ceased to be a strictly internal or even a regional affair and has become, along with El Salvador, a part of a new Soviet offensive against the West in the Third World.

Moscow's New Strategy

The Soviet Union first became interested in the so-called Third World countries in the mid-1950s under Khrushchev. Many of the newly-emancipated former colonies harbored strong anti-Western feelings, and Khrushchev saw in them potential allies and began to actively cultivate them. Moscow's hopes at the time centered on self-proclaimed progressives and would-be socialist leaders of these countries who were anti-Western and were expected to lead their nations to Soviet-style "scientific" socialism by way of a "peaceful transition." To facilitate this transition the Soviets were willing to provide considerable amounts of military and economic aid, yet by the end of the early '70s, these tactics had proved largely unsuccessful. Soviet proteges had been overthrown in a number of once promising countries such as Indonesia, Ghana, Mali, and sizeable Soviet economic and military investments had failed to bring about the desired political gains. The failure of these Soviet policies was confirmed dramatically by the sudden expulsion of the Soviets from Egypt in 1972-- a country which for years had been the showcase of Soviet influence and the recipient of huge sums of military and economic aid. Following the Egyptian fiasco a major reorientation of Soviet Third World policy

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occurred and a new strategy was formulated, designed to avoid the pitfalls of the past and reflect Moscow's growing global assertiveness. This shift took place in a period marked by significant changes in the international balance of power. By the mid-1970s the Soviet Union had achieved strategic parity with the United States. While preserving and increasing its conventional superiority it had also for the first time in Soviet history developed truly global naval and air capabilities, allowing it to intervene militarily around the world. The West, on the other hand, had been shown by the energy crisis of 1973 to be extremely vulnerable and increasingly willing to accommodate the Soviets through detente and arms control. The United States, in particular, having suffered a humiliating defeat in Vietnam, appeared traumatized and headed for a default on its global responsibilities. All of this was seen by the Soviet leaders as a historic shift in the political and military "correlation of forces" between the Soviet bloc and the West and promised vast new opportunities for Soviet gains.

The new strategy rejected the previous emphasis on "peaceful transition," i.e., through elections to socialism, which was now said to result in the degeneration of revolutionaries into "parliamentary cretinism," and advocated "direct revolutionary action" instead. The renewed stress on violence for the achievement of socialist goals does not reflect any increased confidence in the potential of indigenous revolutionaries, but rather the Kremlin's determination and confidence in its own ability to project its power and dictate the course of events in areas where it had not been able to do so before. Indeed, Soviet theorists consistently argue that reliance on the Soviet Union is the sole guarantee for the success of a Third World revolution, regardless of the relative strength

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of the local revolutionary movement. Not surprisingly, the Soviets prefer to cast their support to revolutionary movements that do not enjoy broad popular support since they are more likely to become totally dependent on their foreign benefactor. The key new element in this strategy is direct Soviet-sponsored military involvement and massive arms transfers designed to achieve political goals by military means. A novel feature of Soviet interventionism is also the use of proxy forces, usually Cuban and East European, which allow Moscow to declaim direct responsibility and avoid superpower confrontation without affecting its control. To date Soviet or surrogate forces have been used on a large scale in Angola in 1975, Ethiopia in 1977, and Afghanistan in 1979. In all of these cases the Soviet clients would have been promptly defeated by domestic opponents had it not been for Soviet intervention. Given the continuing political illegitimacy of these indigenous regimes, Communist military presence and control seem to be assured.

Arms deliveries also play an important role in the Soviet offensive. By supplying huge amounts of sophisticated weapons the Soviet Union is capable of quickly reversing regional balances and assuring military superiority for its chosen clients. For example, after allying itself with the Soviet Union, Somalia--one of the most backward countries in the world--promptly emerged as a military superpower in Africa; yet as soon as Moscow decided to support Somalia's arch-enemy, Ethiopia, in 1977, a massive air-lift of military hardware worth some \$ 1 billion gave the latter country a decisive military edge. Such large arms transfers have typically been accompanied by a massive influx of Soviet and proxy military advisors, instructors, and technicians--many of whom have assumed direct management and command positions and served to further bind the recipient country to its Soviet patron. The clear lesson for

many developing countries has been that whoever enjoys Soviet support is guaranteed military preponderance over their enemies, be they domestic or external.

Once a regime dependent on Soviet help has been established, the new strategy calls for a prompt and radical transformation of the traditional socio-political and economic structures along Marxist-Leninist lines under Soviet bloc guidance. Such restructuring includes the establishment of a one-party system--controlled by a Marxist "vanguard" party, the setting up of a powerful army and internal security apparatus and a paramilitary force loyal only to the party, imposition of censorship, party monopoly over the means of information and a gradual stifling of the free-enterprise economy, and the collectivization of agriculture. All of these changes have already occurred or are presently taking place in Angola, South Yemen, Mozambique, Ethiopia and Afghanistan--countries that have fallen under Soviet sway since 1975. Whether the new Soviet strategy will be successful in guaranteeing permanent Soviet influence in the long term is by no means certain. Moscow's commitment to an aggressive policy of establishing East European-type clients in the Third World, however, is beyond question. This is not to say that the Soviet Union is able to impose its will unilaterally through naked aggression and coercion. The key to Soviet success has been clever exploitation of opportunities that have presented themselves, with or without Soviet connivance, and their common interests with radical indigenous elements. Such Marxist revolutionary movements, though well-organized and fanatical, invariably lack mass political appeal and thus become totally dependent on external assistance in their struggle for power. Once in power, the revolutionaries' alliance with the Soviets becomes essential because it guarantees them military and political

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security, a certain international legitimacy as a result of the vociferous acclaim of the Socialist bloc, and most importantly a proven system for the political control of potentially hostile populations. It is within this context that Soviet involvement in the developments in Nicaragua and Central America need to be examined.

Nicaragua's Militarization

The application of the military aspect of Moscow's penetration strategy in Central America is by now well-pronounced. The militarization of Nicaragua has proceeded at a brisk pace under the guidance of Cuban and other Soviet surrogates. Nicaragua is presently building an army of 50,000 and equipping it with Soviet-supplied offensive weapons such as tanks and fighter aircraft never before present in the region. Most of these have been channeled through Cuba, which in the past year has received from the Soviet Union three times more arms than in any of the preceding years since the Cuban crisis. In comparison, during the height of the civil war, the Somoza dictatorship had less than 12,000 ill-equipped troops. Over 2,000 Cuban, Soviet, and East European military advisors provided training and supervision while hundreds of Nicaraguans are being trained and indoctrinated at military academies in Cuba and Eastern Europe. Alongside the army the regime in Nicaragua is building a powerful internal security force and a militia which by now numbers 70,000. As is typical in Communist countries, strict political controls have been instituted in both the army and the militia with the aim of making them responsible only to the Sandinista party and not to the state. It is indicative that both the army and the militia are now called Sandinist and not Nicaraguan. It is also not an accident that the task of assuring the regime's control over the means of violence has been entrusted to two avowed

pro-Soviet Marxists, Tomas Borge, as Minister of the Interior, and Humberto Ortega as Minister of Defense. Should the militarization of the country continue unabated, Nicaragua will soon be in a position of overwhelming military superiority over all of its neighbors and would become a strategic stepping stone for increased Soviet intervention in Central America. There is already evidence that through Nicaragua arms are being supplied not only to the guerrillas in El Salvador, but also to Leftist insurgents in Guatemala and Costa Rica. In El Salvador also, the Left did not pose a military threat until its divergent factions were organized into a unified guerrilla movement under Cuban auspices. The flow of arms is steadily increasing and the guerrillas are already in possession of weapons more sophisticated than those of the government.

Socialist Political Transformation

In the political realm the gradual transformation of Nicaragua into a Socialist state began shortly after the Sandinista takeover. Though the ruling junta established in July of 1979 included non-Marxists of established democratic credentials, real power rested with the Sandinistas who took charge over all key ministries. This practice is the same as that used in Eastern Europe following its occupation by the Soviet army in the aftermath of World War II. In most of these countries so-called "popular front" governments were established with non-Communist politicians appointed to visible but politically unimportant positions. Such politicians were simply used to camouflage the Communists' real intentions and mislead world opinion. Once the Party had consolidated its power these "useful idiots," as Lenin once contemptuously referred to them, were promptly discarded. During the first year of Sandinista rule, a similar role was played by the noted Nicaraguan democrat, Alfonso Robelo, who

subsequently realized the anti-democratic nature of the regime and has now emerged as its main opponent. In El Salvador, the Social Democrat, Manuel Ungo, is the pro forma leader of the "Democratic Revolutionary Front," the political organ of the Marxist guerrillas, which has prompted many uncritical Western observers to conclude that the Front is representative of the Democratic forces.

Within weeks of Somoza's overthrow, despite the fact that the Carter Administration had taken a decidedly friendly attitude toward the new government and had delivered millions of dollars in emergency aid, the Sandinistas signed agreements for Cuban assistance in the restructuring of the educational system and the development of new "progressive" school curricula. Hundreds of Nicaraguan youths were promptly dispatched to Cuba for indoctrination at the Island of Youth School. As early as September 1979 at the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations, Nicaragua's positions were staunchly pro-Soviet. The Sandinista movement has also moved quickly to consolidate its power as the sole political authority and has made it almost impossible for other political parties to function effectively. In its bid for total political control the regime has created special "Committees for Sandinista Defense" at the neighborhood level, designed to spy and inform on the citizenry. Recently they have been given the task of compiling lists of regime opponents and "enemies of the people" who "will be the first to be hanged from the lamp posts," in the words of Humberto Ortega. The Sandinistas' effort to establish a "vanguard" party in Nicaragua has relied heavily for guidance and support on their Cuban and Soviet mentors. Not surprisingly, the first official agreement between Nicaragua and the Soviet Union, signed

in March of 1980, was one of cooperation between the Sandinista Liberation Front and the Soviet Communist Party.

The inexorable movement toward a one-party socialist system has often been accompanied by a campaign of intimidation, repression, and even political murder. According to the Nicaraguan Human Rights Commission--an organization now severely restricted in its functions--up to 1,000 people had been executed without trial by December of 1979, while several hundred other suspected opponents of the regime had simply disappeared.

The ruling junta has reneged on its original promise to hold elections, despite a poll by the daily La Prensa, which showed that 73% of the population want elections. The junta has actually been quite honest in stating openly that there will never be free elections in Nicaragua under its rule. According to Ortega, the elections supposed to take place in 1985 "will serve the strengthening of revolutionary power and not decide who will be in power as in some lottery." The junta has also severely curtailed freedom of speech and embarked on a determined course of nationalization of the economy, of which only fifty percent is still in private hands, and the collectivization of agriculture. The total suspension of civil rights in March on the pretext of U.S. "plans of aggression" may just be the last step in a pre-determined sequence of events leading to the establishment of a totalitarian-socialist state in Nicaragua. Such an event will undoubtedly be hailed by Soviet theorists as another important breakthrough in the process of establishing Soviet influence around the world--a process known in Marxist jargon as the "march of history." Unless the United States does whatever is needed to turn it back from its backyard, this "march of history" will next engulf El Salvador. It will not stop there.