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**RONALD REAGAN AND THE PEACE PROCESS IN CENTRAL AMERICA:
THE CONTADORA'S SHORTSIGHT**

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JCSP 40

Exercise Solo Flight

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INTRODUCTION

Although no Latin American country was likely to ever attack the United States; it was an historical concern to prevent powers from outside the hemisphere from establishing a base of power or influence within the region, when ideologies or movements alien to democracy appear to be advancing in Central America, the United States becomes concerned, not only because of the possibility of a military threat but also because of a feeling that the U.S. is responsible for the states of this hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine, the Spanish-American War, contingency planning for defense of the Panama Canal and the development of the inter-American security system in the post-World War II environment were all founded on the goal of preventing inter-continental powers from establishing a base of influence. Since World War II, concerns that revolutionary Marxism linked to the Soviet Union (or Marxism-Leninism) might establish a hostile, ideological base in the region has been the key factor influencing U.S. foreign policy in the Americas.¹

In the 80's U.S. strategists had some concerns regarding the loss of influence in critical areas due to reduction of contributions to the defense of third world countries, not only because Nixon's doctrine promoted "Self-Reliance" for developing countries to resolve their own domestic problems, but also due to cutting military assistance to governments accused of human

¹ Margaret Daly Hayes, "Understanding U.S. Policy Toward Latin America," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 82.

rights abuses.² According to Hayes, those concerns were related to rebel movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, considered excessively close to the influence of Cuban's Fidel Castro. Regional scarcity and wage disparity created fertile ground for the expansion of political instability, local anti-Americanism, and the rise of revolutionary opposition groups.³ Vanderlaan says that that in 1980 the even candidate Ronald Reagan declared that the Nicaraguan revolution was living proof of the expansion and influence of the Soviet Union in the hemisphere, then as U.S. President began a turn in the foreign policy of the U.S. toward issues of bipolarism, anti-communism and the containment of Soviet influence.⁴ The Bipartisan Commission pointed out that the crisis in Central America was real, and the risks were great not only for Central Americans and the hemisphere but for the United States which is should cope it and act boldly.⁵ Schoultz agrees that this situation was a threat to the United States.⁶

The expiration of the Nixon Doctrine was imminent when the Committee on the Present Danger intensely influenced the Reagan administration and its foreign and military doctrine. There was the argument that Soviet expansionism was the cause of every single revolutionary feeling in the world and it had to be defeated, thus the coexistence with the Soviets proposed by the Nixon Doctrine was not seen as a good plan any longer.⁷ Domestic counter-insurgency operations in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua were still under the U.S. Congress's watch related to the protection of human and civilian rights. In this context Reagan's determination to

² Guy J. Pauker, Steven Canby, A. Ross Johnson and William B. Quandt, "In Search of Self-Reliance: U.S. security Assistance to the Third World under the Nixon Doctrine" (California: Rand 1973), 10.

³ Margaret Daly Hayes, "Understanding U.S. Policy Toward Latin America," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 79.

⁴ Mary B. Vanderlaan, "Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua", (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 5.

⁵ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 1.

⁶ Lars Schoultz, "National Security and United States Policy toward Latin America", (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 34.

⁷ Thomas S. Bodenheimer, and Robert Gould, "U.S. Military Doctrines and Their Relation to Foreign Policy". (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 13.

take military action in Central America contravened congressionally legislated restraints related to military assistance to those countries.

In January 1983 on Contadora Island in Panama, representatives of Mexico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela launched an initiative to deal with the internal conflicts in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. The Contadora group tasked itself to undertake a mediation process in order to seek a peaceful end to the conflicts. The project implied the concerns of the United States although Contadora was an initiative independent from the Soviet Union.⁸ If commitments were accomplished exactly as written, Contadora's objectives would have been sufficient to reduce U.S. security concerns on foreign threats, this is because they included commitments to respect existing borders between States and their sovereignty, not to introduce more weapons, to reduce and balance inventories of weaponries, and a ban on the establishment of foreign armed forces in the territory.⁹ Goodfellow argued that, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras reserved their decision to further revisions on Contadora's Act after they met with U.S. officials with regard to the document while Reagan administration sought to support counter-revolutionaries in Nicaragua known as Contras due to its own concerns, diplomatic pressure eventually hinder the peace process.¹⁰

Within the United States-Nicaragua relationship framework as a central issue to this peace process, this paper will demonstrate that the circumstances surrounding the conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s had a direct impact on Central America's peace process promoted by the Contadora Group not being achieved. To demonstrate the thesis, the first part will discuss U.S. security interests in Central America in the context of the Cold War and the application of a low-

⁸ Bruce M. Bagley, "Contadora and the Diplomacy of Peace in Central America", (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 2.

⁹ Contadora Act on Peace and Co-operations in Central America, (Panama, 1986).

¹⁰ William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 144.

intensity warfare doctrine developed by the Reagan administration as the preferred military option to solve conflict in Nicaragua. The second part points out the mechanism used by the U.S. Government to legitimize at certain extent its position toward the peace initiative of the Contadora group, and which also noted weaknesses in the proposal to achieve effective mechanisms of verification and sanctioning. The third and last part will discuss the importance of the rhetoric employed by leaders involved, Nicaraguan Daniel Ortega and Ronald Reagan, the former within his revolutionary and ideological speeches against the United States, the latter on regard the need to support the Contras to roll back the Soviet influence and finally the importance of the public opinion to support the Reagan administration's policy.

U.S. Security Interests in Central America

To contextualize this analysis, the promotion of responsible government, free trade, the provision of essential services, and respect for the territory and the political integrity of the neighboring countries in Central America was a genuine aspiration of the Government of the United States of America. At the same time, the region offered a growing consumer market, natural resources and opportunity of investment. But the interests discussed here are presented from a wider point of view as the denial to the establishment of global rivals that were considered by the Reagan administration in the field of security.¹¹

In the context of the Cold War, the support given by the United States to the Contras was one of the components of low-intensity warfare (LIW) doctrine whose central aim was to prevent as much as possible the involvement of U.S. troops abroad. In the global scenario, the operations leading to that doctrine allowed to the Reagan Administration hold some influence in the field

¹¹ Margaret Daly Hayes, "U.S. Security Interests in Central America," in *Contadora and the Diplomacy of Peace in Central America: Volume I The United States, Central America, and Contadora* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 4.

without incurring the deployment of a bigger unit.¹² However, these operations quarreled with the resistance of the majority of Latin American States had been showing in relation to the influence of the United States on the continent, and the yearning for greater self-reliance.¹³ Actually, after the application of LIW doctrine became public knowledge, Contadora countries could have taken advantage of this stance to reframe a better output, swallow their pride and recognize the reality of the United States as a the global power. By not taking into account U.S. concerns in Contadora Act did not help to revitalize the process.¹⁴ Preventing any ideological presence or military hostility to the United States in the region initially depended on Central American countries being willing and able to prevent the emergence of undesirable outcomes in their own territories by themselves. But this implied a difficulty. In ideal conditions Americans hoped that Central American Governments democratic or not, shared the same perception of communist threat to the region. In other words it was a challenge to the foreign policy of the United States in obtaining the cooperation of the Governments that did not share the same opinion on the external presence in the hemisphere. The Nicaraguan revolution, with the stated purpose of achieve idealistic revolutionary goals and supported by the Soviet bloc, was seen by the Americans as clear evidence of the incursion of communism on the continent, hence a matter of vital national interest.¹⁵

With the emergence of the peace proposal of the Contadora Group, the Reagan Administration considered promoting multilateral solutions to the conflict through diplomatic consultation so that Central American countries would find their own way to peace, even though

¹² Lilia Bermudez and Raul Benitez, "Freedom Fighters and Low-Intensity Warfare Against Nicaragua," in *Hemispheric security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 121.

¹³ Mary B. Vanderlaan, "Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua", (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 18.

¹⁴ Contadora Act on Peace and Co-operations in Central America, (Panama, 1986).

¹⁵ William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 146.

the proposal was daring and challenging for that time to include the absolute withdrawal of American military forces in the isthmus which was welcome by Nicaragua.¹⁶ This was arguably a huge mistake, not considering the geo-strategic importance of the region with a great interoceanic canal, harbors on the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean all along the isthmus, and in the middle an instable government in Nicaragua receiving heavy military support from a the Soviet Union, as well as two more leftist insurrections in the region willing to joint them. The Reagan Administration supported the idea that the role of the United States in the settlement of the conflict not only should include diplomatic negotiation to be in a better position within Contadora's proposal, but its contribution should make the difference between success and failure. This last referred to supporting for the Contras.¹⁷ With these actions he sealed his decision not to allow that Sandinistas revolutionary movements spread in the region.

Public knowledge of the operations of sabotage in Nicaraguan harbors supported by the US Government led to a prohibition of the U.S. Congress to use funds from intelligence agencies in order to carry out operations to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government directly or indirectly, an unpopular strategy among the American people.¹⁸ This setback for the foreign policy of Reagan could have meant a push for the proposal of the Contadora Group to gain support from the American public. But the support of the countries of the Group was more intended to submit the draft of a peace agreement. The Reagan Administration used an advantageous mechanism to support the LIW through the establishment of the Office of Public Diplomacy on Latin America and the Caribbean, under the State Department, to influence American's public opinion about the

¹⁶ William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 149.

¹⁷ Margaret Daly Hayes, "U.S. Security Interests in Central America," in *Contadora and the Diplomacy of Peace in Central America: Volume 1 The United States, Central America, and Contadora* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 5.

¹⁸ William M. Leogrande, "The Contras and Congress," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 205.

Sandinista threat and thus win Congressional support to resume financing the Contras.¹⁹ Walker states that at some point opposition press was backed or persuaded to disseminate propaganda.²⁰

Governance in Central America was also an ongoing interest for the Reagan Administration. It also included the promotion of economic well-being, the answers to the demands of social groups, respect for human rights and security to the democratic and political processes; this not differed much from the ideals promulgated by the leaders of revolutionary movements in the region.²¹ But while there were interests in common both among the leaders Central America, the proposal of the Contadora Group and the foreign policy of the United States towards the isthmus, the interest in the conflict in Nicaragua was the concern of the United States primarily because of the presence of the Soviet Union, via armaments, equipment and military advisers.²² The only possibility to raise the interests of both sides in the conflict was the Contadora Group.

U.S. posture towards the Contadora Group

Basically since the beginning of this process, there were tensions derived from tactical differences between the countries of the Group and the United States in the term of how to reach desired goals. For most of the Contadora group officials, U.S. pressures were a hindrance to pluralism.²³ At the same time as relations between the United States and Nicaragua continued to

¹⁹ Mary B. Vanderlaan, "Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua", (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 144.

²⁰ Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 13.

²¹ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 105.

²² Margaret Daly Hayes, "U.S. Security Interests in Central America," in *Contadora and the Diplomacy of Peace in Central America: Volume 1 The United States, Central America, and Contadora* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 4.

²³ Nina Maria Serafino, "The Contadora Initiative, the United States, and the concept of a Zone of Peace," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 195.

deteriorate, other countries in the Latin American region were taking a more active role in attempting to solve the conflict.²⁴ Unfortunately the historical involvement of the United States in Central America during the 20th century played a predominant role in bogging down the proposal of the Contadora Group. The peace initiative was defiant and somehow overambitious in relation to unprecedented request of U.S. military withdrawal from the region so it was not taken lightly by U.S. policy makers. The Reagan Administration considered the implementation of a thoughtful commission that will help to legitimize its proposal towards the situation in Nicaragua and the rest of Central America creating bipartisan consensus as well. The product was "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America" under the guidance of Chairman Henry Kissinger. The result formed the foundation for the pursuit of foreign policy objectives toward Central America for the next few years.²⁵ The so called Kissinger Report, at the same time to recognize the example set by countries of the Contadora Group, was a smart move to gain credibility in Washington.

In opposition to the arguments by the report, Child complains that the Commission put very little attention to several documents and initiatives that the Contadora Group had already generated; only three times the initiative is mentioned in the Report and was not considered worthy of mention more than barely a page in a document that exceeds one hundred. Critics of this report point out that its emphasis on traditional U.S. Central American policy methods such as economic assistance motivated by geopolitical reasons and military expansion among others,

²⁴ William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 148.

²⁵ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 119.

lead to think the Commission was following Reagan administration guidance of being superficial to Contadora.²⁶

One of the amendments U.S. diplomats recommended to Contadora's initiative was the need to include more comprehensive regional agreements that would then result in reciprocal commitments. Another recommendation was to include mechanisms for verification and creating incentives for compliance.²⁷ Although the Reagan administration recognized that the Contadora initiative was constructive, their posture was that the addition of recommended amendments was essential to assure accountability to states involved. Historically not all Central American countries shared the same acceptance of foreign policy agreement with United States.²⁸ That is why the level of commitment and loyalty which Nicaragua could meet in medium term within an agreement aligned with U.S. interests was debatable.²⁹ In regards to the proponents of the initiative, there was not solid backing for the peace process without the support or the positive participation of an institution or an influential state which could impose effective economic sanctions in case that Nicaragua failed to comply with the provisions in the agreements. The absence of a negotiating partner in the Contadora Group with this capability weakened the argument for its proposals. No country directly involved in the process was a major importer or exporter of goods, services or products for Nicaragua, nor was a large market at risk, that could be as an incentive to guarantee the fulfillment of commitments or provide a possibility for

²⁶ Jack Child, *The Central American Peace Process, 1983-1991 Sheathing Swords, Building Confidence* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 22.

²⁷ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 119

²⁸ Mary B. Vanderlaan, "Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua", (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 235-239.

²⁹ Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 12.

sanctions if Nicaragua drew back from its obligations regarding disarmament and withdrawal of military advisers from the Soviet Union.³⁰

Mark Falcoff suggests that the excessively general nature of Contadora's statutes, and the apparent lack of willingness to establish specific control and verification apparatus were the unofficial causes and obstacles to receive more support from the United States to the process, as well as the inclusion of the Organization of American States (OAS) as the appropriate mechanism of verification and compliance.³¹ Although it seems that it was not time, the four Contadora States presented a draft created with little collaboration from sources other than the accountant working groups. Goodfellow cites part of a U.S. National Security Council secret memo, "We have effectively blocked Contadora group efforts to impose the second draft of the Revised Contadora Act".³² Showing how Reagan administration responded that this draft was a vague statement of goals that already had been reported and that continued benefiting Nicaragua, especially in relation to the mechanisms of verification and compliance that were weak and could allow the Sandinistas failing as set forth.³³

Another factor considered by the Reagan Administration for not supporting all of their initiatives was their conclusion that Contadora countries did not necessarily share interests, policy positions toward the region or toward the United States, and had different ways of leading their own policies. They did not share common overall interests. Moreover none of the four

³⁰ Michael E. Conroy, "Economic Aggression as an Instrument of Low-Intensity Warfare," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 65.

³¹ Jack Child, *The Central American Peace Process, 1983-1991 Sheathing Swords, Building Confidence* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 18.

³² William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 150.

³³ Jack Child, *The Central American Peace Process, 1983-1991 Sheathing Swords, Building Confidence* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 29.

countries had experience working together.³⁴ Distrust in the ability of Nicaragua to fulfill what has been agreed in the accords lessened U.S. support to the Contadora proposal. Another compromise stated by the Reagan Administration was to support any negotiation of the Contadora Group that offered genuine democracy to that country, but it would not support any agreement that limits the right of the Nicaraguan people to be free. Reagan disagreements with some points of the proposal kept the layout of his Administration to continue supporting the Contras and a point not included in any proposal of Contadora, which was important for the U.S. concerning the overthrow of the Sandinista regime.³⁵

Elaborate factors required by Reagan went beyond what the goodwill of the Contadora Group could achieve in terms of ensuring the cooperation of the parties to the conflict in Nicaragua and in the interests of regional security and stability.³⁶ It is arguable that a major obstacle in the negotiations was the Nicaraguan revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega's rejection of the foreign policy of the United States. Contadora's proposal was intended to achieve desirable goals for Central American countries, but it was short sighted in assessing geopolitical interests in the context of the Cold War. The proposal did not reflect its recognition to the geographic and strategic importance of the isthmus.³⁷

Arguably, the Reagan Administration highlighted the difference in interests of Contadora countries and their lack of experience in working together as a justification for the stance that the United States would take on these matters. However, the interests at stake were so high that

³⁴ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 120.

³⁵ William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 154.

³⁶ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 120.

³⁷ Nina Maria Serafino, "The Contadora Initiative, the United States, and the concept of a Zone of Peace," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 206.

would be difficult to come out clean of influences from outside the region.³⁸ Venezuela was seen by the United States as a counter power to Cuba. The U.S. sale of jet fighters F-16s to the Venezuelan Air Force was intended to support that role.³⁹ Despite differences in its interests toward Central America, Venezuela was considered to be closer to Washington than Mexico first regarding military assistance and foreign policy toward Latin America during the Falkland Islands war where the U.S. supported United Kingdom; second due to a commercial tuna embargo imposed by U.S. to Mexican fishing industry.⁴⁰ Contadora countries expressed pessimism in relation to the United States attitude in the negotiations while reproaching not only U.S. but to Nicaragua by the lack of political will in agreeing the agreement.⁴¹ Those claims were validated by the emergence of the Lima Support Group consisting of Peru, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, formed during the inauguration of Peru's new President in Lima in 1985.⁴²

An optimistic analysis would suggest that a verifiable Contadora treaty could protect U.S. security interests in Central America by essentially relying on multilateral support as was proposed by the four countries in the Contadora group. Child proposed a list of confidence-building measures (CBMs) should have included peacekeeping operations (PKO) as a verification mechanism. In this matter, a PKO as Child suggested, should have played an ad-hoc role of monitoring transparency, predictability, balance, symmetry or disarmament-

³⁸ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 120.

³⁹ Carlos Portales, "South American regional security and the United States," in *Hemispheric security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 144.

⁴⁰ Lee Stacey, *Mexico and the United States*, (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002), 571.

⁴¹ Nina Maria Serafino, "The Contadora Initiative, the United States, and the concept of a Zone of Peace," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 207.

⁴² Mary B. Vanderlaan, *Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 247.

demobilization-reintegration (DDR).⁴³ To debate Child's argument the nature of PKO provides a real support and a sense of security for any peace process. Meanwhile both parties in the conflict agreed to be monitored. However, from a broader perspective, the violence and instability in the region was just the tip of the iceberg. PKOs could not achieve reciprocal confidence among the United States, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union which was, in effect, the real cause of mistrust in the implementation of Contadora's proposal. Even though a PKO would have played an important role as a verification process, the lack of effective penalty measures on violators undermined such an initiative.

U.S. could not use the Contadora initiative instead of its own diplomacy. U.S. foreign policy finally became more diplomatically proactive in Central America, encouraging the Contadora group. At the same time, the U.S. urged amendments to its final wording. In other words the proposal should be adjusted to make it consistent with U.S. concerns.⁴⁴

There were also obstacles to the Contadora Group given that circumstances in other Central American countries were already struggling to achieve peace and end internal armed conflicts, such as Guatemala and El Salvador. Nicaragua relations with these countries deteriorated because of its military build-up and apparent goal to export revolution in the region.

The justification in Nicaragua, that the build-up was necessary to defend themselves against the Contras, led to a United States response that support for the Contras was because of the build-up. This disagreement affected mutual trust among small countries that were also

⁴³ Jack Child, "U.S. Security and the Contadora Process: Toward a CBM Regime in Central America," in *Contadora and the Diplomacy of Peace in Central America: Volume 1 The United States, Central America, and Contadora* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 54.

⁴⁴ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 119.

assessing how to protect their already threaten stability. Unfortunately those obstacles also disturbed peace initiative from Contadora.⁴⁵

In summary the proposal of the Contadora Group was an ambitious document, which involved economic, political and security objectives but at the beginning they were presented ambiguously. The enthusiasm for the proposal without precedent in diplomacy Latin American was affected by its blindness to larger geo-strategic circumstances at stake in Central America, and extremely complex external interests were very powerful, such that of the U.S. The absence of agreements that recognized the wide range of interests and pressures at stake for each Government seemed to lead to the non-viability of the Contadora proposal. In addition, a detailed evaluation of particular interests of various sectors in the Centro America would have been required, for example the refusal of the Nicaraguan military to disarm, due to socio – political considerations and their relative power status in the revolution.⁴⁶

American and Nicaraguan leaders' rhetorical criticism:

The common interest, to achieve social and political stability in Central America, was shared not only by revolutionary leaders but also right-wing dictators in the region. At the beginning of the 80s, American relations with Nicaragua enjoyed a relatively high public image, as well as the Sandinista revolution had. But by 1985 the Sandinistas were considered serious opponents of America. It is important to discuss how quick this stance change especially since it was not related to the internal reality of Nicaragua. Seeking to understand American and Nicaraguan perspectives of the Sandinista Revolution, Arneson presented a study to examine the

⁴⁵ Esperanza Duran, *Contadora: A Next Phase?* In *Conflict in Nicaragua: a Multidimensional Perspective*, (Massachusetts: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 177.

⁴⁶ Nina Maria Serafino, "The Contadora Initiative, the United States, and the concept of a Zone of Peace," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 206.

rhetorical strategies used by Reagan and Ortega.⁴⁷ The variable that most influenced the American position was the high level of rhetoric, combined with pragmatic arguments deployed by the Reagan Administration regarding the revolution in Nicaragua.⁴⁸ Thus it is valid to also highlight the importance that Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega's equally irritating ideologically based rhetoric had in speaking out against the foreign policy of the United States. In turn, this served as basis for the Reagan Administration to ramp up the rhetoric against Communism that already had deep rooting in the American public. Such rhetoric has already characterized the poor relationship between U.S. and Cuba and, from time to time, other countries in the region as well such as the Peruvian President Alan Garcia who stated in 1985 they were supporting Nicaragua because "...it is a symbol of an independent sovereignty and destiny for the continent".⁴⁹ Politicians in Latin American sometimes are not aware that the use of rhetoric in reaffirming independence from regional powers deeply complicates the quality of their relations with the United States.⁵⁰

The rhetoric used by Nicaraguans revolutionary leaders such as Daniel Ortega played an important role in gaining followers and massive support from the peasants and middle class population. Indeed, they were able to persuade ordinary people to take up arms and even die to achieve their goals.⁵¹ They used to persuade Nicaraguans to oppose the United States by arguing American military past in Nicaragua repression from 1912 to 1933, and some others LIW historical precedents such as the attempt to reverse the Cuban revolution in 1961, the military

⁴⁷ Pat Arneson, *The Discourse of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Daniel Ortega: Peace in Nicaragua without Concession*. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1987), 1.

⁴⁸ Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 157.

⁴⁹ Mary B. Vanderlaan, "Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua", (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 242.

⁵⁰ Margaret Daly Hayes, "Understanding U.S. Policy Toward Latin America," in *Hemispheric Security and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 78.

⁵¹ William Goodfellow, "The Diplomatic Front," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 146.

coup in Chile in 1973, Dominican Republic in 1965, Grenada and others.⁵² They were able to influence followers by inspiring them to take a negative attitude toward Reagan administration and U.S. foreign policy. This is an example of Ortega's rhetoric:

...the Reagan administration has been able to persuade Congress to approve funding to implement policies of military and economic aggression against the Nicaraguan people. This funding heavily supports the mercenary forces which have been engaged in order to destroy the Nicaraguan revolution. This terrorist action has proven severely detrimental to church dialogues and international negotiations.⁵³

This discourse worked for Ortega at home, but also created the threatening image of communist dictators in the collective sub consciousness in the United States. Ortega speech and rhetoric reflected his desire to lead his government to an ideal future state, reflected in measures taken in the present although not related to a plan or vision for the future e.g. "...we have been able to fight the aggression because we have morals, reason, and justice on our side."⁵⁴ Daniel Ortega's discourse included purpose or idealistic goals which in one many ways expressed anti-American phrases. "The Nicaraguan people are defending their independence with nationalistic pride; a volunteer Army has emerged to protect the country from United States invasions."⁵⁵

On the other hand, not only the personality of President Reagan was required to promote and raise the popularity of American policy in regard to Central America, his speech style was also effective in appearing pragmatic and not ideological. Reagan used phrases such as: "to restore peace and democracy to Central America" and "keep America safe, secure, and free".⁵⁶ What Nicaraguan leaders said against U.S. was exploited to argue that communist threats were settling in Latin America, and the threat of Sandinista revolutionary expansion, e.g. "the

⁵² Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 12.

⁵³ Pat Arneson, *The Discourse of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Daniel Ortega: Peace in Nicaragua without Concession*. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1987), 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

communists practice human rights repression throughout the world. Their next target for expansion is the western hemisphere.”⁵⁷ Americans were aware of the Soviet influence in Nicaragua. In 1986, a survey showed that 56 percent of Americans polled saw Nicaragua as problematic, but only 32 percent considered it a major security threat.⁵⁸ This led to the administration considering how it might protect U.S. interest against communism in the Western Hemisphere.⁵⁹ However, Reagan could not obtain the necessary acceptance of his proposal or the financial support to develop his plans; Demonstrating that Sandinista leaders were Marxist was not so difficult, but the challenge for the Administration was to convince the Congress how that revolution could expand in Central America to the point of needing U.S. soldiers deployed for combat. Yet this is what the majority of the population feared.⁶⁰ Evoking recent combat experiences was an example used by Reagan: “the consequences of Congress not supporting the proposal are defined as the first step down the slippery slope toward another Vietnam.”⁶¹

One of the examples of how the rhetoric employed by one side was rhetorically exploited by the other side is the phrase said of Sandinistas leader Tomas Borge: “...this revolution goes beyond our borders...”.⁶² That statement was paraphrased many times by such U. S. officials as Reagan when asked: “...Can we responsibly ignore the long-term danger to American interests

⁵⁷ Pat Arneson, *The Discourse of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Daniel Ortega: Peace in Nicaragua without Concession*. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1987), 17.

⁵⁸ Eldon Kenworthy, “*Selling the Policy*,” in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 162.

⁵⁹ Pat Arneson, *The Discourse of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Daniel Ortega: Peace in Nicaragua without Concession*. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1987), 13.

⁶⁰ Eldon Kenworthy, “*Selling the Policy*,” in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 166.

⁶¹ Pat Arneson, *The Discourse of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Daniel Ortega: Peace in Nicaragua without Concession*. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1987), 21.

⁶² Eldon Kenworthy, “*Selling the Policy*,” in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 172.

posed by a Communist Nicaragua, backed by Soviet Union and dedicated in the words of its own leaders to a ‘revolution without borders’?”⁶³

Another illustration cited by Sklar occurred when President Reagan addressing the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 1987 stated:

...To the Sandinista delegation here today I say: your people know the true nature of your regime...Understand this: we will not, and the world community will not, accept phony democratization designed to mask the perpetuation of dictatorship.⁶⁴

The very next day Ortega addressed the United Nations pronouncing one of the most controversial U.N. speeches in response to Reagan:

When President Reagan addressed the Assembly, the delegation of Nicaragua listened to him. We are not afraid of words; we are not afraid of political and ideological debate...Before consulting those who give him hot-headed ideas, such as military options, including outright invasion, let him remember that Rambo exists only in the movies.⁶⁵

The Contadora peace process was weakened by their media strategy, where the Reagan Administration managed to invoke “real intentions of the revolution” by repeatedly referring that phrase and link it with a recognized fact, the Nicaraguan military build-up.⁶⁶ One advantage of the Administration was the ability to conduct influence operations through so called “white propaganda” in major newspapers, TV and radio broadcasting. The strategy, to reach the public opinion, was designed to hide the real origin of articles, reports citing false references or not citing any source at all, to indicate information originated from sources other than that of the U.S. Government. The media strategy for Reagan’s policy was so important that the Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean was created during his administration,

⁶³ Eldon Kenworthy, “*Selling the Policy*,” in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 172.

⁶⁴ Holly Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua*. (Ontario: Between the Lines, 1988), 379.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁶⁶ Eldon Kenworthy, “*Selling the Policy*,” in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 172.

tasked with influencing public opinion by this white propaganda operation.⁶⁷ With this infrastructure, Reagan's administration gained the support of the U.S. Congress, when including in his discourse terms of humanitarian assistance, freedom fighters, communist expansion, slippery slope toward another Vietnam, Soviet aggression, etc. As a consequence, Daniel Ortega had to work hard to dissipate negative American impressions of Nicaragua as the center of communism in Latin America. The effect of the media coverage in the United States was to highlight the Communist threat, but this also represented a big disadvantage for Contadora countries, since their willingness to promote peace negotiations was simply overwhelmed by the media campaign against the Sandinistas launched in America. According to official sources, from US\$100 million authorized by the U.S. Congress to support the Contras, US\$30 million should have been for non-lethal aid. Yet part of it was used to convince the Congress of the need for an additional US\$27 million, broadcasting massive information campaign against the Sandinistas.⁶⁸ They had no comparable economic or media resources at their disposal. U.S. Media coverage on Nicaragua in 1986 was mostly focused on issues that sustained Reagan administration arguments to seek for supporting funds for the Contras.⁶⁹ Spence argues:

...Two case studies of news stories on Nicaragua...suggest the increased coverage of Central America was really coverage of Washington...Most of the 1986 *New York Times* Nicaragua stories emanated from Washington.⁷⁰

To support the argument that major media did not publish major topics about Nicaragua, it could be highlighted that access to land and agrarian land reform was a critical political issue in 1986; a study reviewed 181 *New York Times* articles on the Nicaraguan conflict from the first

⁶⁷ Eldon Kenworthy, "Selling the Policy," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 172.

⁶⁸ Jack Spence, "The U.S. Media: Covering (Over) Nicaragua," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 183.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

half of the same year, but only one sentence among all articles was related to land ownership patterns.⁷¹ Almost nothing was mentioned about the Contadora group effort.

CONCLUSIONS

The struggle to alter the domestic policies of Central American Governments, to reconcile the fears from each other, the overwhelming need to revitalize local economies, were all affected by U.S. security interests, since the beginning of negotiations for the Contadora peace initiative U.S. security interests in that context, Cold War uncertainty was an important factor of Low-intensity warfare doctrine in order to prevented the deployment of American troops abroad, but also affected the American support with the Contras in Nicaragua and how this was promoted by the Reagan administration. The structural weaknesses of Contadora Group members affected Reagan Administration to reconsider the proposal of Contadora, and were especially based on the Kissinger's recommendations; Nicaragua was seen geo-strategically by the Reagan administrations or in the context of a super power struggle. The impact of rhetoric in the speeches of both national leaders Reagan and Ortega, resulted in a chain reaction likewise the speech of Nicaraguan Tomas Borge convinced the most recalcitrant anti-communists in the United States. The Contadora group should have assessed the geo-political realities in their studied proposals, in order to be convincing to all parties. The weaknesses, strengths, opportunities, and threats of all those involved in the negotiations must be recognized. The importance of the mass media mentioned in this paper, which in this case also played an important role in winning the support of the American population. These references demonstrate that the revolution in Nicaragua involved factors at various levels in the global context, and some

⁷¹ Jack Spence, *The U.S. Media: Covering (Over) Nicaragua*, "in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 183.

of them also caused the peace process in Central America proposed by the Contadora Group to be ultimately unsuccessful. The analysis provided in this paper can be used to highlight, in other case studies, how understanding local and regional complexities necessary for innovations foreign affairs and security policy.

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