

## AVOIDING THE CONTADORA TRAP

U.S. policy toward Nicaragua is approaching a crucial crossroad. Endorsement by the U.S. of a Contadora<sup>1</sup> peace treaty--set for signing on June 6--would have a fundamental impact upon the intricate geopolitics of Central America. It could be a trap for American national and regional security interests. While Contadora proposals call for the need to end support for insurrectionary movements and for internal democratization in Central America, these sentiments lack tough verification and enforcement mechanisms.

Although the current Contadora document calls for "effective steps aimed at producing national reconciliation," it makes no specific provisions for including the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance forces (the "Contras") in peace negotiations. Yet the Democratic Resistance has an integral role to play in bringing peace to Nicaragua, for its military pressure motivates the diplomacy. An end to U.S. military support of the Democratic Resistance could be a result of a Contadora treaty, causing in turn support for the resistance from other nations to dry up. At that time the Sandinistas would be under no real pressure to abide by an unenforceable treaty.

Some say that, if the Sandinistas violate the treaty, the U.S. could start aiding the resistance fighters again with full justification. But treaty ratification is expected to take at least six to nine months. After that, it would be at least six months to a year before guarantors of the treaty could begin to detect a pattern of violations. By the time Sandinista deceit became clear, there probably no longer would be a democratic resistance force in Nicaragua to receive U.S. aid.

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1. The "Contadora Group" refers to Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela, the four nations that have brokered Central American peace talks since January 1983, when they first met on Contadora Island.

This in fact may be Managua's tactic. Moscow and Havana already have been urging the Sandinistas to sign the treaty as a tactical move, and then hedge on compliance with its terms and wait until the Democratic Resistance forces wither away and U.S. Congressional and public attention turns elsewhere. At a propitious moment, Nicaragua will resume its attempts to destabilize its neighbors as a Soviet proxy. After a period of U.S. neglect, it will be even more difficult to arouse public and Congressional support for U.S. involvement.

Is the Leninist regime of Nicaragua going to be "mellowed" by a piece of paper called the Contadora Treaty? Unlikely, if the past experience of dealing with communist leaders is any guide. The Kennedy-Khrushchev accord of 1962, which ended the Cuban missile crisis with a pledge from Moscow not to introduce offensive weaponry into Cuba has been violated openly; and the Sandinistas yet have to fulfill promises made to the Organization of American States.

While the U.S. will not be a signatory to a Contadora treaty, Washington's approval will be essential to its adoption. The Reagan Administration thus has an enormous responsibility to ensure that such a treaty will not quash the chances for democracy in Nicaragua and will not trigger events that threaten the security of Nicaragua's neighbors. The Administration must state explicitly what treaty compliance entails. The Administration must declare that the treaty must require the Sandinista government to: 1) stop supporting revolutionary and terrorist forces; 2) terminate its de facto military and political alliance with Cuba and the Soviet Union; 3) reduce its military forces; and 4) democratize its society.

To ensure that a Contadora Treaty does not become a trap, the Administration should set compliance deadlines for the Sandinistas. These could include: 1) within 60 days, the Sandinistas must begin negotiations in Managua with all opposition forces; 2) within 60 days, foreign "advisers" must begin leaving Nicaragua; and 3) within 60 days, Managua must accept and implement reliable verification and enforcement mechanisms for the Contadora Treaty. The Administration should press for legislation stipulating that, if these deadlines are not met, U.S. aid automatically would resume to the Democratic Resistance forces. The U.S. should press other Central American nations not to sign an agreement that does not meet these conditions. The U.S. should also make clear that it would reassess supporting the Resistance only after implementation of the treaty.

The Administration must define clearly its diplomatic and regional security policies toward this vital region. Most important, the White House must not abandon its support for Nicaragua's Democratic Resistance simply to place an unenforceable paper yoke on the Sandinistas' aggression.

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