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SOVIET POLICY IN THE CARIBBEAN AND CENTRAL AMERICA: OPPORTUNITIES AND RESTRAINTS

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I

Introduction

The spiraling crisis in Central America and the Caribbean, and the stronger and more assertive role of the Soviet Union and Cuba in that part of the world, have given rise to a new phenomenon in what we might call the sociology and politics of knowledge: the infusion into the area of an array of Soviet specialists, Kremlinologists, and experts in Soviet foreign policy. For the first time (even including the 1962 Cuban missile crisis) Sovietologists are paying serious attention to Latin America. In the process they have often come into conflict with long-time regional experts on Central America and the Caribbean. The result has been, from both vantage points, a decidedly mixed blessing.[1]

Latin Americanists tend to like the area they study. They like to go there. Many went there first as youthful and idealistic Peace Crops volunteers. They sympathize with its aims and aspirations. They develop empathy and understanding. They come to learn -- and often appreciate -- the area's language, literature, culture, even the "distinctiveness" of its socio-political development. As area specialists, they become steeped in the region's history. They are inclined to look with favor on its efforts to break out of its vicious circles of under-development and dependency.

Latin Americanists tend to elevate and exaggerate their area's importance both as a major region worthy of study and

in terms of its importance to the United States. Theirs is a culture-area approach and their conceptual frameworks usually hold little room for exogenous actors. When external forces are analyzed, it is usually the United States that is blamed for the region's troubles and its situation of dependency. Moreover, quite a number of Latin Americanists suspect, with considerable reason historically and probably some current validity, that the new wave of attention to the area, especially when it comes from Sovietologists within the U. S. government, is a prelude to new covert, CIA-directed initiatives directed against "their" countries. Nor do they always appreciate, to put it mildly, the attempts by newcomers to analyze or write about the area, let alone issue policy prescriptions for it, without learning the language or culture or spending much time there.

That is precisely the position in which the new wave of Sovietologists who have in fact recently turned their attention to Central America and the Caribbean now find themselves. Few know the language or languages of the area. Few have ever been there -- or if they have, for only a brief period, long enough perhaps to confirm prejudices already strongly held. Few care about the area; and they would probably not want to live there. They do not value Latin American culture and civilization. For them, Central America and the Caribbean constitute only another <u>object</u> of Soviet foreign policy, rather like Vietnam or Afghanistan. They have little empathy for the area and many tend to denigrade its importance. They view professional Latin Americanists rather like the proverbial (and sometimes current) anthropologist who has "gone native,"

and they suspect Latin Americanists have stronger loyalities to their place of study than to the United States and its foreign policy objectives. They further feel Latin Americanists are blind to the realities of Soviet and Cuban machinations in the area.

There is obviously the potential for the absence of any meeting of the minds in this situation. Indeed there is a strong possibility for hostility and downright conflict between these two rather opposed points of view.

I would hope that some better and mutually beneficial exchange could be established between these two groups. I am hopeful, though not optimistic, that Sovietologists and U. S. foreign policy generalists may now, following Mr. Kissinger's lead, stop denigrating Latin America and actually learn ("steeping themselves," as Mr. Kissinger did, is a stronger verb and may be too much to hope for) something about the area. On the other hand, Latin America specialists need to recognize that there is a new Soviet (and Cuban) presence and capability in the Caribbean Basin. It is also useful for them to be reminded that in the broader global context, theirs is an area of distinctly secondary importance from the point of view of U. S. policy.

Both groups, it seems to me, can stand to learn from each other. That, in any case, is the thrust and direction of this paper.

II

The U.S.S.R. and Latin America: New Capabilities and Tactics

I do not presume to be an expert on Soviet foreign policy, strategy, and tactics. Those subject areas can be

handled ably by others at this conference. Nevertheless, a brief overview and summary is necessary to provide some setting and background for the discussion that follows of the Soviet presence, possibilities, and limits or constraints in Central America and the Caribbean. First, Soviet capabilities.

Capabilities

The Soviet capacity to function effectively in Latin America is far greater now than it was thirty years ago.[2] Then the notion of Stalinist legions playing a serious role in Latin America was dismissed as ludicrous, and it deserved to be. Today, the situation is no longer quite so simple. Several aspects of the Soviets' new capabilities merit mention (here and in subsequent sections of the paper these are listed in brief and summary form; in the final version of this paper, the points made will be elaborated and greater nuance and qualifications introduced).

First, the Soviet military has become a global military, it has considerably increased its presence and capability in the Caribbean, and it is now (or about to be) equipped with amphibious forces. The day may not be long off when a crisis somewhere in the Caribbean will find both the U. S. and the Soviet fleets setting sail simultaneously and arriving at the same time, both with helicopters in the air and marine forces ready to land -- or to face down each other.

Second, Cuba has been turned over the years into a major military base, offering numerous advantages to the Soviets. Cuba also acts at the behest of the Soviet Union, as its very effective proxy, in some but not all foreign policy/strategic circumstances.[3] Nicaragua may help supplement these possibilities,

as Grenada once held promise of doing. In addition, the Soviet presence ("fishing boats," etc.) has been expanding in several other countries of the area.

Third, Soviet trade with the area is increasing. Argentina is the largest commercial partner but in Central America and the Caribbean the economic connections have been growing.

Fourth, the Soviet diplomatic and political presence is stronger, in terms of both numbers of personnel and their quality. There is now (far more than before) quite a number of Soviet personnel who know Spanish and have lived and have experience in the area. And unlike American personnel, who tend to be moved around from region to region and their expertise lost, Soviet personnel tend to be kept in the same area.

Fifth, Soviet cultural exchanges have expanded enormously. The matter should be of particular interest to USIA. Soviet and Marxist-Leninist literature is everywhere; the number of scholarships being offered far outdistances our own efforts. Moreover there is in Latin America a whole new generation of young people who have swung radically to the left and for whom Marxism (if not Marxism-Leninism) constitutes the cognitive map by which they interpret the world.

Sixth, the level of Soviet will and commitment to get involved in Central America and the Caribbean has changed. Previously the Soviets looked on the Caribbean Basin, with the exception of Cuba, as a rather hopeless area from their point of view, part of the American "lake," within our sphere of influence, and hence not worth getting involved in. Now the Soviets see both opportunities and advantages to be gained from embarrassing the United States in its own backyard and furthering the Soviets' own

foreign policy goals. As the Valentas' article previously cited makes clear, the Soviets still recognize their limitations in operating in this part of the world, but they have seen that even a modest investment on their part can reap considerable gains and hence they have been willing to make a greater commitment there.

Strategies and Tactics

Along with the new capabilities has come also a shift in Soviet strategy and tactics.[4] Overall, the Soviet approach has become much more sophisticated than in the past. Among the changes:

First, there has been a change toward emphasis on long-term rather than short-term gains. The Soviets recognize the level of industrialization and the class situation in Latin America is not sufficient to produce soon many workers' revolutions. But they do see strong possibilities for building a solid base for future use. The strategy is oriented toward caution, prudence, and gradual gain rather than some quick and easy victory. Che Guevara's abortive campaign in Bolivia in the 1960s helped force this reassessment.

Second, the Soviets have learned to play cleverly on and take advantage of the anti-Americanism throughout the area.

Third and related, the Soviets have learned that they need not go so far as to support guerrilla action everywhere. But even where democratic and popular governments are in power (Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic), there are advantages to be gained from playing on both nationalism and anti-Americanism.

Fourth, there has been a change in guerrilla tactics. From an emphasis on Cuba-like revolutions two decades ago and the

foco theory of the early 1970s, the Soviets have moved to a strategy emphasizing broader anti-imperialist strategies and tactics, and the building of broad-based opposition coalitions.

Fifth, the Soviets have in key revolutionary contexts like Nicaragua five years ago and El Salvador today forced the several anti-regime groups to come together for the common struggle. This has afforded a unity and a coherence to these efforts that were not present before.

Sixth, the Soviets have been careful to try to build international support. This includes support not just from communist countries but also other Third World countries, socialist ones and the Socialist International. It involves additionally building a base of support in the United States. Church groups, human rights lobbies, and other groups can be used for advantage.

Seventh, the Soviets and their Eastern European allies have themselves taken a stronger hand in orienting the Central American/ Caribbean revolutionary groups ideologically, providing training and indoctrination, assuring a stronger degree of ideological orthodoxy.

Eighth, the Soviets are realistic. They do not believe all of Central America and the Caribbean will tomorrow fall into their hands. But they do see situations there to take advantage of, to cause embarrassment for and frustrate the United States, to tie up U. S. economic and military resources, to deny possibilities to the United States if not yet seize them for the Soviet Union.

III

The Soviet Union and Latin American Realities

The United States and the Soviet Union have many problems in common in their efforts to advance their interests in Latin America. As we examine both those aspects favoring Soviet interests in Latin America and those operating against them, the point will become clearer.

Aspects Favoring an Expanded Soviet Influence

There are many aspects of society and culture in Central America and the Caribbean that help advance Soviet interests there. Among them:

First, nationalism and anti-Americanism are strong. The Soviets have been clever in exploiting these factors to their own advantage.

Second, the economic and social conditions are such that Soviet interests may be advanced. This means the countries of the region are neither so traditional and backward that they are politically inert, nor so developed as to have evolved some immunity to revolutionary appeals. Rather they are in that intermediate and hence potentially revolutionary category analyzed by Crane Brinton and other students of modern-day revolutions where development is occurring but not fast enough to satisfy the expectations that have been raised, or else the development has gone in corrupt and perverted directions as under Batista and the later Somoza.[5]

Third, there is a disaffected class of young people and umemployed intellectuals for whom the systems of Central America

and the Caribbean have not yet found an appropriate place. These elements have provided the leadership for the area's guerrilla movements.

Fourth, the area may be said to have a certain affinity for monistic or wholistic solutions which also works to the Soviets' advantage. In a famous passage historian Richard Morse argued strongly that it is a shorter and easier step from monolithic and theocratic Thomism to monolithic and "theocratic" Marxism-Leninism than it is from Thomism to liberalism, pluralism, and democracy.[6] It may be posited further that it is a relatively short step from the state capitalism characteristic of the area (90 percent of GNP generated by the public sector in Bolivia, 60 percent in Brazil) to a system of state socialism; all that is required is a shift in political leadership at the apex of these historically pyramidal systems.

Aspects Impeding on Expanded Soviet Presence

While the conditions in Central America and the Caribbean described above help make that area seem ripe for possible expanded Soviet influence, there are also cultural, sociological, and political factors that help impede that influence.[7] Among these:

First, the Soviets do not really like or get along in Latin America society very well. They often have the same language and cultural prejudices as we -- arguably even more so. Since they are Weberians, more or less, in their expectations of rational bureaucratic behavior as we are, the more informal, charismatic style of decision-making of a Fidel Castro tends to drive them crazy. They do not understand let alone empathize with Latin America any more than we; in fact, probably a good deal less. They live in their own compounds, seldom socialize, seldom speak the language,

make fun of the Latin Americans behind their backs, tell demeaning ethnic and racial jokes, etc.

Second, there is not a residual of good will toward the Soviet Union in Latin America. Public opinion polls are not favorable toward the Soviet Union. The Latin Americans do not like or admire the Soviet political model. It is too rigid, too monolithic, too totalitarian for their taste. Plus the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the suppressing of Poland's Solidarity movement, the subservience and subordination of the Eastern European satellites, the shooting down of the Korean Airlines passenger plane, and the revelations of Soviet machinations in Grenada have all had a major impact. The Latin Americans may have some sympathy for Marxism at the intellectual level and they wish to break or modify their dependency ties to the United States; but Marxism-Leninism, no!

Third, the traditional Communist parties in Latin America are old and tired, overly bureaucratic and overly Stalinist. They do not offer an effective base for the launching of Soviet expansionary policies.

Fourth, there is geography. The distance and logistics are such that it is difficult for the Soviets to carry through an effective effort in the Caribbean. That is changing as their military and political presence increases, but in essence the Soviets know they cannot match U. S. influence and power in this part of the World.

Fifth, there is considerable doubt the Soviets are willing to commit very many financial resources to the region. They are willing of course to accept any plums (Cuba, Nicaragua, Grenada, for a time, Suriname perhaps) that fall into their lap but so far

their economic commitment has been quite modest. Cuba receives upwards of $5 million per day from the Soviets, but so far it appears they are not willing to put anything even near that amount into a defense of the Nicaraguan revolution.

Sixth, the objective conditions in Latin America may not be all that ripe for revolutionary upheaval. The evidence from Latin Americanists indicates that neither the peasantry nor the workers are necessarily or in all countries all that revolutionary. In fact, for the most part, they tend to be conservative. The mass base and consciouness may not exist at present for the successful launching of very many Soviet-like revolutions.

Seventh (and again rather like ourselves), the Soviets have various ideological "hang-ups" about Latin America that get in the way of realistic analysis. This relates to their notions of the class configuration of the area, historical materialism, class conflict as the driving force in change, etc. These are often useful starting points in understanding some aspects of Latin American society and development, but they are not sufficient, complete, or adequately refined explanations. It has been said often that the United States seldom knows what it is doing in Latin America and does not understand the area very well, which accounts for our various missteps and the unanticipated consequences of so many U. S. policies. But the Soviets have a similiar or worse problem in this regard; and the emerging notion now becoming more widespread in U. S. circles that "they know best" (that is, that the Latin Americans themselves are better equipped than outsiders to deal with their own problems) is still anathema in the Soviet Union.

Eighth, related, and finally, there is some suspicion that the dynamics and prevailing models of Latin American politics may

not be very amenable to Marxist-Leninist appeals. Politics in the area is still often patronage-oriented rather than class-based. The traditional accommodative model of politics is still strong in most countries. Liberalism and corporatism are probably more popular at the mass level than is a rigid Marxism-Leninism. The traditional wielders of power are still strong. All this is now changing -- and this is what the contemporary revolution in Latin America is all about -- but so far in most countries of the area these remain the dominant institutions and practices while Marxism-Leninism still represents a minority strain.

IV

Conclusions and Implications

The Soviet Union, operating both on its own and through Cuba, is a rising presence in Central America and the Caribbean, and in all of Latin America. Its capabilities are far greater than they were ten, twenty, and thirty years ago and its strategies and tactics far more complex and sophisticated. It has become a formidable but by no means yet equal rival to the United States in the area. There are also conditions in Latin America that are amenable to Soviet expansionism. The time, hence, when the Soviet threat and potential could be dismissed as silly and ludicrous is over. The evidence for this expanded Soviet role and ambitions is now quite overwhelming. It is time for realistic students of Latin America to recognize this new force or forces in the hemisphere and come to grips with them realistically.

Some would even argue that they can sense, almost <u>feel</u> the United States palpably giving way to the Soviets throughout

the area. I do not see that so strongly myself. I recognize the rising Soviet presence and capability but I also see strong impediments, at least in the near and medium terms, to the Soviets playing a much stronger role throughout the area. There are still quite finite limits on what the Soviets can do in the region. I believe this is recognized realistically in the Soviet Union itself where it is apparently believed (1) the U. S. is a declining presence in Latin America, (2) anti-Americanism and nationalism are rising, (3) the Soviet Union can take advantage of this situation, (4) but it need not make a heavy financial or military commitment, problematic as we have seen from their point of view in any case.

The real problem and issue, it seems to me, is therefore not so much the appeal of communism and the Soviet model, which remain quite limited in Central America and the Caribbean, but rather the capacity of the Soviets to assist, be seen as sympathetic, and attach themselves to the calls for a revolutionary socialism independent of the United States that <u>are</u> widespread throughout the area and that <u>do</u> often appeal to local needs and aspirations. The Soviets recognize this and have adjusted their strategies accordingly. Although the new Soviet policy orientation in this area has obviously military/strategic components, it is essentially a political strategy primarily and it requires generally and primarily a political response. Whether the United States has the will, capacity, and political sophistication to counter it effectively is a question that we must grapple with and that will be at the center of debate in this country in the next years and even decades.

Beyond these important considerations, I believe another one commands our attention. That involves the issue with which we began of the new relations between professional Latin Americanists

and Sovietologists and Soviet foreign policy analysts. Both these groups need to learn from the other. Latin Americanists need to know of the real role the Soviet Union is playing in Latin America and not be scared off by old myths and shibboleths. They also could learn some greater modesty as regards the importance (or relative lack thereof) of their area in the broader world arena. But Soviet specialists also need to learn something about Latin America. They need to get from Latin Americanists an understanding of the role of the military, Church, elites, middle class, workers, peasants, students, and bureaucracy in Latin America, and of the dynamics and processes of the region's politics. Otherwise American foreign policy in Latin America will continue to be based on the same stereotypes, ethnocentrism, problematic assumptions, and lack of understanding that it has often been in the past. One hopes that there is a mutual learning process that comes out of this.

Notes

1. For some parallel comments see William Luers, "The Soviets and Latin America: Three Decades of Tangled U. S. Policies," Unpublished paper, Department of State, 1983.

2. An excellent recent overview is Jiri Valenta and Virginia Valenta, "Soviet Strategies and Policies in the Caribbean Basin" in Howard J. Wiarda (ed.), Rift and Revolution: The Central American Imbroglio (Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1984) 197-252.

3. A good discussion of this complex issue is Jorge Domínguez, "Cuba's Relations with the Caribbean and Central American Countries," in Alan Adelman and Reid Reading (eds.) Confrontation in the Caribbean Basin: International Perspectives on Security, Sovereignty, and Survival (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, forthcoming).

4. An excellent summary and assessment is Ernest Evans, "Revolutionary Movements in Central America. The Development of a New Strategy," in Wiarda (ed.), Rift and Revolution, 167-93.

5. Brinton, Anatomy of Revolution (New York, NY: Random House, 1965); Ted Robert Gurr, Why Men Rebel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

6. Morse, "The Heritage of Latin America" in Louis Hartz (ed.), The Founding of New Societies (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1964).

7. For some overviews see by the author, Politics and Social Change in Latin America: The Distinct Tradition (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2nd revised ed., 1982); Corporatism and National Development in Latin America (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981); In Search of Policy: The United States and Latin America (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1984); and (with Harvey F. Kline) Latin American Politics and Development (Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1979; 2nd revised edition due out from Westview Press in early 1985).

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