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Soviet Interests and Communist Tactics in Central America prior to the Sandinista Victory of 1979

It would not be an underestimation to say that until the victory of the Sandinista revolution in July 1979, Central America was the most neglected region in Latin America in Soviet foreign policy formulation. Even the victory of Castro’s revolution did not much alter the Soviet perception of the area. Two major factors had placed limitations on Soviet interests and activities in Central America. Firstly, its close proximity to the United States, and thus its presence within the American geopolitical sphere of influence. The Soviet analysts and policy-makers were apprehensive of the Monroe Doctrine (proclaimed by Washington in 1823), which has been applied successfully in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in the Western hemisphere, comprising Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, where American security interests are exposed most. The Panama Canal, the Central American countries and the Caribbean basin provide a geographic link with South America that carries important strategic raw materials, such as minerals, ores, oil, refined petroleum products and so forth, which are essential not only for the United States economy but for its defence. Thus, keeping pro-American politically stable regimes in the region has been vital to US security interests.

Since President Theodore Roosevelt declared his corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which gave the US the right to intervene to restore ‘order’ and stability in the region, the United States has not hesitated to use military force where it felt that its interests were threatened. For example, between 1900 and 1930 the US carried out 28 military interventions in the Caribbean basin.¹ North American commitment

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to sustain governments and political systems that maintained capitalist relations in the economic, political and social spheres, was confirmed to Moscow when the United States intervened in Guatemala in 1954 to oust Arbenz’s populist government.

After the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959, Khrushchev announced, in 1960, that the Monroe Doctrine was no longer valid.² However, the Bay of Pigs operation (1961), though unsuccessful; the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962); and the US intervention in the Dominican Republic (1965) showed that Khrushchev’s boast was hollow.

The second important factor which contributed to the lack of early Soviet interests in Central America, was that the ruling elites of Central American countries were staunchly anti-communist and opposed to any links with the Soviet Union whatsoever. This hostility was derived largely out of fear for their own positions and an unwillingness to put their relations with their protector, the United States, at risk. This anti-Soviet attitude had intensified after the abortive Communist uprisings in El Salvador (1932) and Brazil (1935). For the Soviets, these small Central American agricultural societies, which were mainly monocultural, had not much to offer economically.

Nevertheless, Moscow did succeed in establishing diplomatic relations with Nicaragua and Honduras in 1944 and 1945 respectively. The USSR’s wartime alliance with the United States had facilitated those relations. The only Central American country which itself had expressed an interest in establishing diplomatic relations with Moscow was Costa Rica.³ Its socio-economic make-up differed from that of the other four countries in the region. This was due to the fact that its agricultural system was based largely on medium-size, self-sufficient farms, as opposed to the usual pattern of large estates owned by a few families who were directly descended from the original European colonists. However, after the Costa Rican revolution of 1948 these diplomatic relations were broken off and not resumed until the end of the 1950s. Its links with Costa Rica were viewed by Moscow as a sign of greater capacity for autonomy on the part of those countries under United States hegemony. Although these relations were kept low-profile throughout the years, as there was not much compatibility in terms of trade between the two countries, they still had some political significance to the USSR. Costa Rica was the only country in the region where the USSR had an official foothold, at