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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

24 November 1986

Will Nicaragua Get MIGs?

Summary

[Redacted] in about 1980 Moscow decided to provide Nicaragua with MIGs. Since then, however, Washington's concern regarding this issue has become clear to the Kremlin and apparently has kept the Soviets from delivering jet fighters to Managua. We believe the Soviets continue to be sensitive to US injunctions and are unlikely to send MIGs to Nicaragua in the near term. They almost certainly assume that the present US administration would attack such planes if they were discovered based in Nicaragua. [Redacted]

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Although we consider it unlikely, certain calculations might nevertheless lead Moscow to introduce the aircraft, even if their destruction were a forgone conclusion. They might calculate that a US attack would, once the dust had settled, strengthen opposition in the United States to further Contra aid, or would in any event inflame opinion in Latin America and Europe against the United States. [Redacted]

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Even if the MIGs were not destroyed, however, they would not add appreciably to the Sandinistas' ability to defeat the insurgency. Moreover, introduction of MIGs could severely undercut Soviet diplomatic and political efforts to steer the US-USSR arms talks in a favorable direction; US destruction of the aircraft would once again expose Soviet inability to defend a client against US military power; and the act of introducing MIGs might well be seen as provocative and alarming by Latin American countries, such as Mexico. [Redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and can be directed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division [Redacted].

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[redacted] Moscow believes the next US administration may be prone to accept a Sandinista regime as a fait accompli, which would provide a strong motive to hold back on delivery until after the 1988 US elections. These arguments are likely to incline the Soviets to continue to withhold the MIGs from Nicaragua for the next few years. Although it is also possible that Cuban President Fidel Castro could act unilaterally on this issue, we do not believe he would do so. [redacted]

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The Evidence for MIGs to Nicaragua

[redacted] in 1980 about 30 Nicaraguan pilots went to the USSR or Bulgaria to begin a MIG pilot training program which usually takes about three to four years to complete. In mid-1984, Daniel Ortega publicly announced that Nicaraguans were being trained to fly MIGs. [redacted]

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[redacted] Cuba also has been involved in some MIG training of Nicaraguans, probably providing follow-up training to previously trained pilots. [redacted]

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[redacted] we have not yet identified MIGs of any type in Nicaragua. While the following discussions focus on the MIG-21, the same general arguments apply to MIG-17s, -19s, and -23s. [redacted]

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Judging from the number of personnel being trained, it appears that Moscow planned initially to supply Nicaragua with a full squadron of MIGs--12-15 aircraft. The typical Soviet pilot-to-fighter manning ratio of about 1.5:1 would permit the initial cadre of Nicaraguan jet pilots to support operations of a fighter-size unit. [redacted]

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[redacted] some 70-75 aviation technicians have been trained in the USSR--roughly the number of maintenance technicians associated with a Soviet fighter squadron. [redacted]

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MIG Missions

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Moscow apparently planned to supply Managua with MIGs to carry out both air defense and ground attack missions. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Nicaraguan weapons specialists were trained in the USSR on MIG weapons intended for both missions. [Redacted]

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Managua has stated publicly that it has the right and need to acquire these types of aircraft. We have no information, however, indicating what specifically prompted Moscow in 1980 to agree to provide fighter aircraft to the Sandinistas. Nicaragua was not faced with an insurgency at the time, and the US was providing aid to Managua. For its part, Moscow apparently believed it could begin arming Nicaragua as it did Cuba without drawing a serious challenge from Washington. The Sandinistas now claim to be concerned about a potential US invasion and also are interested in ways to interdict rebel resupply flights. MIG-21s could be useful in a defensive role as well as for interdicting supply flights, but currently this effectiveness would be hampered by the Sandinistas' limited air surveillance coverage. Nicaragua's current air surveillance capability is concentrated on the Pacific coast and, while useful in defending against a seaborne invasion, it is inadequate to detect an aerial resupply effort coming from other quarters. Interdiction of air resupply operations would require the installation of similar radar sites along Nicaragua's other borders. [Redacted]

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The MIGs also would be useful, of course, for attacking insurgent base camps across the border in Honduras. They could also be used to attack insurgents in the field, but the attack helicopters already in the Sandinista inventory are better suited for this mission. The Soviets are supplying Nicaragua with more helicopters, both for attack and troop transport. This year Moscow has sent nearly 30 helicopters to Nicaragua, more than doubling the inventory. [Redacted]

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Despite Washington's concern about the introduction of jet fighters into the Nicaraguan inventory, the Soviets reportedly continue to train Nicaraguans to fly MIGs. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Nicaraguans

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recently have gone to the USSR for MIG training and will return next year. Continuing training by Moscow and Havana suggests that although Moscow has been cautious thus far, the Soviets are still holding open the possibility of delivering MIG aircraft to the Sandinistas. [REDACTED]

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#### Indication of Impending Delivery

[REDACTED]

Should the Soviets decide to send fighters to Nicaragua, they could easily take advantage of this knowledge, severely complicating our ability to detect a specific delivery before it occurred. [REDACTED]

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Even so there are indicators which might precede a MIG delivery to Nicaragua. Moscow and Managua reportedly believe that introducing these fighters would lead to moves on Washington's part--either military strikes or even an invasion--to eliminate them. [REDACTED] the Grenada operation in 1983 did much to foster this perception. Because of this concern over the vulnerability of the aircraft, Moscow probably would take steps first to help Managua establish air defenses around the airfield(s) where these fighters are likely to be based. There are no signs yet that such steps have been taken. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The SA-3 normally is used for point defense of fixed sites such as airfields. These SAMs would significantly improve Nicaragua's defenses in the area they are deployed, but probably would require Cuban crews initially to be effective. [REDACTED]

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#### Possible Methods of Delivery

Moscow could deliver MIGs to Nicaragua by sea, air transport, or direct flight from Cuba. Should the Soviets decide to send fighters to Nicaragua by sea, they could readily complicate our ability to detect the delivery before it occurred. Moscow could take steps to conceal aircraft containers at known arms transfer facilities in the USSR, or use other ports of embarkation in the Soviet Union such as Leningrad or Vladivostok. The MIG shipping crates could be loaded and unloaded under tight security at night and--while en route--be stored out of sight below deck. [REDACTED]

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Sea-borne delivery would likely take place at Corinto--Nicaragua's only deepwater port--on the Pacific coast. The arms carrier probably would avoid passage through the Panama Canal, where it would be subject to inspection. Other Soviet arms

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carriers loaded with combat equipment--except those merely carrying military-associated equipment such as trucks and jeeps-- have taken longer but safer routes to Corinto around Cape Horn or across the Pacific. Offloading military cargo at El Bluff, Nicaragua's receiving facility on the east coast, is much more complicated and involves the use of barges to get the cargo ashore where it must be loaded on trailers and transported overland. Because the crates would be much more visible and vulnerable in such a delivery, we consider it less likely. The first MI-25 attack helicopters sent to Nicaragua, however, were delivered through El Bluff. [redacted]

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Fighters could also be delivered to Nicaragua on board transport aircraft. Soviet AN-22 and IL-76 transports (Havana also has two IL-76s) can each carry up to two palletized MIGs. Air delivery of a squadron of MIGs and their associated equipment would thus call for more than half a dozen flights. The flights could be phased over a long period of time, however, to maintain a low profile. Soviet air access to Cuba and Nicaragua from the USSR would essentially follow one of two routes and is dependent on overflight clearances and refueling stops in a variety of countries. The northern route crosses either Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Canada, or Western Europe to include the UK and Ireland. The southern route crosses Yugoslavia, Algeria, Mali, Guinea, and probably Cape Verde and Suriname. By using Aeroflot markings the Soviets might hope to conceal the military nature of these flights. Instead of a direct air delivery from the USSR, the Soviets could also send transports to Cuba to deliver MIGs already there or they could use the Cuban IL-76s. We would be likely to detect the arrival of large transport aircraft in Nicaragua. [redacted]

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The Soviets could also elect to fly MIGs directly to Nicaragua from Cuba. MIG-21s have adequate ferry range to fly the 750 nautical mile trip from Cuba and about 160 MIG-21s are currently based at four airfields in Cuba. There are also about 12 other Cuban airfields that have runways long enough for these fighters. Nicaragua itself has five airfields that could accommodate MIGs--Sandino, Punta Huete, Montelimar, Bluefields, and Puerto Cabezas (see Map). [redacted] Punta Huete was designed to accommodate MIG aircraft. Satellite photography indicates that this new military airfield--the runway is complete but support facilities are still under construction--has many of the earmarks of a fighter base. Sandino, however, is currently the only airfield with hangars that could be used to conceal newly arrived fighters. We believe flying MIGs directly to Nicaragua would be the quickest and perhaps most secure method of delivery. Moreover, the aircraft would arrive intact and would be available for combat operations within hours. [redacted]

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Jet fighters generally are not equipped with adequate navigation systems for long-range over-water flights. MIGs flying from Cuba to Nicaragua, however, could cross the Caribbean Basin by following a properly equipped aircraft--such as a Cubana airlines IL-62. Alternatively, ships equipped with navigation beacons could be stationed along the route--about 150 miles apart--to assist the transit. Cubans likely would fly some, if not all, of the aircraft. [redacted]

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### Other Jets

[redacted]  
[redacted] Nicaraguans have been trained to fly French-built Mirages and that Managua would receive some of these fighters. Paris, however, has announced that it would not provide Managua with advanced fighter aircraft. [redacted]

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[redacted]  
Managua also is expecting L-39 jets. The Czechoslovakian L-39 is designed as a subsonic trainer for advanced jet fighters, but is also attached to some Warsaw Pact operational units as a ground attack fighter. Versions in Cuba and Libya also have a dual role--training and light attack. The L-39 has been used effectively in a counterinsurgency role in Libya and Iraq. Although there is no interceptor version of the L-39, this 340-knot aircraft could also be modified for clear-weather air defense. In 1984 the Sandinistas publicly announced plans to procure the L-39, mentioning negotiations with Prague on training and sales. [redacted]

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[redacted] a Libyan IL-76 transport aircraft en route to Nicaragua with at least one disassembled L-39 on board was seized and turned back by Brazilian authorities when it was discovered that the IL-76 did not hold medical supplies as declared. As far as we can determine, this is the closest the Sandinistas have come to receiving combat jet aircraft. [redacted]

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### Soviet Policy Considerations

For Moscow the decision whether or not to supply jet fighters to the Nicaraguans obviously involves a careful weighing of pluses and minuses. US demarches to the USSR have made clear the seriousness with which the United States would take the introduction of jet fighter aircraft into Nicaragua. Under the Reagan administration, the United States has warned the Soviets on at least 10 occasions. The Soviets almost certainly assume that the present administration would attack such planes if they were discovered in Nicaragua and that Moscow would not be able to

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[redacted]

prevent their destruction. Conceivably they could believe that the US administration might also seize this opportunity to seek through further military action to dislodge the Sandinista government altogether, or to attack Cuba if Cuban forces were drawn into the fighting. [redacted]

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Certain calculations might nevertheless lead Moscow to introduce the aircraft, even if their destruction were a forgone conclusion. If the Soviets judged that, as a consequence of a US attack, support for Contra aid would be decisively undermined and consolidation of the Sandinista regime thereby assured, Moscow might go ahead. Moscow also might calculate that the game would be worth it if a US attack inflamed opinion in Latin America and Europe against the United States. But we believe that, for the time being at least, Moscow will find arguments for restraint more compelling. [redacted]

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Even if the MIGs were not destroyed, they are not as useful as helicopters in many close air support roles and would not contribute appreciably to interdiction of resistance resupply flights without a costly and difficult upgrading of Nicaragua's air surveillance capability. Nor would the Soviets calculate that MIGs would pose a significant military deterrent to US operations in the event of a postulated US attack on the Sandinistas. [redacted]

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We think that Moscow would judge that introduction of MIGs could severely undermine Soviet diplomatic and political efforts to steer US-Soviet relationship in a favorable direction. Fallout from a confrontation with Washington over the jet fighters could affect the whole range of bilateral issues including other regional hotspots, a possible Summit, or the progress of arms limitation talks. [redacted]

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The Soviets would almost certainly be concerned about the likely negative effects of such an action on Latin American audiences. On the one hand, the introduction of MIGs might well be seen as provocative and alarming by the moderate governments in the region that Moscow is wooing, especially Mexico. On the other hand, the destruction of the jets by the United States would reinforce the message sent to leftists by the Grenada events that Moscow and Havana are unwilling or unable to protect their clients. [redacted]

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[redacted] Moscow believes a successor US administration may be prone to accept a Sandinista regime in Nicaragua as a fait accompli. The Soviets think that time works to their advantage. The premise that the most serious challenge to the survival of the Sandinistas will be removed in the next several years militates against willfully placing

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[redacted]

Managua in possible jeopardy in the meantime, or sacrificing other Soviet equities. [redacted]

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The Soviets also have the option of publicly transferring control of the MIGs to Nicaragua and communicating somehow that, until suitable basing is available in Nicaragua, the aircraft were to be stationed in Cuba. This step could be accompanied by demonstrative flights from Cuban airfields of these "Nicaraguan" aircraft. Moscow might see such a move as a means of escalating regional tensions in a way that could embarrass Honduras, build pressures on the US administration not to deliver F-5s to Honduras, stimulate demands for concessions on Contadora, or generate international controversy over the MIGs and US intentions sufficient to constrain a US response in the future to basing of the aircraft in Nicaragua. The Soviets would, of course, have to calculate that the US administration would perceive this move as a serious confrontational step, and they would have to weigh the chances that Washington would attack these aircraft on the ground in Cuba or in flight. [redacted]

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[redacted] continued training of Nicaraguan pilots indicate that until it judges the time propitious for delivery, Moscow will keep MIG-trained pilots up-to-speed on the aircraft, and it could decide in the meantime to introduce air defense equipment such as surface-to-air missiles at some Nicaraguan airfields. Such steps would be intended to reassure the Sandinista leadership and prepare Managua to receive the aircraft on short notice. [redacted]

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### Radii of MIG-21 and L-39 in Offensive Role



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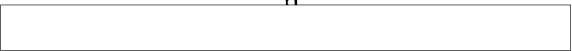
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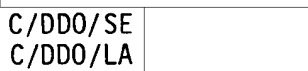





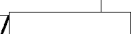





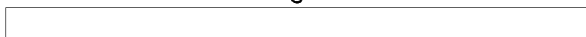


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