

Disputes Blur U.S. Policy on Nicaragua

Continued Split Seen Over Use of Military or Diplomatic Options

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WASHINGTON—Almost four years ago, the Reagan Administration resolved publicly to “draw the line” against the expansion of Soviet influence in Central America. But as President Reagan approaches his second term, internal disputes within the Administration have blurred the line, especially in leftist Nicaragua.

“What is our real policy?” a Republican congressional aide asked recently. “I keep asking, but nobody can tell me.”

Similarly, a leader of the U.S.-supported Nicaraguan rebels confessed: “I don’t really understand what the Administration is up to. It looks mixed up to me.”

Different Stances

And no wonder. At the same time that the Administration is negotiating with the Marxist Sandinistas who control Nicaragua, it is threatening to destroy any Soviet MIG fighter planes that are delivered there and hailing as “freedom fighters” the guerrillas who want to overthrow the Managua regime.

At the same time that some U.S. officials are advocating diplomacy to advance U.S. objectives in Nicaragua, others are convinced that the Sandinistas will respond only to military pressure.

“There is a basic struggle (over Central America policy), and it’s going to continue in the second term,” an Administration official acknowledged. “Sometimes it’s

over issues. Sometimes it’s over people. Sometimes it’s both. . . . It’s something we have to work around. It doesn’t mean we don’t have an effective policy.”

The struggle is not over El Salvador, where the Administration believes the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte is making clear progress in bringing a five-year-old leftist insurgency under control.

Rather, it involves Nicaragua—specifically, whether a negotiated compromise is possible with the Marxist Sandinistas, and if so, what kind of compromise.

Talks Fruitless So Far

Reagan authorized the State Department in May to negotiate directly with them in order to learn what kind of agreement might be possible. But after eight sessions, the talks have produced no clear results.

A secret report prepared last month for the National Security Council noted the lack of progress. “The situation in Central America, particularly in El Salvador and in the regional peace talks, is moving in a direction favorable to U.S. interests, although difficult problems remain,” the report said. “In Nicaragua, the picture is mixed.”

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who launched the negotiations during a surprise visit to Nicaragua in June, has said the United States is pressing four broad concerns in that nation: internal

democracy, a cutoff of aid to leftist Salvadoran guerrillas, a reduction in the Sandinistas’ military buildup and an end to their military ties with the Soviet Bloc. Only last week, the Administration warned the Soviet Union against delivering high-speed jets to Nicaragua, a move the United States fears would disrupt the military balance in Central America.

But it is the American emphasis on Nicaraguan democracy that has proved particularly thorny. Langhorne A. Motley, assistant secretary of state for Latin America, called democracy “an essential element to improving relations among the countries of the area.

“I don’t mean that you take Westport, Conn., Xerox it and put it in Central America,” Motley said. “I’m talking about whatever system is appropriate to the country where people choose their leaders through the ballot box.”

But Nicaragua’s internal political system is precisely the issue on which the Sandinistas have resisted compromise most fiercely, arguing that it is nobody’s business but their own.

No U.S. Concessions

Beyond that, newly elected President Daniel Ortega and other Nicaraguan leaders have complained that the Americans, while insisting on reforms in Nicaragua, have offered no specific concessions in return, such as a resumption of economic aid and a withdrawal of U.S. troops from neighboring Honduras, where they have been advising the Honduran army and running a series of joint maneuvers. The Nicaraguans say they fear that giving in to the U.S. demands will simply lead to more U.S. pressure—and, ultimately, the overthrow of the Sandinista regime that came to power with the 1979 overthrow of Anastasio Somoza, Nicaragua’s longtime rightist

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