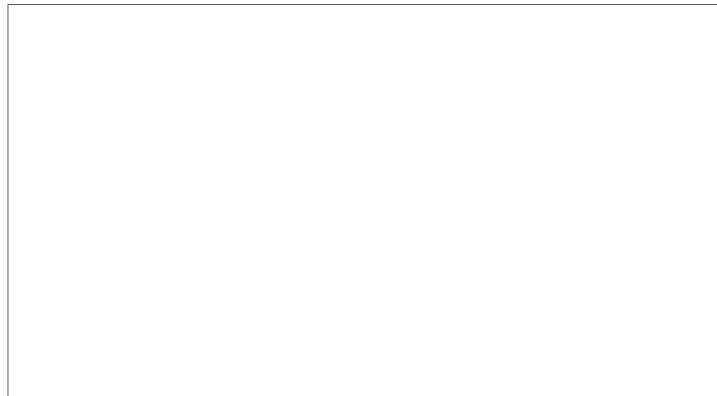


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Communist Military Assistance to Nicaragua: Trends and Implications



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A Research Paper

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December 1987*

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Communist Military Assistance to Nicaragua: Trends and Implications [Redacted]

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Scope Note

This research paper highlights the evolution of Communist arms transfers to Nicaragua and analyzes the likely direction of Communist arms deliveries in the near term. It focuses in particular on Soviet assistance since 1983, its means of delivery, and its impact on Nicaragua's conflict with the anti-Sandinista rebels. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] It is believed that almost all major combat arms delivered to Nicaragua have been identified. It is believed that estimates of the tonnage of military support materiel represent the minimum quantity of military cargo delivered. Estimates of the dollar value of Soviet military deliveries are derived by adding the value of major equipment delivered to the estimated value of deliveries of support equipment, spare parts, and munitions, which are valued in the aggregate on a per-ton basis. The value assigned by weight to such follow-on support was recently revised upward for Soviet deliveries to all Third World nations, based on a comprehensive review of the composition and value of this component of Soviet arms transfers. [Redacted]

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Communist Military Assistance to Nicaragua: Trends and Implications 


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Summary

Information available as of 20 November 1987 was used in this report.

Communist military assistance to Nicaragua since the Sandinista revolution now exceeds \$2.5 billion and probably will continue at or above its current level of \$400-500 million annually as long as Managua faces an active insurgency. The value of Soviet deliveries by mid November 1987 was approaching the record high of \$550 million in 1986. Continuing aid at this level should be sufficient to supply the helicopters, infantry weapons, trucks, ammunition, and other materiel Managua needs to carry on its counterinsurgency without serious shortages. In the short to medium term, the Soviet Union is unlikely to send newer or more expensive equipment, which would be difficult for the Sandinistas to use effectively against the insurgent threat. Moreover, Managua can pay for little, if any, of the materiel delivered. 

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The military assistance already provided has made Nicaragua the strongest conventional military power in Central America and has been vital in limiting the insurgent threat. Nicaragua has more tanks, other armored vehicles, field artillery, and air defense artillery than Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala combined, and its regular armed forces are at least 50 percent larger than those of any of its neighbors. Recent Soviet deliveries are intended to improve Sandinista mobility, firepower, logistic support, and air defense capabilities. Most notably, Moscow has delivered at least 50 helicopters since 1984. 

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Soviet military aid to Nicaragua undoubtedly will fluctuate as a result of changes in the regional political and military situation. Should the insurgency intensify, Moscow would probably provide additional helicopters to enhance mobility and firepower, more trucks and wheeled armored vehicles to increase troop mobility and protection, and improved air defense equipment to try to disrupt insurgent resupply flights. On the other hand, if the insurgent threat declines as a result of the Central American peace plan, Moscow would probably replenish depleted stocks and then reduce military deliveries below



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current levels, possibly passing the savings on to other beleaguered Third World clients fighting insurgencies.

[Redacted]

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Even if the insurgency declined, Moscow probably would still provide several hundred million dollars of military assistance per year to Nicaragua over the longer term. In this situation, Moscow would probably concentrate on building up Nicaragua's conventional armed forces to consolidate the regime and to allay Sandinista fears of a US invasion. Once Managua was militarily secure, Moscow might discreetly build a weapons stockpile for provision to subversive groups in the region. A militarily dominant Nicaragua would provide an effective platform for the Sandinistas to further their revolutionary goals and intimidate their neighbors.

[Redacted]

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It is unlikely that Moscow would deliver jet combat aircraft as long as the United States maintains its clearly stated objections to such a delivery.

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If the USSR decided to deliver new or politically sensitive weapons to Nicaragua, it would probably use deception and denial methods to reduce Washington's reaction time and deny tactical warning to US-backed insurgents and other Central American nations. It is believed that Soviet vessels going to Nicaragua in the past have employed more deceptive measures than those going to other Third World clients. Moscow also uses Cuba as a transshipment point for military cargo destined for Nicaragua, and it could calculate that new weapons shipped via this channel would not set off alarms in Washington because ships frequently travel between Cuba and Nicaragua. The Soviets would, moreover, retain an element of deniability in their military relationship with the Sandinistas.

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Communist Military Assistance to Nicaragua: Trends and Implications

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The Arming of Nicaragua

Since the Sandinista revolution in 1979, the Soviet Union and its Communist allies have supplied Nicaragua with nearly all of its military needs at little cost to Managua. In the early years after the revolution, Moscow provided Managua with the weapons to build a conventional army. The Kremlin did not deliver these arms directly but relied on friends and allies to ship this materiel. Since 1984 the Soviets have played a more direct role in shipping materiel to the Sandinistas and have concentrated their deliveries on bolstering the counterinsurgency effort in Nicaragua. Soviet deliveries reached a record high of \$550 million in 1986, and the value of such shipments by mid November 1987 was approaching that level.

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Moscow Provides Materiel Indirectly: 1980-84

During the early years after the revolution, Nicaragua received cumulative shipments of military hardware from the Soviet Union in excess of \$1 billion, much of which was delivered on Algerian and Bulgarian vessels. Four Algerian ships delivered almost 11,000 metric tons of materiel between 1981 and 1982, including Nicaragua's first medium tanks and armored personnel carriers. Bulgarian ships delivered some 16,000 tons of equipment, including additional armored vehicles and radars, in five trips between 1982 and 1984. East Germany also made at least five deliveries of support materiel totaling some \$40 million during this time; and North Korea, the only other Communist supplier, provided four patrol boats worth \$8 million.

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It is believed that most, if not all, of the materiel delivered on the Algerian and Bulgarian ships was of Soviet origin and, at least in the case of Algeria, was provided specifically for transshipment to Nicaragua. Some cargo delivered to Mers-el-Kebir probably came from Nikolayev Port Facility South, the dedicated arms exporting facility in the Soviet Union. Once delivered to Algeria, the hardware may have been stored separately before being loaded on an Algerian ship. Similar equipment was reported to be in Nicaragua after a visit by an Algerian vessel.

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[Redacted] the Bulgarian shipments also originated in the Soviet Union. Soviet ships

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reportedly offloaded equipment of the types later delivered to Nicaragua at the port of Burgas. This equipment probably was later transported by Bulgarian vessels to Nicaragua. Bulgaria does not have a surplus of military equipment, making it unlikely that the large numbers of armored vehicles, for example, that were sent to Nicaragua came from Bulgarian stocks. [redacted]

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Moscow also made some direct military deliveries to Nicaragua throughout this period from ports other than Nikolayev. Ships leaving the Soviet Union--at least one in 1981, another in 1982, and some 19 during 1983--carried about 8,000 tons of support materiel to the Sandinistas. These ships were part of the regular liner service that delivers both military and nonmilitary goods from ports such as Leningrad. The military portions of the cargo were probably made up of 11 MI-8 transport helicopters, trucks, spare parts, and other items. [redacted]

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The USSR may have relied to a large extent on other countries to ship major arms to Nicaragua in the 1981-84 period because it was uncertain about the US response. Moscow may have feared providing Washington with a pretext for military action against the Sandinista regime; it almost certainly sought to avoid any direct conflict with the new US administration. [redacted]

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Direct Soviet Deliveries Increase: 1984-87

Moscow began direct shipments of large quantities of combat arms to the Sandinistas in late 1984. The Soviet ship Bakuriani arrived in Corinto from Nikolayev in November after avoiding the Panama Canal by traveling around the tip of South America. Since then, three more Nikolayev deliveries have occurred--two in 1986 and one so far in 1987--with some 14,000 tons of materiel, about a quarter of all Soviet tonnage shipped to Nicaragua from 1984 through November 1987. Military voyages from other Soviet ports also rose, particularly in 1986 when 33 trips were made. Eighteen shipments had been identified by mid November 1987. Prior to 1986, the Soviets sent an average of 15 such deliveries to Nicaragua annually. [redacted]

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East European nations made significant shipments in 1985 and 1986. They picked up some of the slack during an ebb in Soviet deliveries by shipping more in 1985 than all the previous years combined--some \$55 million worth of military assistance in 1985, compared with \$46 million during 1981-84. Most of this aid was provided by East

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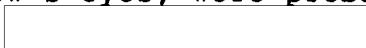
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Germany, although Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania supplied small amounts. In 1986 East European deliveries dropped back to \$35 million and will probably continue to remain low in 1987. The North Koreans also had 1,000 tons of arms--possibly rifles, rocket launchers, and ammunition from Iran--awaiting shipment to Nicaragua in 1985. These arms probably were delivered. Four North Korean patrol boats are also currently in Cuba awaiting delivery to Nicaragua.



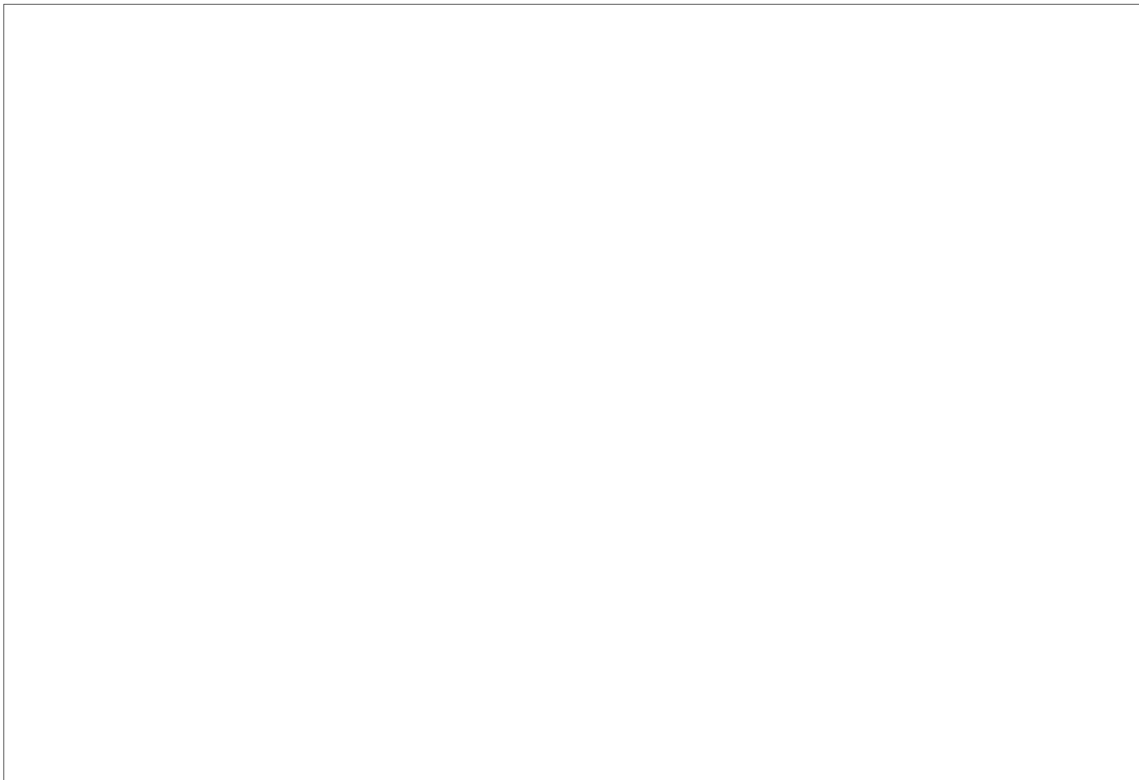
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The Soviets probably became more directly involved in supplying military equipment as concern over the US reaction lessened and political commitment to the Sandinista regime grew. At the same time, the Sandinistas became more firmly entrenched, developed a viable conventional army, and therefore, in Moscow's eyes, were probably more deserving of Soviet assistance.



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The USSR has employed deception and denial measures with each of the four shipments of weapons from Nikolayev. Such steps presumably were taken to reduce Washington's ability to react to the deliveries before they reached Nicaragua and to downplay Moscow's military relationship with the Sandinistas:



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The Soviets may be taking these steps to confuse and complicate any short-term US response to a pending arms delivery by introducing elements of uncertainty about where the ship is actually destined, what it is really carrying, and when it will actually arrive in port. Moscow may also be trying to establish a pattern by which more sensitive equipment could be delivered to Nicaragua by testing the West's responses to the use of deceptive measures.



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The Cuban Role

Cuba was the first nation to provide military assistance to Nicaragua after the Sandinistas came to power, and Havana sent a significant amount of military equipment to Managua from 1979 through 1983. This materiel consisted mostly of field artillery and air defense guns, the bulk of which arrived in 1980. Beginning in 1984, direct Cuban provision of identified military equipment dropped off. Even so, substantial quantities of materiel--probably mostly small arms and ammunition--are still shipped to Nicaragua from Cuba:

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--Nicaraguan, Cuban, and Cuban-controlled ships shuttle frequently between the two countries, and the offloading of some military equipment from at least two such voyages. One Nicaraguan ship brought a radar from Cuba to Rama in March 1987, and another ship delivered at least 16 ZPU-4 anti-aircraft guns in April 1987 to the same port. These shuttle ships reportedly have also towed Zhuk-class patrol boats from Cuba to Nicaragua.

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--Security precautions are often put into effect at El Bluff or Rama, indicating the imminent arrival of military cargo on the shuttle ships from Cuba. These security precautions include: deployment of early warning radars to the area, movement of patrol boats on the river between El Bluff and Rama, deployment of underwater demolition teams to search the port and river for mines, and deployment of troops and helicopters to the area to protect the convoys carrying offloaded equipment.

--Reportedly a crate taken off the Aracely, one of the Nicaraguan shuttle ships, broke open, revealing RPK light machineguns.



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--Cargo manifests accompanying Cuban deliveries to Nicaragua sometimes include high tonnages of such items as 'dolls' and 'toys' that appear too frequently to actually be playthings. Some 10 shipments of 'dolls' and 'toys,' totaling more than 600 tons, have been made in 1987 alone.

--Some materiel is also delivered by air. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] most Cuban materiel for Nicaragua is almost certainly provided by Moscow. It is likely that this materiel either never enters the Cuban inventory or, if taken from Cuban stocks, is replaced by the Soviets.

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--The Soviets have used Cuba to transship weapons to the Sandinistas on several occasions. A total of six AN-26 transport aircraft delivered to Cuba between 1983 and 1986 were assembled and flown to Nicaragua, and at least five Soviet-built Zhuk-class patrol boats were towed from Cuba to Nicaragua between 1982 and 1987. The Soviets replenished the Cuban inventory with at least 14 Zhuks during this time.

--In 1985 three Soviet arms carriers were in port in Mariel, Cuba, and two Nicaraguan shuttle ships were berthed next to them. It cannot be established conclusively that military cargo was moved from the Soviet ships to the Nicaraguan ships, but the uncommon berthing practice suggests that it was.

--Cuba does not manufacture sufficient quantities of small arms and ammunition to allow exports, so the large quantities delivered to Nicaragua on the shuttle ships almost certainly come from Cuba's military benefactor, the Soviet Union. [Redacted]

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Cuba's growing role as a transshipment point for military goods has been accompanied by a slight decline in other forms of Cuban assistance to Nicaragua:

--Cubans fly fewer Nicaraguan combat missions than in 1985.

--Since 1985 there is no information to suggest that Nicaraguans are currently training on air defense missile systems in Cuba, although some communications

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and much officer training are still provided there.

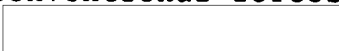
--Since completion of the Punta Huete runway in late 1985, the Cubans do not appear to have been actively involved in military construction in Nicaragua.



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Impact of Communist Military Deliveries on the Sandinista Regime

Communist military assistance in the early years after the revolution transformed the Sandinista guerrillas into the largest conventional force in Central America. In more recent years, the types and quantities of military equipment delivered indicate that Moscow's and Managua's priorities have shifted from building conventional forces to confronting the insurgency.



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Creating a Conventional Army: 1980-84

Large arms deliveries during the first years after the revolution helped Nicaragua create the largest ground force in Central America.



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the Soviets reportedly provided Managua with more than 130 T-54/55 medium tanks, two dozen PT-76 light amphibious tanks, and some 130 BTR-60 and BTR-152 armored personnel carriers (APCs). The first tanks were delivered by an Algerian ship in 1981, but much of the armor--as well as large numbers of field artillery and air defense weapons--was shipped on Bulgarian vessels in 1982 and 1983. The last and largest major Bulgarian shipment, in October 1984, contained more than 180 tanks and other armored vehicles and more than 20 early warning and coastal surveillance radars.



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Soviet, Cuban, and East German advisers provided training on these new systems, as well as basic training for new conscripts, while other Communist countries worked to improve the military infrastructure. The Bulgarians began construction of a deepwater port at El Bluff, which is still under way but proceeding very slowly. Other Communist aid went into facilities for the thousands of new recruits, while still other assistance improved the road network.



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Confronting the Insurgency: 1984-87


Communist military assistance since late 1984 has focused on improving Managua's counterinsurgent efforts. The types and quantities of weapons delivered--large numbers of



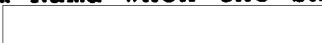
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helicopters, trucks, munitions, early warning radars, and air defense weapons--have increased Sandinista mobility, firepower, and air defense capabilities. 


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Greater Mobility. Soviet deliveries have facilitated government movement throughout the country to meet the insurgent threat. Moscow has provided 37 transport helicopters--MI-8 and MI-17s--since late 1984. These helicopters can carry up to 24 troops and are armed with 12.7-mm machineguns, 57-mm rockets, and bombs. They allow the Sandinista troops to reach northern and eastern parts of the country where the road network is undeveloped. The helicopters reportedly are also used to protect the road leading from Rama when the shuttle ships make arms deliveries. 

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Nicaragua now has six AN-26 transport aircraft in its inventory--although two are registered to the civilian airline--that further enhance mobility. These aircraft can carry either passengers or cargo and have been used to move materiel from the Managua area to the east coast where insurgent activity is greater. The AN-26s also have been used for bombing and reconnaissance missions. 

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Delivery of some 5,000 vehicles since 1985 by the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe--primarily East Germany--further enhances Sandinista troop movement, logistic resupply, and rapid dispersion of military materiel throughout the country. In late 1984, and again in 1986, the Sandinistas received a total of 14 40-ton trailers that are used to move tracked armored vehicles, such as tanks, without wearing out the vehicles themselves. Other vehicles--mostly trucks and jeeps--also assist in the dispersion of newly arrived materiel. 

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More Firepower. Moscow has also provided Managua with assault helicopters and patrol boats that markedly increase Sandinista firepower and threaten insurgent activities. The Soviets delivered the first six MI-25 helicopter gunships in late 1984, another six in 1986, and one more in mid-1987. The aircraft are armed with machineguns, cannons, air-to-ground rockets, and bombs. They are ideal for attacking insurgent bases--although they have never been used this way--and they provide effective support for military operations, including security for convoys that meet the smaller arms carriers visiting the east coast of Nicaragua. Soviet-built Zhuk-class patrol boats also support arms deliveries by patrolling the Rio Escondido between El Bluff



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and Rama, preventing the insurgents from establishing themselves in the area. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets have, with Cuban help, sent Managua large quantities of expendables needed to fight the intensifying war. Consumables made up more than 55 percent of all military tonnage delivered between 1985 and 1987, up from some 40 percent during the 1981-84 time frame. In the first six months of 1987 alone, it is estimated that at least 8,500 tons of small arms and ammunition were delivered to Managua by Havana and Moscow. The two Nikolayev ships that called in Nicaragua in 1986 may have carried as much as 8,200 tons of ammunition. From 1982 to 1984, the Algerian and Bulgarian ships probably brought some 12,000 tons of munitions on behalf of the Soviets. [REDACTED]

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Improved Early Warning and Air Defense Capability. Communist early warning radars and air defense weapons, while improving Managua's ability to track aircraft, have only marginally enhanced the Sandinistas' ability to shoot them down. Nicaragua received its largest delivery of radars in late 1984, followed by a second surge in 1987. Effective use of these radars in a nationwide network will improve counterinsurgency efforts by allowing the Sandinistas to identify and track rebel resupply flights better, particularly in the eastern portion of the country. Stopping these flights, which have been delivering supplies to the insurgents virtually unhampered since March 1987, is a top priority for the Sandinistas. [REDACTED]

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Support for Political Violence in Latin America

Nicaragua has received some small arms and ammunition from other Communist nations that it almost certainly has passed on to insurgent groups in Latin America. Managua's involvement in arms trafficking includes the supply of most of the US Vietnam-vintage M-16 assault rifles that have been recovered in El Salvador from leftist insurgents between 1979 and 1984. The provision of weapons has dropped off in the last few years, probably at least in part as a result of Managua's heightened attention to its own counterinsurgent effort. The Sandinistas, however, continue to provide ammunition to the Salvadoran guerrillas. [REDACTED]

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Nicaragua has also provided weapons from its own inventory or has sought to procure weapons on the

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[redacted]

international market. At least six of the weapons recovered following the 19th of April Movement's takeover of the Palace of Justice in Colombia in November 1985 can be linked to Nicaragua. [redacted]

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Should Managua no longer need to concentrate on fighting the insurgents, Sandinista assistance to regional leftists would probably rise. When not faced with an active civil war, the Sandinistas would have more materiel available that could be provided to regional groups to help them further both their own goals as well as Sandinista revolutionary ideals. Such assistance, however, would have to be very discreet so as not to elicit an international outcry in the wake of the Central American peace plan.

[redacted]

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Although Nicaragua has received large numbers of air defense weapons, the Sandinistas typically have not been able to use them effectively against insurgent resupply flights. The largest delivery of air defense weapons occurred in 1987, following smaller shipments in earlier years. The optically guided 23-mm ZU-23 antiaircraft (AA) guns delivered in 1987 provide some improvement but lack sufficient range to be effective against the rebel flights. The radar-directed KS-19 guns and the 57-mm S-60 guns delivered in 1987 pose a threat to the flights because they are the only weapons capable of engaging targets at high altitude and at night. In 1986 and 1987 the Sandinistas deployed some of the KS-19s to the eastern portion of the country, but the guns had not inflicted any losses by November 1987. The wheeled S-60--which is slightly more mobile and has a higher rate of fire than the KS-19--may prove more effective once deployed. The Sandinistas also have several hundred SA-7 hand-held surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) as well as more powerful and versatile SA-14 and SA-16 SAMs. All of these weapons require visual target acquisition, which reduces their effectiveness at night when the resupply flights operate. [redacted]

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Communist Economic Aid Increasing

Nicaragua has received most of its economic aid from Warsaw Pact countries and Cuba since 1984, when oil, other imports, and project development aid from non-Communist

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sources began to dry up as a result of Managua's increasingly radical stance. By 1986 Communist countries accounted for about two-thirds of aid flows from non-Communist sources, or more than \$2 billion. With an estimated 3,000 civilian technicians in country (about 85 percent of them Cubans) and some 4,000 Nicaraguans training in Communist academic establishments, the Soviet Union and its allies have consolidated their position as the dominant foreign economic influence in Nicaragua. [redacted]

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Commodity assistance to relieve import shortfalls is the predominant element in Warsaw Pact economic aid, with nearly \$750 million worth of oil, food, and other products having been delivered. The Soviet agreement in 1984 to meet Nicaragua's annual oil needs on credit has been the most important economic assistance provided. Eastern Europe is also providing oil, but the value of these commitments is not clear. Another \$550 million in deliveries represents machinery, equipment, and long-term development aid. Projects under way with Soviet and East European assistance include:

- Gold mining at Bonanza and Siuna and oil and minerals prospecting elsewhere.
- A satellite ground station.
- School and hospital construction.
- Fishing and port development.
- The Pacific Coast irrigation project and hydropower development.

Project aid is expected to accelerate from its present low level over the next few years as major projects enter an advanced stage of implementation. [redacted]

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Cuba has provided some \$400 million of assistance since 1980, most of which has gone into a sugar mill and into airfield, road, and railway construction, as well as oil storage facilities and irrigation projects. Cuban participation in economic development has receded from the high levels of the early 1980s, when 5,000 Cuban technicians were in Nicaragua and 4,000 Nicaraguans were in Cuba for training. Cuban-trained Nicaraguans have replaced Cubans in teaching and other administrative jobs, and Cuba has been

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reluctant to commit new resources to Nicaraguan projects because of competing requirements at home. [Redacted]

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Outlook and Implications

Communist military deliveries to Nicaragua will probably continue at a fairly steady pace as long as Managua faces an active insurgency. The Soviets almost certainly are committed to supplying whatever military assistance they deem necessary to help the Sandinistas combat the rebels. If the insurgent threat remains at current levels, most Communist aid will probably consist of helicopters, trucks, and consumables, delivered in quantities comparable with those of 1986. Since Nicaragua pays for little, if any, of the materiel it receives, the Soviets will probably choose not to send newer or more expensive equipment that is in demand by paying clients like Iraq. Moreover, more sophisticated weaponry would require an increased Soviet or Cuban advisory presence, something Moscow probably is trying to avoid. The Kremlin nonetheless has several options to improve Managua's military capabilities against the insurgents. [Redacted]

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Should hostilities intensify, Moscow would likely step up deliveries of trucks and wheeled armored vehicles, air defense equipment, and additional and more effective helicopters. Although jet combat aircraft would enhance the Sandinistas' defenses against aerial resupply, it is doubtful that Moscow would provide such aircraft in the near term to avoid adverse reactions from the West. [Redacted]

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If insurgent activity were to decline, the Soviets would probably maintain their current level of military support for at least a year to rebuild stocks depleted by the war. Afterward, the number and tonnage of deliveries could fall to a level comparable with the 1982-84 period when the Soviets delivered \$300-400 million worth of materiel each year. The \$100-150 million saved each year by Moscow could be passed on to Moscow's other beleaguered clients fighting insurgencies, although the impact for some would be marginal given their larger needs. [Redacted]

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Over the longer term, it is believed that Moscow, unless constrained by a regional accord, would continue to build up the Sandinistas' conventional capabilities.

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The Soviets' first priority would be the provision of the conventional materiel necessary to help the Sandinistas protect themselves from any remaining internal threats. As a second priority, the Soviets would probably continue to enhance the defenses around Managua to provide still more protection from an external attack. Finally, the Soviets might create a large stockpile of weapons for the Sandinistas to distribute to regional insurgent and terrorist groups to further their revolutionary goals.

[REDACTED]

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Improved Ground Forces

Soviet efforts to improve Managua's ground forces would probably include delivery of both armored and unarmored vehicles. Moscow would almost certainly continue to ship large numbers of trucks to replace those that are damaged, worn out, or poorly maintained. If an insurgent threat continues, delivery of wheeled APCs would also be likely, given the Sandinistas' need to move troops around the country to combat the insurgents and defend convoys of unarmed vehicles. Such vehicles would include the BTR-152 and the BTR-60, which Managua already has in its inventory. Additional wheeled armored reconnaissance vehicles--such as the BRDM-2--would also be useful in stepped-up counterinsurgent operations. It is unlikely that the Soviets would send more tanks or tracked APCs because such vehicles are not as useful in an unconventional war as the more mobile wheeled vehicles.

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The Soviets could also provide more light artillery, infantry support weapons, and rocket launchers to improve Nicaragua's ground forces. The Sandinistas' 76-mm guns, ZIS-3s, are ineffective against the insurgents; light artillery that can be easily moved would be more useful. Truck-mounted rocket launchers, such as the 122-mm BM-21, are also fairly mobile and are already in the Sandinista inventory. The Soviets could deliver more of these as well as additional 122-mm and 152-mm howitzers.

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More Effective Air Defenses

At present, Nicaragua's air defenses have the double task of targeting the insurgent resupply flights and defending against conventional air attacks, and Moscow could take several steps to improve both facets. Managua's top priority is almost certainly to interrupt the insurgent resupply flights. The Sandinistas now have a growing nationwide air defense tracking network, but air defense weapons currently in the inventory usually have been


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ineffective in shooting rebel supply craft. To threaten the insurgent pipeline seriously, the Sandinistas would need a more mobile weapon like the radar-guided ZSU-23-4 self-propelled AA gun. 

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To meet a conventional threat, the Soviets could provide the SA-2 or the SA-3 SAM system or the more mobile SA-6 and SA-8 SAMs. Some in-country preparation would be necessary to deploy the SA-2, and refresher training on the use of any of these systems would be essential. 

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Better Air Capabilities

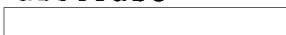
The Sandinistas already have some of the best aircraft available for counterinsurgency operations with the MI-25 helicopter gunship and the MI-17 transport helicopter. If, however, the Soviets chose to further upgrade this capability, they would probably send the recently identified MI-35, the export version of the MI-25 Hind E. This aircraft has a more powerful engine, improved countermeasures, and carries more air-to-ground rocket launchers than the MI-25. Alternatively, the Soviets could supply additional countermeasure packages for incorporation in the aircraft the Sandinistas already have to defend against the SAMs in rebel hands. In either case, the Nicaraguans would need additional training and greater maintenance support to use these systems effectively. 

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The Soviets could improve the Sandinista transport aircraft fleet by supplying additional AN-26 transports or upgraded AN-32 transports. Peru is currently exchanging its AN-26s for new AN-32s in a barter arrangement with the Soviet Union, and the AN-26s from Peru reportedly may go to Nicaragua. Either aircraft would enhance Sandinista efforts to supply troops fighting the insurgents in the northern and eastern portions of the country. 

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Delivery of Fighter Aircraft

It is unlikely that Moscow will deliver jet combat aircraft to Nicaragua in the near term, although Managua has made preparations to receive them at any time. Managua continues to request MIGs. Construction of the jet-capable runway at Punta Huete has been finished for some time and the nationwide radar network needed to detect an imminent air attack is virtually complete. Moreover, such aircraft could be easily and rapidly delivered from Cuba. 

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Despite Managua's preparations to receive jet combat aircraft, Moscow probably will continue to withhold delivery for political reasons:




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--Washington has warned the Soviets on a number of occasions since 1980 that the United States would take very seriously the introduction of jet fighter aircraft into Nicaragua.

--Moscow almost certainly assumes that such planes would be attacked if discovered. Delivery of MIGs would be seen as provocative by other nations and would do significant harm to US-Soviet and Soviet-Latin American relations.

--Although it is also possible that Castro could unilaterally provide MIGs, it is not believed he would do so given the strong adverse reaction this would probably cause in Moscow. 

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