

On the other hand, the geographical situation of the Caribbean Basin, strongly favours restraint on the part of Soviet policy-makers. In the first place, its distance from the Soviet Union makes it difficult to sustain forces there. This is to some degree mitigated by access to facilities in Cuba, but the problem of logistical support over extended and vulnerable lines of communication remains. This is particularly true of reinforcement during crisis. Distance from the Soviet Union is coupled with closeness to the United States. The result is a massive potential, if not actual, American conventional superiority in the region — a superiority which has been repeatedly demonstrated in exercises and combat use (Grenada) in the region in recent years. The Soviet Union cannot redress this imbalance without seriously degrading its military posture elsewhere. In such circumstances, “advance posts” in the strategic backyard of the United States are both highly vulnerable and relatively easily suppressed. This imbalance encourages caution in the assumption of commitments which the Soviet Union might later feel compelled to defend. It is significant in this regard that the Soviet Union has never formally assumed a commitment to the defence of its closest regional ally, Cuba.²³

Soviet statements, moreover, have not extended such guarantees to Nicaragua and indeed do not include Nicaragua in the categories of “socialist community” or “fraternal socialist countries”. This should be viewed in the context of the stated commitment of the Soviet armed forces to “defend the gains of socialism”.²⁴ It probably reflects not only doctrinal rectitude (Nicaragua is not, after all, socialist, as that term is understood in Soviet Marxist scholarship), but also again a reluctance to assume implicit let alone explicit commitments which, if challenged, would necessitate either surrender or escalation. This is particularly compelling since, in view of the perceived importance of US interests in the region and the favourable (from the American perspective) balance of forces in

²³ M. Rothenberg “Latin America in Soviet Eyes”, *Problems of Communism* (Sept.-Oct. 1983), p. 3. This is not to say that the Soviet Union might not feel compelled, despite the lack of such a guarantee, to react in some fashion in the event of an American attack on Cuba. In this context, it is germane to note that Soviet leaders have identified Cuba as an inseparable part of the community of socialist states.

²⁴ The closest that Soviet commentators have come is a single mention of Nicaragua as a “state of socialist orientation” in *Pravda* in 1983. This is a category clearly inferior in Soviet eyes to that of the “socialist states”. See Robert Leiken, “The USSR and Central America: Great Expectations Dampened?”, in Joseph Cirincione, ed., *Central America and the Western Alliance* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), p. 167.