

tunity to expand their own influence and to undermine US positions in an area of great perceived strategic significance to the United States. By 1979, they were in a far better position to take advantage of opportunities in the region than they had been in the cases of Guatemala and Cuba, twenty five and twenty years before. The initial Soviet response to the Nicaraguan Revolution was accordingly far less hesitant.

The Sandinistas came to power committed, like their Cuban and Guatemalan predecessors, to deep socio-economic transformation and to discontinuing Nicaragua's previous alignment with the United States in foreign policy. Moreover, a number of the leaders of the movement had an openly avowed Marxist-Leninist orientation in their political and social thought, blamed many of their country's ills on what they perceived to be systematic US interference in Nicaraguan affairs and were dedicated to the spread of their revolution to other countries in Central America. These domestic and international attitudes on the part of the new Nicaraguan regime provided the local conditions for the establishment of friendly ties with the Soviet Union.

That Soviet-Nicaraguan relations have developed and Nicaraguan-American relations have deteriorated to the degree they have is, however, in large part the result of US policies which left the Nicaraguans little choice but to deepen their dependence on Cuba and the Soviet Union. This in turn has had the effect of confirming US suspicions and worsening relations between the two countries still further.

The degree to which the Soviet Union can consolidate its position in Nicaragua at the expense of the United States continues to be constrained by Soviet economic weakness, by the continuing preponderance of US military power in the region, and by the fact that Soviet involvement in regional conflict carries risks of military confrontation and escalation of a kind which the Soviet Union seeks to avoid. The latter consideration gained renewed strength with the election of Ronald Reagan and subsequent increases in US military activity in the region, culminating in the invasion of Grenada (see below). In this context, the Soviet response to regional crisis continues to be cautiously incremental. There is little evidence of any Soviet willingness to challenge US security in the region directly, and the insistence of many scholars that the crisis in the Caribbean is local and North-South, rather than East-West, in character seems sound. This has important policy implications, as shall be seen below.