PREFACE

The Central American region of which Nicaragua is an important state has always been an area of vital interest to the foreign policy of the United States. United States strategic interests and ideological considerations have occupied a dominant role in shaping its policy towards the western hemisphere particularly to the region “south of the border.” The region is highly significant to the United States in terms of hemispheric interests as well as national security considerations. The strategic importance of the Panama Canal, direct access to the Caribbean and the oil fields of Mexico, are some of the important concerns that have shaped U.S policy towards the region. For U.S. policy-makers the Central American region as well as the Caribbean are areas of geographical proximity and constitute the ‘backyard’ of the United States. Hence any kind of regional or external political or ideological interference is regarded as a threat to U.S. interests. From the nineteenth century onwards the United States has adopted geopolitical parameters in identifying its interests and formulating policy in the region. United States policy towards Nicaragua is a typical case of its domination and intervention in Central America, which was aptly manifested during the Reagan Administration from 1981 to 1988, and which forms an important focus of this study.

The history of U.S. involvement in the western hemisphere has been a prolonged effort for the protection of its interests. In the course of its history and its relations with the western hemisphere and Central America in particular, the United States has not deviated from this basic policy and the U.S. doctrine of national security has been used to justify almost all covert or overt U.S. interference in the region. The United States has been a major historical influence on the political and economic developments in Central America. The beginning of U.S. interests in the western hemisphere
is typically marked by the announcement of Monroe Doctrine in 1823. This statement identified the United States with the independence of the Latin American states and provided a basis for excluding European colonialism from the western hemisphere. The Spanish-American War of 1898 gave the United States an active role in the region and inaugurated a period of intervention in the Caribbean and the Central American region. Moreover, the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine of 1904 also sanctioned U.S. intervention in order to prevent European intervention in the region. The United States has approached hemispheric issues and relations to ensure military, security and economic advantage and domination. The Monroe Doctrine was as much an instrument of economic hegemony as it was an expression of U.S. political influence and “self interested paternalism”. This combination of forces successfully drove United States policies over the years, enabling and encouraging U.S. business to develop its investment, mining and marketing interests throughout the region. Thus U.S. interests in the western hemisphere have been influenced by the geographical proximity of Central America and the Caribbean as well as its strategic resources and the high level of trade and investment there.

In the twentieth century, with its advent as a dominant and rival ideology and its internationalization especially after the Second World War, communism became an important consideration in the foreign policy of the United States. The foreign policy of the United States in the post-war period had been dedicated to the containment of communism. The United States pursued this policy because of the belief that communism was a threat to its peace and security. To most Americans, communism was viewed as a doctrine diametrically opposed to the “American way of life.” The United States followed anticommunism as a policy on the conviction that the Marxist-Leninist doctrine comprised of alien ideas that posed a threat to the United States and to the
world at large. It was based on the assumption that communism was an expansionist and crusading force, intent on converting the entire world to its beliefs, and that, however evil, its doctrines might command widespread appeal. In addition, because communism was seen as inherently totalitarian, anti-democratic, and anti-capitalist, it was perceived as a real threat to freedom, liberty and prosperity throughout the world. In the post-war era, official pronouncements about United States global objectives stressed that communist doctrines represented a real menace to the United States. Moreover, the Truman Doctrine came close to shutting the door against any revolution, since the terms ‘free peoples’ and ‘anti-communist’ were thought to be synonymous.

The influence of communism in the Western hemisphere has been an issue of great concern for the United States. The United States followed anti-communism as a policy on the conviction that it comprised of alien ideas that posed a threat to the U.S. interests in the world as well as in the Western hemisphere. The backdrop of the cold war also intensified U.S. concerns over the region. The Cuban revolution further energized the U.S. effort to contain communism in the region. The defection of Cuba from the U.S. hegemonic system to the Soviet orbit brought about major U.S. efforts to consolidate its influence in the region. In the sixties the United States sharply increased direct assistance to Central America which included the increase of regional military co-operation. Despite U.S. rhetoric about democracy, during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations, four of the five Central American governments receiving U.S. aid were military dictatorships. The United States mobilized Central American co-operation in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. To counter the Cuban threat the United States launched the Alliance for Progress, an economic aid programme to-
wards its supporters in the western hemisphere. It was intended to be an alliance against Cuba and successive U.S. administrations had been united in the proclamation that there would be “no more Cubas” in Latin America.

It is in this context that United States policy towards Nicaragua has to be analysed. Nicaragua has always been both geographically and strategically significant to the United States. Nicaragua is the largest and most populous Central American republic stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific across the narrow neck of the isthmus which joins North and South America. Historically, after the victory in the Spanish-American War, it was in the Caribbean and the Central American region, that the United States for the first time consolidated its informal empire. As part of that region, Nicaragua was also a victim of American intervention. In the whole history of U.S. interference in Latin America, there is no inglorious chapter than that of Nicaragua. By the turn of the twentieth century the United States followed a policy of intervention to monopolise Nicaragua both economically and politically. Its economy was dominated by the U.S. monopolies and its political system was maintained and dominated by the United States. Until the Sandinista revolution in 1979, Nicaragua was virtually a colony of the United States.

The success of the Sandinista Revolution was a setback to the United States. The United States considered the Nicaraguan revolution as a severe blow to its hegemonic interests. It regarded Nicaragua as a centre of regional struggle, an exporter of revolution and a ‘second Cuba’ in the region. The leftist ideology of the Sandinistas, and the Soviet-Cuban military and economic support were all regarded by the United States as evidence of communist interference in its vital interests. The United States perceived that any spread of Soviet-Cuban influence in Central America would result
in a decline of its hegemony in the western hemisphere. Consequently, the emergence of a ‘new Cuba’ in Central America was seen as a threat to its interests. The loss of Nicaragua strengthened the belief that the communist strategy was to spread its influence from Nicaragua to other parts of the region which would adversely affect U.S. interests.

An important focus of this study is the Reagan administration’s policy towards Nicaragua. The Reagan administration’s policy towards Nicaragua was a hostile one, regardless of how the Sandinistas behaved, and diminished the incentive for moderation carefully crafted by the Carter administration. The administration seized upon Nicaragua as a perfect issue with which to assert its new hard line foreign policy. The administration’s officials believed that failure to react on an issue close to home would encourage the Soviet Union and jeopardize American ability to dictate events elsewhere in the Third World. The main task of the Reagan administration was to prevent any kind of consolidation of a Marxist-Leninist regime in Nicaragua that would be a threat to its national security interest in the region. However, in taking the decision to pursue covert war against Nicaragua, the administration came to realize the significance of domestic political constraints arising mainly from the U.S. Congress as well as from the general public in the United States. Ultimately, the administration’s policy was manifested through the effort to destabilize the leftist Sandinista regime through covert war, support to Contra rebels, economic sanctions and attempting to isolate it regionally and internationally.

This work intends to examine the historical evolution of United States policy towards Nicaragua without losing sight of its role in the Central American region. It examines United States policy both in the context of its traditional hemispheric inter-
ests as well as in the context of its post 1945 objective of the containment of communism. Further, it seeks to look into United States responses to the Soviet-Cuban role vis a vis Nicaragua. The work examines in particular the Reagan Administration’s policy towards Nicaragua and its efforts to destabilise the Sandinista government and isolate it regionally and internationally.

The work proceeds on the basis of the following assumptions. Firstly, that United States policy towards Nicaragua has been part of its traditional policy of preventing external powers and forces from interfering in Central America, long considered to be a sphere of U.S. influence. Secondly, during the Cold War period United States’ Nicaragua policy was shaped and influenced by its worldwide policy of the containment of communism. Thirdly, the United States, apprehensive of Soviet-Cuban designs in Central America and the Caribbean, and their intervention through supposedly regional surrogates, consequently adopted and pursued an inflexible and hard-line policy. Fourthly, the Reagan Administration believed that failure to react on an issue close to home would encourage the Soviet Union and Cuba, and jeopardize the American ability to dictate events elsewhere in the Third World. Finally, with regard to the Sandinista government, the United States pursued a patently belligerent and uncompromising policy with the definite intention of destabilising it, using covert means, supporting rebel forces, imposing economic sanctions and attempting to isolate it regionally and internationally.

The study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One provides the framework of analysis of the study. It examines the twin considerations of United States policy with regard to the western hemisphere, namely preserving its traditional hemispheric interests and preventing the spread of communism. Chapter Two is a survey of United
States policy towards Central America. Chapter Three is a review of the United States-Nicaraguan relations prior to 1980. Chapter Four traces the Sandinista ideology and the Nicaraguan Revolution and the response of the United States to them. While Chapter Five examines the Reagan Administration’s policy towards Nicaragua during its first term, Chapter Six focuses on policy during the second term. The final chapter sums up the conclusions arrived at in the study.

The methodology adopted in this work is historical-analytical. The data for this work have been collected from primary as well as secondary sources. The primary sources include documents and statements of the United States government, Congressional hearings, as well as documents of the Government of Nicaragua. The secondary sources used in this study consist of books, articles from journals and magazines and newspapers. Internet sources have also been consulted in the preparation of this work.

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