CHAPTER II

UNITED STATES’ POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL AMERICA

Central America has been historically a very significant region within the western hemisphere for the United States and plays an important role in U.S. foreign policy considerations. Its proximity to the United States as well as to the countries of South America and its strategic location of being buttressed between two continents makes Central America crucial to U.S foreign policy objectives. It therefore goes without saying that United States policy in Central America had, and still has great significance in the overall foreign policy of the United States. This chapter is an attempt to examine overall U.S. policies and interests in the Central American region.

Over the years, within the western hemisphere, regions of greater geographical proximity like Central America, because of several factors, have acquired much importance. Central America has always been an important region to the United States not only due to its geographic position but also because of the strategic importance of the Panama Canal, proximity to the Caribbean, presence of strategic minerals and the oil fields of Mexico.¹ It is not surprising that U.S foreign policy makers consider Central America the ‘backyard’ of their country. Consequently, any kind of foreign, political, economic or ideological interference is considered a threat to U.S.

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hemispheric interests.  

The five modern Central American republics – Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua have a somewhat common history and have developed economically along quite similar lines. Most of these nations gained their independence from Spain in the 1820s. Since then the United States has played a dominant role in the region. An outcome of Spanish and later American influence in Central America was the creation and maintenance of a landed elite throughout the region. This elite used its power to perpetuate political monopoly, economic underdevelopment and social inequality. These oligarchies were relatively stable during the nineteenth century, despite occasional peasant revolts which never really caused major political changes. The power of the local elites augmented by U.S supported regimes and economic interests kept the rural population politically weak, ill-informed and unorganized.

**The Legacy of United States Intervention**

For the protection of United States interests in the Central American region, the United States pursued a policy of strength that involved the commitment of its troops and resources. The objective of United States policy in the Central American region

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3. Though part of the Mesoamerican isthmus, Panama was a province of Colombia until 1903 and has not shared the numerous common historical experiences of the other five countries.

was to contain foreign political interference while at the same time advancing its own economic and security interests.\textsuperscript{5} From the beginning of the United States, its leaders have coveted its neighbourhood. Thomas Jefferson wrote in the late 1780s that it was in the interest of the United States “to gain it (Latin America) from them (Spain) piece by piece.”\textsuperscript{6} He saw the region as essential to the tranquillity and commerce of the United States.\textsuperscript{7} Secretary of State William Seward echoing the notion in 1846, promised that he would “engage to give you the possessions of the American continent and the control of the world.”\textsuperscript{8} In 1895 Secretary of State Richard Olney, at the behest of President Grover Cleveland, made it clear that U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere had become a matter of policy as well as reality. He stated:

> Today the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition. Why? It is not because of the pure friendship or good will felt for it. It is not simply by reason of its high character as a civilized state, not because wisdom and justice and equality are the invariable characteristics of the dealings of the United States. It is because, in addition to all other grounds, its infinite resources combined with its isolated position render it master of the situation and practically invulnerable as against any or all other powers.\textsuperscript{9}


\textsuperscript{8} ibid.

\textsuperscript{9} ibid.
During the first few years of the independent existence of the Latin American republics, the United States remained indifferent towards them. In the early nineteenth century United States interest focused on Mexico and the Caribbean. However, by the third decade of the nineteenth century, United States policy towards the western hemisphere changed fundamentally. This was clearly underlined by the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. President James Monroe stated that:

The American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintained, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European Powers…. We should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintained it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition towards the United States.10

For the United States, virtually from the time of its independence, the removal of the European presence in North America was a vital and continuing interest. Competition from the major European powers posed a continuing security and economic threat to the nation. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 eliminated the French

10. The Monroe Doctrine stated in effect that any attempt by European powers to interfere with their old colonies in the western hemisphere would not be tolerated by United States and that the Americans were henceforth not to be considered as subjects for further colonization by any European powers. For the text of the Monroe Doctrine, see www.ushistory.org
from a vast area west of River Mississippi. British territorial expansion was contained by the Peace of Ghent in 1814, and the Spanish were manoeuvred with some forceful pressure out of Florida in 1819. Westward expansion and the systematic reduction of European colonization continued into the 1840s and the British were gently nudged out of the Oregon Territory in 1846 11. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 stands as a documentary manifestation of that deliberate policy of excluding Europe from the future of the New World. This doctrine has been seen as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America as well as a symbol of the ‘Western Hemisphere idea.’ Its implications were clear in that the destinies of the two Americas were inexorably linked and that the persistence of European colonialism was a direct threat to the security of the United States.

Hegemony, the dominance of one state over another assumes that a major power in a region has the right to do dominate the politics of nearby weaker states. The hegemonic interest of the United States in the western hemisphere emerged gradually over many decades. From the late nineteenth century onwards, U.S. behaviour towards Latin America especially Central America and the Caribbean had been that of hegemony.12 Until World War I, financial and commercial interests in the Caribbean and the Central American region were the only concerns of U.S. policy. The highest priority of U.S. policy was the pre-emptive aim to exclude competing foreign influence


from the region. For the United States, the underlying concern was not the deleterious effects European encroachment might have on the Latin American states, but the threat such encroachment posed for the peace and safety of the United States. With the Louisiana Purchase and the acquisition of the immense territory, the United States commanded the waters of which emptied through the River Mississippi into the Gulf of Mexico, and the port of New Orleans became an American window to the rest of the world. The acquisition of California and the discovery of gold there, in the mid nineteenth century made the Central American isthmus equally valuable, since it provided a link between the two American seaboards. A new dimension was added with the construction of the Panama Canal. Control of the Caribbean basin, which guarded both the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico and access routes to Panama, thus became a vital objective for the United States.

The United States dream of an informal empire in the region became a reality with its victory in the Spanish-American War (1898-1902). The first two decades of the twentieth century were traumatic ones for both Central America and the Caribbean in their relations with the United States. Washington’s hegemonic policies in the Central American region have been mostly demonstrated by overt and covert interventions in the name of national security. This was clearly underlined in 1904, when President Theodore Roosevelt enunciated what since has become known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. It said:

Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately

require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.\textsuperscript{14}

The “sphere of influence” idea vis a vis Latin America that emerged in Washington at the turn of the century became well illustrated by President Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Faced with the possibility of European intervention to collect debts from bankrupt Caribbean countries such as Dominican Republic, in 1904 Roosevelt drew upon the exclusionary provisions of the Monroe Doctrine to formulate a policy that more appropriately reflected both the new realities of U.S. power and the President’s own assertion of the “big stick” approach in foreign policy.\textsuperscript{15} Roosevelt was extending the Monroe Doctrine to justify U.S. intervention to prevent European intervention. This ultimatum clearly defined for Europe and for Latin America, U.S. hegemony in the region. It was an assertion of the United States as both a patron and a policeman.

By upholding the Monroe Doctrine and qualifying it with the Roosevelt Corollary, the United States undertook a number of military interventions in the region. From the late nineteenth century, U.S. soldiers landed in Cuba, Honduras, Panama and even Mexico. During the years of gunboat diplomacy and dollar diplomacy, U.S. military

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\textsuperscript{14} The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine asserted that the United States had the power and right to control any interference in the affairs of the hemisphere by outside governments and to ensure that acceptable governments were maintained there. President Theodore Roosevelt, \textit{Annual Message to Congress}, 6 December 1904, www.latinamericanstudies.org

\textsuperscript{15} Harold Molineu, n.11, p.41.
forces occupied Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. In 1914, the United States occupied the port of Veracruz, Mexico, to gain respect for the U.S. flag. Intervention in Latin America continued after Theodore Roosevelt’s “big stick.” But under the administrations of fellow Republicans, William Howard Taft, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover as well as that of Democrat Woodrow Wilson, the motives were more consistent with the creation of an economic zone of influence than with power politics. To Taft and his Secretary of State, former corporate lawyer Philander C. Knox, the major purpose of U.S. foreign policy was to protect and promote U.S. business interests abroad. Labelled dollar diplomacy, the foreign policy of Taft and Knox treated investments as a key instrument of U.S. influence in the world. At the same time Latin America was not alone in being viewed as an area for economic exploitation. However, because it was consistent with their view to use U.S. armed forces to protect U.S. property and commercial interests abroad, the small, neighbouring states to the south became vulnerable to military intervention. One of the earliest and most enduring United States objectives toward Latin America has been to intervene to keep all other powers out of the hemisphere. This results from the historical observation by American leaders that while no other state in the western hemisphere was powerful enough to threaten the security of the United States, the very weakness of these states rendered them vulnerable to the control of outside powers.

Democracy was not the reason why Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft intervened so often in Central America and the Caribbean. But after the intervention, democracy became part of their strategy for solving the crisis and withdrawing. During

the protectorate era, free elections were an instrumental goal of the United States, aimed at locating the leader with the most popular support and restoring stability. Woodrow Wilson was not content to view elections as just a means to pursue other ends. He wanted the United States to be the “champion” of constitutional government in Latin America. To Latin American despots, he sent a warning. He said that the United States could “have no sympathy with those who seek to seize the power of government to advance their own personal interests or ambitions.”

Wilson’s approach was first applied to Mexico. One month before Wilson’s inauguration, Mexican President Francisco Madero was overthrown by General Victoriano Huerta. Determined to help restore constitutional government in Mexico, Wilson refused to recognize Huerta and dispatched marines to Veracruz to stop a shipment of arms to his regime. Wilson persisted in his pursuit of liberty in the hemisphere. He blocked electoral fraud in the Dominican Republic and encouraged free elections in Nicaragua, Cuba, and Haiti and proposed to make his approach multilateral with a “Pan American Liberty Pact.”

The interventionist period coincided with the expansion of U.S. economic and strategic interests in the region. At the turn of the century, U.S. investors began to seek business opportunities abroad on an unprecedented scale. They were drawn first to the areas lying on the geographical periphery of the United States like Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. The economic interests of U.S. businessmen in the region increased their stakes in its political stability. When that stability seemed fragile and investments were in critical situations, the U.S. government acted to safeguard them with military force.

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19. ibid.
The United States as we saw in the previous chapter has a wide array of political, military and economic interests in the western hemisphere, particularly in Central America. The region is important for its proximity to the Panama Canal, shipping routes, supply routes, oil and strategic minerals. The western Caribbean basin is close to key US listening posts and military installations, and geographically, Central America is a bridge over which refugees and guerrillas could move. U.S. concerns are in the area centred on the sea lanes of communication, military weaponry and commercial shipping in the Caribbean Basin of which Central America forms the western flak. The Panama Canal is a vital commercial and military link to Latin America and Europe. It is the sine qua non in the realm of Caribbean geopolitics. Through its gates and locks 100 million tons of cargo passes over annually. Each year over 12,000 ships from 64 nations pass through the Canal. Some 12 percent of U.S. seaborne commerce traverses the isthmus. The Mexican oil fields are located in close proximity to Central America. Economically, the region is central to inter-oceanic and hemispheric trade. Additionally, petroleum refineries located in the Caribbean process some 50 percent of U.S. petroleum imports from Africa and West Asia. Historically the quest for raw materials had been a major spur to the establishment of colonies. In Central America, discoveries of silver and gold fuelled Spanish colonization. Today U.S. concern with supplies of critical minerals is a major consideration in U.S. foreign policy, and Central America contains a variety of mineral resources. Recent petroleum findings in Guatemala and Honduras have drawn attention to the region’s potential role as an oil supplier. Thus U.S. strategic analysts consider that any adverse event in the region could have detrimental consequences upon the vital interests of the United States. Lars Schoultz states that there are several legitimate reasons for the United States to be concerned about in
By 1927, United States hegemony over Central America was so complete that Undersecretary of State Robert Olds stated that, “Central America has always understood that governments we recognize and support stay in power, while those we do not recognize and support fail.” Olds’ statement was a clear assertion of U.S. hegemony. During the presidency of Herbert Hoover, between 1929 and 1933, the United States marines were pulled out of every country in Latin America except Haiti. President Hoover deplored United States interventionism and ordered a review of its historical underpinning.

The trend away from interventionism was given new impetus by Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbour Policy. President Roosevelt stressed strong economic ties with Latin America, not political domination, and favoured collective security over unilateral actions by the United States. At the 1933 Pan American Conference in Montevideo, Uruguay, Roosevelt pledged that the United States would hold to the principle of non-intervention. To extract itself completely from region’s politics, the Franklin Roosevelt administration swung the pendulum from the extreme of interventionism to absolute silence on international political issues. In 1934 the Marines left Haiti, and true to his word, Roosevelt did not send them again into any Latin American country. Nor did his successor Harry S Truman. In 1947 the Truman administration helped to bring into being the Rio Pact, a collective security arrangement that made defence of the Western Hemisphere the responsibility of all member states.

Subsequently, at the Ninth International Conference of American States held in Bogotá, Colombia, from 30 March to 2 May 1948, the Organization of American States (OAS) was established. It provided for the adjudication of disputes among members and for collective peacekeeping measures. Unfortunately, as the OAS Charter was being drawn up, the cold war was also beginning in earnest.

**Cold War and Strategies of the United States**

The cold war brought a revival of interventionism as the United States assumed the role of global gendarme in the struggle of containing communism. In the western hemisphere, Central America and the Caribbean once again became the principal focus of intervention. Ironically, most of the post World War II interventions were prompted by the collapse of dictatorial regimes which were themselves a legacy of gunboat diplomacy. As dictators collapsed in Guatemala in 1944, Cuba in 1959, and the Dominican Republic in 1965, populist and nationalist governments followed in their wake. Such governments aroused fears in Washington that U.S. hegemony in the region might collapse, producing a whole host of hostile and potentially pro-communist nations. In Guatemala, the populist government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman was overthrown with the blessings of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1954. In Cuba, the CIA organized 1500 exiles to invade the island at the Bay of Pigs in the hope of overthrowing Fidel Castro. In the Dominican Republic, 20,000 U.S. troops were dispatched to prevent elected president Juan Bosch from regaining the presidency.

U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles brought the cold war to Latin America with a vengeance. He quickly rammed through the OAS an anti-communist resolution, declaring anything communist to be incompatible with the inter-American system. From 1959 onwards the Cuban revolution further energized U.S. efforts to contain communism in Central America. The defection of Cuba from the U.S. hegemonic system to the Soviet orbit brought major U.S. efforts to consolidate its influence in the region. In the 1960s the United States sharply increased direct assistance to Central America including beefed-up regional military cooperation.26

Until the early 1960s, the Soviet Union had no place to build a base in Latin America. Since the Cuban revolution, however, it was not easy for U.S. policy makers to keep a Soviet base from being constructed somewhere in the region. In July 1960, President Eisenhower issued a carefully worded statement affirming “in the most emphatic terms that the United States will not be deterred from its responsibilities by the threats of USSR is making. Nor will the United States, in conformity with its treaty obligations, permit the establishment of a regime dominated by international communism in the Western Hemisphere.”27 Within a year Fidel Castro had aligned his government with international communism and President John F. Kennedy had

25. ibid.
failed in his attempt to overthrow the Cuban government. The Soviets, on their part, then attempted to build an offensive missile base in Cuba, and the Kennedy administration had to push the world to the brink of war in order to negotiate with Soviet Union for the satisfactory end to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The substance of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement was interpreted as a major victory for the United States. The Soviet Union pledged to remove its missiles and not to establish an offensive military capability in Cuba. In return the United States agreed not to invade Cuba.

During the years of the cold war, the United States had only one focus, namely the Soviet Union. “The Russians are coming” was the cry, and all United States efforts were aimed at stopping them. The Kennedy administration sought to effect a change in the traditional postures of the United States policy with regard to the southern portion of the hemisphere, in particular to the possibilities for the latter’s development. This resulted in the formal birth of the Alliance for Progress, signed at Punta del Este, Uruguay on 17 August 1961 in which all the countries forming the Organisation of American States took an active part.²⁸ The Alliance for Progress aimed to deny Moscow’s targets of opportunity by assisting in the development of healthy societies and economies. Moreover, the Alliance for Progress sought to prevent a repetition of the Cuban revolution by providing Latin America with economic assistance to promote social reform and development and military assistance to suppress political radicals. The Alliance faltered in the late 1960s, however, because most of the existing Latin American governments were unwilling or unable to implement the sorts of reforms envisioned by the Alliance.

The emergence of client states and a massive programme of foreign security assistance necessary for preserving its client states were among the most prominent features of U.S. policy towards Central America during the cold war. During this time, the motivating factor of U.S. involvement in Central America was Washington’s belief that bolstering the surveillance capacities of its Central American clients was necessary for securing them against communism. In reality, the United States was ostensibly pursuing its own national security agenda through military aid and co-operation. But in doing so it diminished not only the national security of the inhabitants of the client states by enhancing the repressive capacity of those states, but also the international security it was seeking. Resistance to U.S hegemony was not only confined within the region but spilled over into the international arena as well.

Washington continued to assume a coordinator’s role in the Central American countries’ surveillance activities. Agreements at the ministerial levels approved the “continued application and promulgation of laws against communist subversion, better communications, coordination, improved record keeping and stepped–up training programmes.” After the failure of the Vietnam War, U.S. policy makers wanted to reassert their strength to contain Soviet-Cuban perceived expansionism in the Central American region.

The emergence of revolutionary movements in the Central American region was

30. ibid.
31. ibid., p.11.
considered by the United States as a threat to its interests. The main U.S. policy objective was to prevent the growth of leftist revolutionary movements. However, there was a distinct change in how the United States viewed the question with the Carter administration’s human rights policy. The administration saw in this region an opportunity to assert, in an exemplary way, its concept of human rights as an instrument of social change and democratization.\textsuperscript{32} The purpose of the Carter administration’s “controlled evolution” was to reform the political systems in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua through democratic parties.\textsuperscript{33} Though it was global in scope, the administration’s human rights policy found its most consistent expression in Latin America. The region naturally attracted the central focus of the human rights policy, with the predominance of authoritarian governments with dismal human rights records in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Central America, moreover, is a Third World locale whose geographic proximity to the United States quickly arouses American security sensitivities. Cuba’s growing role in the area, the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the growth of various leftist insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and the onset of potentially destabilizing economic and political problems in Mexico led Washington to focus attention on the geostrategic significance of Central America.\textsuperscript{34} However, it was only after the Nicaraguan revolution that the United States discovered that it had completely underestimated the natural dynamics of revolutionary developments in Central America.


\textsuperscript{33} ibid.

The victory of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua in 1979, coinciding with a new surge of revolutionary organization and struggle in El Salvador and Guatemala created a dilemma for the United States in a region where it had traditional interests. For the United States, Somoza’s overthrow raised crucial policy issues—not merely issues of U.S. relations with the new Nicaraguan government, but issues of U.S. attitudes towards the whole of Central America and the Caribbean as well. The Sandinista victory in Nicaragua forced the United States to reassess its policy towards the entire Central American region and it became a cardinal issue in the U.S. debate over foreign policy. When President Reagan came to office in 1981, Central American conflicts were seen as an opportunity to reassert United States hegemony in the region. The administration attributed the developments in Central America as interference of foreign powers, specifically the Soviet Union and Cuba, and viewed them as threats to U.S. security. Resolving to “draw the line” in Central America, it increased military aid to the Salvadoran government and began a process of organizing, training and financing a counter revolutionary force against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.35

The Reagan Administration and Central America

The Reagan administration viewed the political developments in Central America as part of the global East-West conflict.36 The administration was convinced that the conflict in Central America was the result of machinations of the Soviet Union and


Cuba, who wanted to prove that the United States was not in a position even in its geographical backyard, to keep friendly governments in power. Thus, in order to make it clear in the context of the East-West dispute, the Reagan administration found it necessary to tilt the military aspect of the conflict unequivocally in favour of the U.S. supported governments especially in El Salvador.\(^\text{37}\) The position of the Reagan administration towards the developments in Central America was clearly reflected in its global foreign policy. The main task of the administration was to re-establish the power position of the United States through a policy of strength, including military might. The focal point of the policy was to limit the influence of the Soviet Union and the radical nations of the Third World in regions of strategic and economic importance to the United States.\(^\text{38}\) The administration regarded Nicaragua to be the base for the export of subversion and armed intervention throughout Central America.

In reassessing U.S. foreign policy, the Reagan administration asserted that the loss of leadership by the United States should have been avoided and could be reversed. A document written during Reagan’s first presidential campaign, commonly known in Latin America as the Santa Fe Document, stated this new conception. The document outlined the means to roll back communism in Latin America. It called for US policy to recognise the integral linkage between internal subversion and external aggression.\(^\text{39}\)


\(\text{38. Wolf Grabendorff, n.32, p.159}\)

Although the neoconservative ideology increasingly characterized U.S. policy in Central America and elsewhere since Reagan came to office, it was not until 1985 that the so-called Reagan Doctrine emerged as a coherent body of political thought designed to guide U.S. actions. The doctrine rested on four basic principles: 1) to promote and support, by overt or covert means, any military and political forces opposing revolutionary governments in Third World countries; 2) to intervene in potentially revolutionary situations so as to control change while preserving the essence of the regime in power; 3) to undertake an antiterrorist campaign; 4) to reserve the threat of direct, massive intervention by U.S forces for highly vulnerable revolutions, either incipient or already consumated.\textsuperscript{40} The Reagan Doctrine was a response to a crisis in the world political and economic system which was consolidated under U.S leadership during World War II. More specifically, its self stated purpose was to respond to the Soviet strategy of supporting movements of national liberation and particularly, to the Brezhnev doctrine of 1968 which stated that “once part of the Soviet bloc, always part.”\textsuperscript{41}

The Reagan administration’s policy was oriented around a grand strategy for containing the Soviet Union, premised on a starkly bipolar view of geopolitics, placing great reliance on the military components of power.\textsuperscript{42} In contrast to the Carter administration, the Reagan administration considered flexibility towards the new

\textsuperscript{40} Deborah Barry, Raul Vergara, and Jose Rodolfo Castro, “‘Low Intensity Warfare’: The Counterinsurgency Strategy for Central America,” in Nora Hamilton et.al. (eds.) n.35, p.79.

\textsuperscript{41} ibid.

political groups in Central America more of weakness than strength on the part of the United States.

The Reagan administration viewed the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua as the most serious threat to U.S. security interests. Operationally the administration sought essentially three important policy tasks. The first was to stop Nicaraguan meddling in its neighbours’ affairs. The second was to purge the isthmus of Soviet/Cuban influence, and to sanitise Nicaragua’s relations with those countries. The third was to prevent the Sandinista regime from consolidating itself as a Marxist-Leninist regime. The strategic underpinning for the U.S. national security posture continued to be deterrence combined with the Reagan Doctrine. This doctrine held that the United States would support the fight against established Marxist–Leninist regimes and support established non-Marxist Leninist systems struggling against Marxist–Leninist revolutions. The focus was primarily on the Third World, with particular attention to Central America.

The administration also announced a propaganda campaign to convince public opinion that Salvadoran guerrillas were supplied arms by Nicaragua and the Soviet bloc. In February 1981 it released a White Paper on El Salvador entitled *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, designed to prove an international conspiracy to overthrow the El Salvadoran government. Having defined the Sandinista revolution and the insurgent movements in El Salvador and Guatemala as threats to its security, the United States decided on using local forces to defend its interests. The armies of the region,

43. ibid., p.248.
through their long, complex relationship with the U.S military, began to adopt and, indeed, internationalise U.S conceptions of hemispheric security as their own.

The Reagan administration’s policy in El Salvador was a typical example of renewed American forcefulness. The administration wanted to “draw the line” against communist expansionism and demonstrate its commitment to defend its friends.46 The administration also tried to prevent any more regional regimes from having understandings with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Thus, the proposed Caribbean Basin Initiative was supposed to offer all the small Central American and Caribbean republics the opportunity to improve their economic and social conditions with U.S. assistance.47 The administration tried to escalate the conflict in Central America through military strength that led to the armed invasion of Grenada in 1983. After the Grenadan invasion, the foreign ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama met on the small Panamanian island of Contadora to discuss the deteriorating situation. The Contadora group’s document of objectives signed in January 1983 called for a halt to the Central American arms race and a major economic, political and social development effort aimed at solving the root cause of conflict in the region. The Contadora initiative did not gain the crucial backing of the United States due to its de facto recognition of the government of Nicaragua. The United States was also not supportive of the plan because it prohibited unilateral action by the US in protection of its interests. The Reagan administration regarded the Contadora initiatives as an obstacle to its hegemonic


interests. It did not want to enter into negotiations with the Sandinistas or end assistance to El Salvador and the Contras fighting the Nicaraguan government.48

In July 1983, President Reagan set up a Bipartisan Commission under the chairmanship of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to draw up a plan for U.S. policy in Central America. The report of the Commission emphasised the threat to the region and to U.S. security posed by Soviet, Cuban and Nicaraguan support for Marxist insurgents. The Commission recommended a massive increase in U.S. military aid to El Salvador and other countries to respond to that threat. In response to this threat the Commission recommended sharp increase in development and security assistance in the region.49 The report of the Bipartisan Commission clearly stated what the Reagan administration perceived to be the strategic interest of the United States in Central America. The main objective of the administration was to prevent hostile forces from seizing and expanding control in a strategically vital area of the western hemisphere and also to prevent the Soviet Union from consolidating either directly or indirectly, a foothold in the region.

Throughout President Reagan’s first term, United States policy in Central America continued to be based on the premise that the use of force by the United States remained the last resort and that an important objective of diplomacy was to preserve this option. The policy of aiding anti–Marxist guerrillas in Central America was also based on this doctrine. During Reagan’s first term, the debate over Central America focused primarily on how to win the war in El Salvador. As El Salvador receded into the background,


Nicaragua and the Contra war became paramount. Moreover, the administration wanted to do more than just prevent the loss of other Central American countries, it also wanted to turn back the tide in Nicaragua. Just like Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ doctrine of ‘rollback’ in the 1950s, the Reagan Doctrine preached the liberation of the people of the Third World from the Soviet yoke.50

Central America dominated President Reagan’s Latin American policy in the second term just as it had in the preceding term. The revolutionary movements that emerged in the region were a major constraint for U.S. influence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.51 The primary objective of the administration was to regain the traditional hegemony over Central America enjoyed by the United States. In 1985, this objective remained the cornerstone of the administration’s policy. The rationale of this policy was to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence in the hemisphere. In his 1985 State of the Union Address President Reagan declared that:

> We must stand by all our democratic allies. And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.52

The administration conceptualized the Central American situation as essentially a cold war problem. The main reason for this conviction of the administration was that Carter’s liberal human rights policies had destabilized the region and that the Central


52. President Ronald Reagan, Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 6 February 1985, www.presidency.ucsb.edu
American crisis reflected a loss of control in the United States ‘backyard’ along with a deterioration of U.S. power.\textsuperscript{53}

In 1987 U.S. policy towards Central America was under severe attack due to the exposure of the Iran-Contra arms scandal. The administration’s covert aid to Nicaraguan Contras was evidence of the United States anti-Sandinista policy. Even after the arms scandal President Reagan reaffirmed his strongest commitment to a policy of diplomatic, economic and military pressure upon the Sandinista government.\textsuperscript{54}

The administration’s Central America policy was based on various considerations including a leftist government in Nicaragua, leftist insurgents in El Salvador and Soviet-Cuban manipulation. All these were perceived by the administration as a threat to its interests. The administration’s tough policy towards Central America was considered as the art of confrontation psychology.\textsuperscript{55} It aimed at a military solution for the elimination of forces of a leftist nature. The administration and its supporters saw any threat to US interests in the Third World as a more general political and military threat and ultimately as a threat to the capacity of the United States to maintain its global role.\textsuperscript{56} In Central America the Reagan administration tried to encourage war as a substitute for state policy. Diplomacy was replaced by conflict, and military escalation was substituted for politics. More specifically, the Reagan administration used


\textsuperscript{54} \textit{International Herald Tribune} (Paris) 12 March 1987.


diplomatic discussions as a fig leaf to cover military escalation. In dealing with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua as well as the revolutionaries who were trying to overthrow the U.S. supported government in El Salvador; the Reagan administration used war, not diplomacy, as its state policy.57

United States policy towards Central America has been based on its hegemonic interests in the Western hemisphere. This is clear from U.S. experience in the region from the early nineteenth century onwards. The proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine and other successive declarations clearly illustrated Washington’s interests in the region to keep the foreign powers out of the western hemisphere. This was also reflected in the Reagan administration’s policy to the region. The administration’s objective was the elimination of radical Soviet supported leftist regimes in the region and at the same time protecting its interests by pursuing a policy of strength.