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ARTICLE

"A Similar Detente": Mexico's Central American Policy, 1978–1982

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Abstract

This article explores Mexico's overlooked importance in the Central American armed conflict, the limits of its influence, and its connection to the late Cold War. Mexico's policy toward Central America attempted to prevent an American and Cuban military intervention in the area and avoid a Cold War confrontation along its southern border. Mexico attempted to build detente in the region and prevent a global escalation of tension between the great powers. Meanwhile, it sought to propose a "third way" for the revolutionary actors shaped after Mexico's political system and history. Studying Mexico's efforts to create detente-like arrangements can shed light on the efforts of peripheral actors and their projects to influence the international system despite the actions of hegemonic powers.

Keywords: Mexico; Nicaragua; Cold War; Detente; Central American conflict

Resumen

Este artículo explora el papel que México jugó durante el conflicto Centroamericano, los límites de su influencia y su conexión con la Guerra Fría tardía. Argumenta que la política de México hacia la región buscó detener una escalada militar cubana y norteamericana, y evitar una confrontación bipolar en su frontera sur. México intentó generar un proceso de distensión (detente) para prevenir un aumento de las tensiones entre las grandes potencias; al mismo tiempo, buscó promover una "tercera vía" entre los revolucionarios centroamericanos basada en la historia de México y su sistema político como alternativa a la expansión del comunismo. Al explorar los esfuerzos de México por crear procesos de distensión similares a los de las grandes potencias podemos estudiar los intentos de actores periféricos por influir en el sistema internacional durante la Guerra Fría, a pesar de las acciones de las potencias hegemónicas.

Palabras clave: México; Nicaragua; Guerra Fría; Distensión; Conflicto Centroamericano

Between 1978 and 1983, the government of Mexico carried out an ambitious foreign policy to limit the scale of Central American conflicts, combining political-economic support to revolutionary organizations like the Sandinistas and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and a robust diplomatic effort to bring Cuba and the United States to the negotiating table. This article explores Mexico's approach to the conflicts, the

origin of its policies, and its vital role during the early period of this regional crisis. The Mexican approach to the process resulted from a defensive policy that sought to prevent a military escalation like the one after the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s. By examining Mexico's approach to the crisis, this article contributes to discussions about the end of detente and the complex connections between global trends in the Cold War and various regional conflicts. It also attempts to foster an understanding of peripheral actors and their efforts and limitations to alter and resist the policies of hegemonic powers during the Cold War. This article incorporates primary sources from Mexican and American archives not previously included in most studies on Mexican foreign policy toward Central America written in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The historiography of Mexican Central American policy in the 1980s can be grouped into three distinct schools of thought: interventionist, defensive, and domestic. The interventionist explanations claim that Mexico sought to carve out a sphere of influence in Central America during the late 1970s (Castañeda 1985; Vázquez and Campos 2017). The defensive policy, of which Ojeda is the forefather, claims that Mexico's so-called active foreign policy attempted to limit the influence of the United States over Mexican domestic politics by introducing "third" elements into bilateral relations (Ojeda and Herrera 1983; Toussaint, Rodríguez, and Vázquez 2001). Contrary to these interpretations, the domestic explanation argues that Mexico's response to the Central American crisis had its origins in an eminently domestic policy that attempted to quell criticism from the political Left (Herrera 2011). This article is deeply indebted to these approaches while also proposing a broader framework (*detente*) to understand Mexico's contribution to the conflict and strengthen Ojeda's arguments with new archival work. An in-depth discussion of Mexican historiography goes beyond the scope of this article; however, recent works by Mario Vázquez and Monica Toussaint examine in great detail these discussions (Vázquez and Campos 2017; Toussaint and Ampié 2020).

Recent historiographical studies have relegated the global interests of Mexico's detente and its place in the global Cold War. This was different from works contemporary to the conflict. In a book written between 1983 and 1985, Mario Ojeda (2007, 33) suggested that "Mexican foreign policy expended a significant effort to emancipate the Central American conflicts from the East-West confrontation." Ojeda's suggestion that the prevention of Cold War conflict in the Central American region lay at the center of Mexico's policy toward the conflict has been somewhat overlooked by Mexican historiography, not to mention Latin American Cold War studies. Under this framework, the efforts of the Mexican government in Central America were strongly influenced by the renewed ideological confrontation during the late 1970s.

This article builds upon Ojeda's ideas with recent archival research and suggests a new framework for further study, arguing that this approach formed part of a broader uncoordinated effort, one of detente from the margins. Mexico's detente was similar to parallel Western European or Latin American efforts that tried to defend their versions of engagement with the communist bloc from American and Soviet actions. In the specific case of the Mexican detente, this can be defined as an attempt to avoid a wider geopolitical conflict through engagement with the parties in conflict, economic support for revolutionary actors, and multilateral diplomatic efforts. It is also important to note that this project was deeply imbued in Mexico's tradition of engagement and co-option of left-wing opposition (one example of how internal dynamics imbued Mexican foreign policy).

There is little consensus on the definition of *detente* and its chronology. Roughly speaking, detente refers to a period between the mid-1960s to the late 1970s characterized by engagement and dialogue between the so-called East and West that attempted to limit the possibility of a military confrontation between the superpowers (Chourcholis 2020). Detente has been primarily studied from a great power and European-centered

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perspective. The Soviet-American negotiations, arms limitations agreements, and important international summits have been the focal point of attention from scholars of detente (Zubok 2008; Kochavi 2008; Suri 2005). However, as Hanhimäki (2008) suggests, detente ushered "unexpected" consequences, despite its somewhat conservative origins as an agreement between superpowers. One could argue that part of the unexpected consequences of detente was the creation of a space of negotiation and the influence of small states within this new diplomatic framework. Recent works on detente in Europe and the Mediterranean have begun to challenge the distinctly superpower-centered explorations of detente, describing how small states managed to influence and strengthen their independent forms of engagement between East and West (Calandri, Caviglia, and Varsori 2015). This decentered view allows us to examine other attempts at detente and other forms by which states, especially in the Global South, sought to break Cold War paradigms (Woodroofe 2013).

Scholars have paid less attention to the effects of detente in Latin America and the Third World. For the Third World, detente was not a period of cooperation and tense peace but a moment of worsening tensions, violence, and repression. "Although detente would take years to unravel at a superpower level," writes Tanya Harmer (2011, 150), "its failures as a framework for solving a global ideological struggle between communism and capitalism—or even pausing it—were already unmasked in Latin America." Despite this, other authors have explored the ways in which the transformations of the international system fostered detente (Pettinà 2019, 35). The promises of detente were not lost on Latin American leaders, some of whom, like Omar Torrijos of Panama, Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, and José López Portillo of Mexico, attempted to extend detente on the continent. Specifically, for the Mexican case, this article suggests that Mexican foreign policy not only reacted to the international system but also attempted to create detente-like arrangements, offering alternatives to ideologically driven conflicts. By studying such efforts, we can shed light on the actions of peripheral actors and their projects to influence the international system despite the actions of hegemonic powers (see Boniface 2020).

This article forms part of an already established historiography on the Cold War in Latin America that has sought to understand this historical period not merely as an appendix of the superpowers but under its own terms (Spenser and Joseph 2007; Harmer 2011; Garrard-Burnett; Atwood, Moreno 2013; Iber 2015; García and Taracena, 2017; Pettinà 2018, and more). Mexico, as well as other "moderate" countries like Costa Rica, Panama, and Venezuela, has been somewhat overlooked by Cold War historiography (Keller 2015; Pettinà 2016; Zolov 2020; Loaeza 2022). A possible reason for this is that Mexico formed part of an interesting ideologically moderate group of countries that seem to break the trends of the bipolar paradigm (and nonalignment) and, thus, are harder to fit within traditional narratives of the Cold War.

A Mexican detente for Central America

By the late 1970s, the Mexican government monitored the deteriorating political situation in Nicaragua with unease, as discontent swept the streets, business and middle-class opposition organized against the dictatorial government of Anastasio Somoza, and the FSLN gained power and influence through its guerrilla activity. Documents from the Mexican Foreign Ministry considered that the growing regional instability could seriously affect Mexican interests. "It is obvious that what happens in Nicaragua would necessarily affect the other Central American countries," a memorandum from the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted in September 1978. The memo continued that Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras "are convinced that Nicaragua ruled by a Marxist government, left-leaning and even democratic, could turn into a base for guerrilla activity in the

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region."[1] More importantly, the situation created incentives for American military intervention. The insurrection "could either be drowned in a bloodbath or lead to a revolutionary victory that would provoke an international intervention to prevent the Sandinistas from taking power," the Foreign Ministry predicted. Mexico, the memo concluded, "cannot be insensitive to the first option and cannot remain silent to the second."[2]

The López Portillo administration considered the insurrection a legitimate and essentially inevitable response to decades of authoritarian rule by the Somoza family dynasty and deep structural economic injustices. A similar position took hold with Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, Omar Torrijos of Panama, and other moderate left-leaning actors. In general terms, Mexico considered that Central American revolutionary organizations like the FSLN were correcting severe social issues while at the same time opening up the possibility of a broader regional ideologically fueled conflict. Mexico advocated for quick revolutions and the establishment of postrevolutionary moderate governments to stabilize the region through social and economic justice, revealing contradictions and biases in the Mexican detente, especially toward right-wing political groups. This policy's success would hinge on the capacity of moderate governments to prevent the radicalization of the revolutionaries and military involvement of Cuba and the United States.

Despite its authoritarian nature, the Portillo administration saw itself as reformist and left-leaning. After years of counterinsurgency and political repression during the Díaz Ordaz and Echeverría governments, Portillo attempted to institute moderate political reforms and rein in the excesses of past governments. It presented itself as an example of the possible conciliatory approach between the political Left and Right that characterized its detente. A sign of this approach was Portillo's second foreign minister Jorge Castañeda, a long-standing defender of state sovereignty and economic nationalism, a skeptic of closer relations with the United States, and favorable to Latin American leftist groups. He seemed to reflect the desire of Portillo to strive for a more reformist and independent foreign policy while appeasing the domestic left. This is another example of how internal Mexican politics informed its foreign policy, showing how Ojeda's (2007) defensive argument and Herrera's (2011) internal policy argument both shaped Mexican foreign policy.

The government of Mexico acted under the assumption that without moderate outside aid, Central American revolutionary forces would have to turn to Cuba and the socialist camp for assistance, igniting a Cold War conflict in the region. To prevent the radicalization of the revolution and the inevitable American backlash, Mexico attempted to steer the revolutionary forces toward noncommunist policies and compete with the Cuban model through economic cooperation. For Mexico and other moderate Latin American countries like Venezuela, competition with Cuba could succeed only under detente-like arrangements that channeled conflict and ideological competition through peaceful means. Economic competition with Cuba was favorable for Mexico and Venezuela, as both countries greatly benefited from the oil boom of the 1970s. At the same time, military confrontation would empower the radical forces within the region, giving an edge to the communists and the Cuban government.

Opposition to American interventionism was one of Mexico's guiding elements. According to the Mexicans, American anticommunism underpinned American foreign policy and threatened the development of Central American progressive forces. Thus, promoting the social and political stagnation at the root of the region's problems. In late

[1] The situation in Nicaragua, 12 September 1978, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (AH-SRE), *topográfica* B-132-6, OEA el caso de Nicaragua, 1-2.

[2] The situation in Nicaragua, 12 September 1978, AH-SRE, *topográfica* B-132-6, OEA el caso de Nicaragua, 4.

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April 1979, the Foreign Ministry had indicated its pessimism about the possibilities of achieving a revolutionary change of government in Nicaragua without American acquiescence: "It seems unfortunately true that if the United States does not want it, General Somoza will not leave the government." It further added: "another Cuba is not possible in Latin America."[3] As the Nicaraguan crisis grew, the Mexican government became preoccupied with the possibility of promoting moderate revolutionary forces and protecting them from US anticommunist aggression. American aggression would lead only to radicalization and communist expansion.

Under this framework, the Mexican government would promote and protect moderate revolutions in Central American countries while at the same time attempting to create a regional detente that could shield these revolutions from being absorbed into the East-West conflict. Between 1978 and 1979, the Mexican government supported the insurrection in Nicaragua with funding, diplomatic backing, and modest covert military support.[4] After the revolutionary victory, Mexico attempted to continue its strategy in El Salvador, promoting the revolutionary forces in that country and weakening the Salvadoran government through diplomatic actions. Parallel to the establishment of the revolutionary government in Nicaragua, in neighboring El Salvador, the political situation began to rapidly deteriorate with violence from communist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups debilitating the authoritarian government (LeoGrande 1998; Crandall 2016). At the end of July 1979, during a meeting between American officials and the Mexican foreign minister, Castañeda considered that, like Nicaragua, the crisis in El Salvador resulted from "true class hatred focused against the landowning class in general." Castañeda continued: "The best hope for progress would be international action to condemn and isolate the government on Human Rights grounds as was done with Somoza." The minister promoted strong measures against the Salvadoran government: "By denying the [Government of El Salvador] any assistance and placing intense moral pressure, one could hope for a middle-class coup against the military in which the urban bourgeoisie might emerge victoriously. Rather than playing at elections, it would be better to take a risk and provoke a crisis now, while commercial and industrial forces still have strength. The international community could then provide some help discreetly to democratic sectors."[5] Castañeda's call to US counterparts to indirectly support a middle-class coup is especially relevant, as it went against Mexico's continuous discourse of nonintervention.

To disrupt the growing bipolar conflict, Mexico sought to create a "third option" for the Nicaraguan government to survive without US or communist-bloc support. In this mission, Mexico tried to enlist Western European countries to act as a neutral block to support the FSLN. Less than a month after the FSLN took power, the Mexican ambassador to West Germany, Roberto Rozensenzweig Díaz, when consulted by "governmental and financial circles," advised that all countries "should provide Nicaragua with all forms of aid since a regime in Nicaragua based on moderation and social reform could serve as an example to resolve explosive situations in other countries in Latin America."[6] Multilateralism and engagement could prevent a growing conflict in the region, and Western European

[3] Memorandum, 23 April 1979, AH-SRE, *topográfica*, III, 6225-1 (*tercera parte*).

[4] Committee of Solidarity with Nicaragua and the Sandinista Liberation Front, 9 March 1979 1979. Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Secretaría de Gobernación, Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS), *legajo* 2, *caja* 276; Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 82. Press releases from the SRE, 21 May 1979, AH-SRE, *topográfica* B3-132-6, OEA, el Caso de Nicaragua, 28 November 1978.

[5] Telegram from the American Embassy in Mexico to the State Department, 30 July 1979, 1979MEXICO 12752. Central Foreign Policy Files 1973-1979, Electronic Telegrams, RG-5, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

[6] Telegram from the Mexican embassy in Bonn to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 August 1978, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III-6276-1 (second part).

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countries could play an essential part in limiting any bipolar confrontation. On September 5, 1979, Castañeda met with the minister of economy of West Germany, Graf Lamsdorf. "The countries of Europe must understand the problems that Nicaragua faces," Castañeda insisted, "and the worst thing they could do was to condition their help to political principles because ... in the future the same situation would reach other countries in the area."[7] Castañeda believed that "Cuban influence in the Junta is not yet overwhelming and that the West can best support [the Government of National Reconstruction] by supplying as much aid as possible without political conditions."[8] In Austria, Castañeda continued with the same message, declaring to his Austrian counterpart that "outside help" would determine Nicaragua's fate: "if help is forthcoming, there is little chance that Nicaragua will go the way Cuba has gone, even though the Cubans are active there."[9]

In October 1979, Mexico's ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), promoted the creation of the Conference of Latin American Political Parties (COPPAL), a gathering of twenty-four "democratic, nationalist and progressive" political organizations from the hemisphere. The State Department considered COPPAL Mexico's response to the "decline of US 'imperialist' influence in the area" and the possibility of the situation as being "filled by totalitarian communism."[10] Mexico presented itself as a possible "third model" that sought to limit bipolar confrontations attempting to co-opt international radical leftists away from Cuban-style communism, using tactics that had served the PRI to dominate the domestic political Left. As Gustavo Carvajal, president of Mexico's ruling party, declared to officials from the American embassy, "COPPAL can influence the new leftists the same way that the PRI brings domestic opposition under its wing by co-opting its positions and people, thereby blunting its force." COPPAL was one of several efforts to promote Mexico's third way, including funding opposition groups in Perú and Uruguay and (indirectly) promoting Puerto Rican independence. As part of its efforts to legitimize the new Nicaraguan government and sway Nicaragua away from more radical positions, Tomás Borge, Nicaragua's interior minister and one of the most influential FSLN *comandantes*, was chosen as vice president of COPPAL.[11] COPPAL explicitly refused to include communist and social democratic parties, lending credence to the FSLN's moderate credentials. In the same way, on June 22, 1980, Mexico hosted a gathering of socialist parties from Chile, Costa Rica, Perú, Uruguay, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.[12]

Mexico also worked to extend its influence over the region with economic incentives. Mexican aid to the new revolutionary government, on direct orders from López Portillo, was channeled primarily through the Ministry of Finance, adding a significant economic dimension to Mexico's foreign policy toward Nicaragua. Its titular head David Ibarra Muñoz was also instrumental in helping renegotiate the international debt of the provisional government.[13] During the first year of the revolution, Mexico supported

[7] Reports from the American embassy in Mexico to the State Department further clarify this exchange between Castañeda and Lamsdorf. Telegram from the Mexican embassy in Bonn to the Ministry of Foreign, 5 September 1979, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III-6276-1 (second part).

[8] Telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, 15 August 1979, 1979MEXICO13864, NARA.

[9] Telegram from the Embassy in Vienna to the State Department, 1979VIENNA 11356, NARA.

[10] Mexico's Role in the Conference of Latin American Political Parties, COPAL, State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 22 September 1980, p. 1, State Department FOIA records.

[11] Telegram from the Embassy in Mexico to the State Department, 13 October 1979,. 1979MEXICO 17640. NARA.

[12] Mexico's Role in the Conference of Latin American Political Parties, COPPAL, State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, September 22 1980, 7-8. State Department FOIA records.

[13] Preparatory work. Meeting for the visit of the President of the Republic of Nicaragua ... 17 January 1980, *foja* 1, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III 6276-1 (*segunda parte*).

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Nicaragua extensively through direct assistance in almost all government areas, including direct oil shipments, trucks and buses, and pencils and art materials. It also helped the new government jump-start the country's crippled economy. On December 14, 1979, the Mexican Foreign Ministry organized a meeting between ninety foreign bank owners and the Reconstruction Junta of Nicaragua to refinance the country's sovereign debt, with the explicit backing of Mexico.[14] Mexican technical assistance was essential for the revolutionary government, and it requested ample support for its oil, mining, housing, and waste disposal systems. By March 1980, México had opened lines of credit for the Nicaraguan government totaling more than US$30 million; in April of that year, Mexico started supplying Nicaragua with 7,500 barrels of crude oil per day.[15]

Mexican diplomatic support was also significant in giving the new Nicaraguan government legitimacy and support among international organizations. For example, Mexico lobbied for funding from the UN Development Programme in 1980 for Nicaragua.[16] It was also instrumental in swaying the Organization of American States (OAS) member states into providing all possible assistance for the economic recovery of Nicaragua and inserting provisions into the OAS statements ensuring that all regional support would not interfere with bilateral aid. This ensured that the inter-American mechanism was not turned against the new revolutionary government if the OAS were to become swayed by anti-FSLN forces.[17] Furthermore, the Mexican government suggested the creation of "solidarity bonds" for $50 million or $100 million from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to refinance the reconstruction of Nicaragua.[18]

At the end of October 1981, a National Security Council (NSC) background paper estimated that the López Portillo government had sent more than $360 million in aid to Nicaragua. Mexico had become the single largest source of economic support for Nicaragua, surpassing the Soviet bloc (Cuba, Soviet Union, Bulgaria, East Germany) by more than three times. Mexico's aid was overshadowed only by the cumulative efforts of Western European nations, accounting for $500 million; international funding from financial institutions like the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) accounted for $320 million.

Despite its significant economic and political dimension, Mexico's support for the revolution was not military. The diplomatic problems associated with delivering arms to the Sandinistas were too high for the Mexican government. Nevertheless, by refusing military support, the Mexican government undermined its ability to influence the new revolutionary government. US ambassador to Nicaragua Lawrence Pezzullo pointed out in 1979, "If we, Panama and other [Latin American] countries do not satisfy the reasonable military needs of the FSLN commanders ... [we] can expect them to turn to the Cubans and the Soviet bloc."[19] Indeed, the revolutionary government's growing security and military needs ultimately fostered Cuba's growing influence over the Sandinistas as the conflict escalated (Grow 2008, 118).

[14] Telex from Mexican Embassy in Managua to Ambassador Raúl Valdez, 30 November 1979, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III 6276-1 (*segunda parte*).

[15] Report on the support provided by the Government of Mexico to Nicaragua as of January 1980, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III 6276-1 (*segunda parte*).

[16] Telex from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nicaragua to the Secretary of Foreign, 7 February 1980, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III 6276-1 (*segunda parte*).

[17] Telegram from the Department of State to the U.S. Embassy in Managua, 26 July 1979, 1979STATE194780, NARA.

[18] Minutes of the meeting held between the Mexican inter-ministerial committee for the reconstruction aid of Nicaragua ... 30 August 1979, *foja* 6, AH-SRE, *topográfica* III 6276-1 (*segunda parte*).

[19] Telegram from the American Embassy in Managua to the State Department, 10 August 1979, 1979MANAGU03651, NARA.

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The Cuban question

Mexico had an uneasy relationship with revolutionary Cuba throughout the Cold War period. Despite maintaining cordial diplomatic relations with the island, it undertook efforts to undermine the Cuban Revolution and prevent its influence from spreading to the region, collaborating closely with the US intelligence services to gather information on Cuban activity (Velázquez 2021, 754). This, however, did not mean that Mexico did not see benefits in pitting Cuba against the United States for its benefit. As has been noted by other historians (Keller 2015; Thornton 2021), Mexico could play the Cuba card to justify its brand of moderate leftist reformism to worried Washington officials. This same dynamic played out with Mexico's approach to insurgent movements like the FSLN attempting to foster a third way of revolutionary leftism or justifying a rapprochement with Cuba to the American government.

Despite competing with the Cuban government for influence with the revolutionary organizations, Mexico saw Cuba differently than how the United States did. While the American government viewed the Cuban government as an offshoot of Soviet power in narrow terms, Mexico viewed Cuba as a nationalist regime. Conversations between American officials and the Mexican foreign minister generally explored this theme. In 1980 Castañeda, the Mexican foreign minister, declared to American officials: "The Cubans have a genuine revolutionary mystique and seek to advance solutions, as in Africa, to problems that the international community has failed to resolve, then withdraw." He asserted: "The Soviets have no master plan for the western hemisphere being too preoccupied with SALT." In a sense, the Mexican official suggested that the Cubans would correct deep social problems and tried soothing American worries by implying that the Cubans would "withdraw" by themselves. Castañeda added: "Though Cuba and the soviets would welcome Marxist/Communist regimes wherever they could get them, they were not prepared to provoke a massive US reaction and would act cautiously."[20] In February 1980, during a conversation with the deputy director of the CIA, Frank C. Carlucci, López Portillo remarked, "There are no present indications that Nicaragua will become another Cuba or become dominated by the Soviet Union or Cuba.[21]

The Mexican government coordinated with Cuba to promote revolutionary actions to stay informed about Cuban actions. The first instance of Mexican-Cuban coordination was on the Mexican home front, where the government collaborated with Cuban intelligence to support the local solidarity and propaganda activities favoring the FSLN and, later, the Salvadoran insurgents under the watchful eye of the Mexican intelligence services.[22] According to the testimony of Ulises Estrada, a senior member of the America Department of the Cuban Communist Party, Mexico also made available an airport in the southern state of Chiapas to channel resources for the Sandinistas in case Costa Rican supply routes were compromised. Mexican-Cuban coordination went further as both countries had overlapping interests in a revolutionary victory in El Salvador along Nicaraguan lines. In fact, in the mid-1980s, Fidel Castro asked directly if the Mexican government was willing to support the efforts of the new united guerrilla organization of El Salvador, the FMLN. López Portillo readily agreed to help support another revolutionary attempt, as it already supported the revolutionaries in El Salvador (Oñate 2016, 134–135).

Mexico's contacts with the Cuban government warned about the danger of the growing Cold War confrontation in the area. During a conversation with Fidel Castro on April 15,

[20] Telegram from the American Embassy in Mexico to the State Department, 30 July 1979, 1979MEXICO 12752, NARA.

[21] Memorandum from the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence (Carlucci) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Bowdler), 21 February 1980, in Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1977–1980, Vol. 23, Mexico, Cuba, and the Caribbean, no. 170.

[22] Committee of Solidarity with Nicaragua and the Sandinista Liberation Front, *legajo* 2, *caja* 276, AGN, DFS.

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1980, the Mexican ambassador Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá presented his evaluation of the regional situation, arguing: "The Cold War had stopped being so cold as tensions in the area had escalated due to the internal situation in the United States.... In this environment of growing tension, extreme positions were drawing further away. In some cases, like Nicaragua and El Salvador, a violent rupture had already occurred, while it was about to break out in others. There could be a general fire consuming all of Latin America and the whole world" (Corbalá 2003, 188).

After the revolutionary victory in Nicaragua, Mexico initiated efforts to limit American pressure against the government of Cuba, effectively offering diplomatic backing and attempting to separate Cuba's actions from the Soviet Union (in effect, the Soviet Union had little interest in supporting another Cuba-style regime in Latin America. Substantial Soviet and bloc support for Nicaragua began only in 1981) (Storkmannp 2014, 64). In a meeting in late August 1980 with William Bowdler, Castañeda adamantly denied, despite American insistence, that the Cuban government was intervening in Central America. According to the record of the meeting, "Castaneda's response consisted of a mixture of acknowledgement of these facts combined with an effort to justify Cuba's actions in terms of US policies which 'forced' Castro to turn to the Soviets."[23]

An integral part of Mexico's policy was its attempts to create a negotiation framework between the parties, especially Cuba and the United States (Kornbluh and LeoGrande 2014). In mid-1980, the Mexican government attempted to initiate diplomatic talks between both countries.[24] The Mexican ambassador in Cuba actively promoted the negotiations because this would "contribute significantly to the distension in the Caribbean, and consequently throughout the world" (Corbalá 2003, 101). Tensions increased in April with scheduled American military exercises off the Cuban coast. To prevent an escalation between both countries, López Portillo announced that he would visit Cuba, the first official visit of a Mexican president to the island since the revolution. Castro recognized that the announcement "during this tense situation" had significant "political implications."[25] During his visit, López Portillo strongly supported the Cuban government, calling for the termination of US actions against the communist regime. "We shall not tolerate anything being done to Cuba," the Mexican president declared, "because we shall feel as if it were being done to ourselves" (Payne 1984, 128).

Mexico attempts to influence the United States

US policy toward Latin America changed considerably during the Carter presidency to favor soft interventionism, human rights concerns, and multilateralism in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Nixon presidency. This created a window of opportunity for other regional actors like Mexico to advance their foreign policy interests (Schmidli 2012; Pastor 2002). By 1979, as the regional crisis grew, the White House increasingly could not control the flow of events, constrained by this reformist foreign policy. This contributed to the revolutionary victory of the Sandinistas in July 1979 and the subsequent rapprochement and engagement with the Sandinistas in an attempt not to repeat the same mistakes after the Cuban Revolution.

[23] "Meeting with President López Portillo and Foreign Secretary Castañeda," 21 August 1980, Telegram from the American embassy in Mexico to the State Department, FRUS, 1977–1980, Vol. 23.

[24] "Meeting with President López Portillo," Telegram from the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, in FRUS, 1977–1980, Vol. 23. no. 171.

[25] Memorandum of conversation between Castro and Honecker regarding the bilateral relations, US-Cuban relations, and Soviet-Cuban relations. Center for Preservation of Contemporary Documentation, (TsKhSD), f. 5, op. 77, d. 642, ll. 18–21, translation by Svetlana Savranskaya, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

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The Mexican government promoted this rapprochement while maintaining a constant effort to hinder what it saw as American interventionism. However, it had fewer tools to sway Washington, relying extensively on diplomatic and symbolic actions. In May 1979, as the situation in Nicaragua was turning dire, Mexico broke off diplomatic relations with Somoza, not only to strengthen the FSLN but also to "prod the United States into acting forcefully against Somoza,"[26] according to a CIA intelligence assessment. The Mexican government defended the revolutionary movement through diplomatic means, strongly opposing US efforts to organize an Inter-American peace force to prevent a seemingly inevitable revolutionary victory. The Mexican government lobbied Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia to oppose any such move by the Organization of American States (OAS). "The Nicaraguan people have opted for exercising their sacred right to rebel against tyranny in the same way that the Mexican people did sixty years ago," Jorge Castañeda declared during a meeting of foreign ministers on June 21, 1979.[27] Intense lobbying from Mexico contributed to the defeat of the American initiative and prevented a military intervention in Nicaragua.

From the beginning of the Nicaraguan revolution, Mexico counseled the United States to engage with the FSLN and send as much aid as possible to the new provisional government. In July 1979, Viron Vaky, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, and Patrick Lucey, US ambassador to Mexico, held a two-hour conversation with Foreign Minister Castañeda on the ongoing crisis in Central America. Castañeda insisted that the situation in Nicaragua would stabilize "unless [the Junta Government of National Reconstruction] GRN receives so little outside support that it is forced to take extreme measures"—a reference to a sharp turn toward the Soviet bloc.[28] The Americans were sympathetic to Castañeda's argument. During most of 1979, the American embassy in Mexico believed that the enthusiasm deployed by the Mexican government for the Sandinistas was in line with its efforts to strengthen the moderate elements within the FSLN. The "display of activism in the Nicaragua situation signals Mexican desire—parallel to our efforts—to fortify moderate elements in Nicaragua and to avoid forcing the new Managua government to rely exclusively on support from Cuba and its friends," the American ambassador in Mexico informed Washington.[29] By late 1979 the Carter administration approved a 75 million dollar loan for Nicaragua and more than 10 million dollars for emergency aid.[30] As a memorandum from Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State to President Carter, explained: "Our principal objectives are to strengthen Nicaragua's ties to us and other Western governments and institutions and offset Nicaragua's dependence on Cuba."[31]

During 1980, the Carter administration became pressured to take more anti-communist positions due to growing Republican criticism of its administration after scandals concerning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran (Pastor 2002, 189–190). By early 1980, the Carter administration became worried about Mexico's policies in El Salvador. During a White House meeting, Secretary of State Cyrus

[26] Intelligence assessment, Mexico-Cuba the course of relations, 5 June 1979, CIA-RDP80T00942A001100050001-7, CIA-FOIA records.

[27] "Speech by Jorge Castañeda at the XVII ministerial consultation meeting, 21 June 1979," AH-SRE, *topográfica* B3-133-7.

[28] Telegram from the American Embassy in Mexico to the State Department, 30 July 1979, 1979MEXICO 12752, NARA.

[29] Telegram from the US Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, 23 July 1979, 1979MEXICO 12378, NARA.

[30] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs to Secretary of State Vance, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and Director of the International Development Cooperation Agency, 10 October 1979, FRUS 1977–1980, Vol. 15, Central America, 1977–1980, no. 485.

[31] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, 9 January 1980, FRUS 1977–1980, Vol. 15; Central America, 1977–1980, no. 310.

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Vance noted that Castañeda believed that "the only way through this current crisis in El Salvador is by revolution" and that Mexico supported the "Marxists." In response, the hawkish National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that the US government should "make absolutely clear to the Mexicans and the Cubans that there are certain things we will not tolerate."[32] A CIA analysis two months later highlighted the growing possibility of tension between the United States and Mexico due to their divergent attitudes toward El Salvador and Cuba: "Mexico's views are more narrowly focused and are based on different concerns than those of the US; therefore, considerable potential for bilateral discord exists-particularly if radical influence continues to increase in Nicaragua and El Salvador."[33]

The defeat of Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election and the arrival of the Reagan administration brought the unstable Central American political situation to a boil. The Carter administration sought to moderate the revolutionary zeal of the FSLN and prevent an expansion of communist influence through engagement and cooperation. The Reagan White House, in turn, favored an aggressive and military approach (LeoGrande 1998, 5). Attempts by Mexico and other countries to foster engagement imposed political costs for overt American interventionism. In March 1981, a National Security Council (NSC) document warned that overt action in Nicaragua could lead to grave diplomatic repercussions in Mexico, Venezuela, and West Germany, all of which had counseled the United States to continue assistance to the Nicaraguans. The report concluded: "We would prefer that it be Nicaraguan actions that show these countries they are wrong."[34] In response to economic support from Mexico and the Western European countries, the NSC background paper suggested that the United States should persuade democratic nations, international financial institutions and Mexico, specifically, "to cut off all further economic aid."[35] Meanwhile, the Regan administration canceled all economic assistance to Nicaragua and began plotting to subvert the Nicaraguan revolutionary government (LeoGrande 1996).

The election of Ronald Reagan had a dramatic impact on Mexico's policies toward the crisis. As Washington toughened its approach to the region, Mexico sought to strengthen its strategic position through multilateral diplomacy while tempering its most overt interventionist policies in favor of the revolutionaries. On August 28, 1981, Mexico and France issued a joint communiqué in which they recognized the FMLN and its political arm, the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), as a legitimate military and political force, which gave the clandestine organizations the same status as the government of El Salvador and its military.[36] Mexico sought to legitimize the FMLN and tried to prevent El Salvador's conflict from being framed as part of growing East-West tensions by the United States. International observers saw the declaration as a symbol of increased support by the Mexican government for the Salvadoran insurgency. However, the declaration might have been more the result of the military failures of the January 1981 "final offensive" by the

[32] Minutes of a special coordination committee meeting, 28 January 1980, FRUS, 1977–1980, Vol. 15, Central America, no. 406.

[33] National Foreign Assessment Center, "Central America/Mexico-Overview," 21 March 1980, p. 5, CIA-RDP88B00443R001304050177-7, CIA-FOIA records.

[34] Memorandum for Mr. Richard V. Allen, Paper for NSC meeting on Nicaragua, 17 March 1981. CIA-RDP83B00140R000100090020-4, CIA-FOIA records.

[35] Data from the Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence from the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America, "Cuba/Central America Memorandum for the president: Update," 30 October 1981, p. 4, CIA-RDP84b00049r001503710011-8, CIA-FOIA records. This calculation did not consider the amount of Soviet-bloc military support for the Sandinistas.

[36] "Franco-Mexican declaration of recognition of FMLN-FDR," 28 August 1981, http://www.cedema.org/ver.php?id=4611.

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FMLN and the growing realization of the Mexican government that only a diplomatic solution could solve the crisis (D'Haeseleer 2018).

Mexico's efforts to ally with France showed a growing concern about a possible confrontation with the United States and a desire to temper Washington's response through international alliances. European countries, such as Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Ireland, and the Democratic Republic of Germany, subscribed to the declaration, while the Federal German Republic supported the document without subscribing to it (Covarrubias 2013, 52). The Franco-Mexican declaration showed a confluence of interests between third-party actors in preventing the escalations of East-West tensions and the defense of detente. In stark contrast to the European response, the declaration was widely rejected in Latin America as "interventionist" by Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, and others. The US State Department dismissed the declaration and immediately issued a statement against the Mexican effort. This episode strained relations between the two countries. According to Secretary of State Alexander Haig and his Brazilian counterpart, Ramiro Guerreiro, the Franco-Mexican declaration was without "justification." Haig even commented that the Mexican president "practically apologized" about the communique during his encounter with Reagan in September 1981. Haig recalled that Portillo acknowledged, "We have not done things the right way."[37]

As part of its ongoing efforts to jump-start peace talks, on November 23, 1981, the Mexican government arranged a secret meeting between Haig and the Cuban vice premier, Carlos R. Rodríguez, in Mexico City. During the conversation, Rodríguez expressed his thanks to the Mexican government and emphasized his support for the efforts of López Portillo to prevent further military escalation: "We are in complete accord with the ideas expressed yesterday by President Lopez-Portillo, who called for an end to the verbal terrorism which has been widely utilized by both sides in the recent past, and for a beginning to the process of détente."[38] Despite Mexico's best efforts, the attempt to initiate peace talks had failed by the last months of 1981.

By January 1982, the Mexican government seemed to realize that its efforts to stop polarization and prevent an ideological confrontation were failing. According to a conversation between López Portillo and the American senators Howard Baker and Alan Simpson, the Mexican president considered the Nicaraguan situation to have destabilized considerably: "[Mexico and the United States] did not contribute in time to a pluralistic solution nor develop a support system that might have eased the political pressure arising from the popular revolution." López Portillo added that "isolating Nicaragua has worsened the situation, which has now become part of the classic East-West conflict." The president then concluded that "the issue has turned into a U.S.-Soviet problem via Cuba."[39] López Portillo and his foreign minister Castañeda informed the American senators that "Mexico is advocating U.S.-Soviet understanding in Cuba, Poland, Nicaragua, etc.," adding that an understanding with Cuba was possible in the same way as the United States approached China. "A similar détente," López Portillo asserted, "is needed with regard to Cuba and the pacification of the Central American/Caribbean area."[40] In February 1982, the Mexican

[37] Memorandum of Conversation, Brazil Foreign Minister Guerreiro and US Secretary of State Haig, 20 September 1981. Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (CPDOC), Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV). Obtained and translated by Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

[38] Transcript of meeting between US Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Cuba Vice Premier Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 84, d. 584, ll. 1-27, translation by Bruce McDonald; document obtained by Carter-Brezhnev Project and on file at National Security Archive, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

[39] "Codels Baker and Simpson visit with President Lopez Portillo," Telegram from the American embassy in Mexico to the State Department, 29 January 1982, CIA-RDP84B00148R000300770031-6, CIA-FOIA records.

[40] "Codels Baker and Simpson visit with President Lopez Portillo," Telegram from the American embassy in Mexico to the State Department, 29 January 1982, CIA-RDP84B00148R000300770031-6, CIA-FOIA records.

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government officially proposed a "regional distension plan" or "regional detente plan," proposing separate peace talks and negotiations centered around the three main areas of the conflict: El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Cuba-US relations. The governments of Cuba and Nicaragua reacted positively to the Mexican distension plan, whereas the United States showed little interest in the Mexico-backed process (Ojeda and Herrera 1983, 436).

By mid-1982, the US government had decided to pressure Mexico to modify its policies toward Central America. A National Security Planning Group report concluded that Mexico supported both publicly and covertly "the extreme left with propaganda, funds and political support." In response, the Reagan administration considered it necessary to "isolate" Mexico (and Western Europe) from Central American affairs through an active diplomatic campaign, as it had done after the Franco-Mexican declaration a year before.[41] Pressure by the American government on Mexico to modify its policies toward Nicaragua and El Salvador increased, but it never reached the level of outright opposition. Mexico was a helpful intermediary between the US, the Salvadoran guerrillas, and the Nicaraguan and Cuban governments. Geography also played a large part in insulating Mexico from US pressure. As a CIA estimate on political instability declared in September 1981: "Because of the long US border with Mexico, and the size and complexity of US interests there, Mexico's problems and policies tend to have stronger repercussions in the United States than those of any other developing nation."[42]

By 1982 Mexico suffered from severe financial strain as a result of declining oil prices and a sharp increase in US interest rates. This ballooned Mexico's budget deficit to 14 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) (US$20 billion) (Copelovitch 2010). By the end of the year, Mexico had to ask for international aid from the United States and the International Monetary Fund to prevent further deterioration of its finances. In December 1982, a new Mexican president, Miguel de la Madrid, took office. Under this grave economic crisis, his government was less interested in fostering revolutionary change in Central America and more wary of US acquiescence.

Mexico's weak financial situation and stubborn US opposition to its policies forced the country to increasingly rely on collective action and multilateral diplomacy, trying to insulate the country from American pressure. In late August 1982, Mexico and Venezuela began working on diplomatic mechanisms to prevent further escalation of tensions (Ojeda 2007, 27). This led to the creation of the Contadora Group in January 1983, formed by Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela to promote peace negotiation and prevent a growing Cold War conflict in the region. The first declaration of the Contadora Group expressed its "profound worry" on direct and indirect "foreign influence in the conflict" and denounced attempts to "inscribe the conflict into the East-West confrontation."[43] The declaration highlighted the continuity of the policy of detente under the new Miguel de la Madrid government.

The Contadora Group's efforts over the next few years resulted in myriad meetings, summits, and councils that attempted to end the military escalation in the region. However, without the acquiescence of all parties in the conflict, especially the United States, violence continued throughout the 1980s. Despite this, several observers have pointed out that Contadora served as a unified framework to begin a negotiated settlement process that would later develop into the Esquipulas I and Esquipulas II peace treaties that created a road map for the end of the armed conflicts (Ojeda 2007, 143–144). It also successfully shifted the narrative of the Central American conflict away from an East-West

[41] Raymond Bonner, "President Approved Policy of Preventing Cuba-Style Model States," *New York Times*, 27 April 1983.

[42] National Intelligence estimate Vol. I, Political Instability and regional tensions. CIA-rdp84b001102650016-5, CIA-FOIA records.

[43] "First communication on the island of Contadora, Panama" 9 January 1983, *Memoria Política de México*.

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confrontation to explanations centered on the local economic and political roots of the conflict. If Mexico could not convince the United States to cease its aggression against the revolutionary government, it would appeal to all other interested parties, promoting the progressive isolation of the American government and its Cold War–centered policy.

Conclusion

Mexico's attempts to forestall a renewed East-West conflict in Central America formed part of a broader global trend to salvage detente in the late 1970s. The Mexican government considered that it could defeat Cuban influence and the allure of communism with direct aid and economic support; it would attempt to out-buy the revolutionaries. At the same time, it tried to restrain the actions of the United States, fearing a Cold War escalation similar to the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. The central point of this strategy was detente, understood as a concerted effort to initiate a dialogue between conflicting parties to ensure long-term peaceful coexistence between different political systems.

Between 1978 and 1982, Mexico's policy toward Central America shifted from revolutionary enthusiasm and optimism to a moderation policy characterized by multilateralism. The Mexican government realized that it could not control the escalating regional conflict. Despite reaching agreements with Fidel Castro, the Sandinistas, and the FMLN, the lack of US cooperation condemned Mexico's actions. Other elements also limited Mexico's attempts to initiate detente in the region. The country's refusal to give security assistance to the Sandinistas severely constrained Mexico's leverage over the revolutionaries despite its enormous material support to the Nicaraguan government.

Mexico's Central American detente project attempted to implement the tenets of superpower detente in a peripheral region. In stark contrast to American approaches to communist China during the 1970 and 1980s, detente in Central America failed due to American opposition, presenting the limits of Mexico's international influence in unequivocal terms. It became an example of how smaller states from the global south could seldom resist the wider international conflict caused by superpower conflict in the periphery. Despite this, Mexico's maneuver space was surprisingly wide in the face of Washington's displeasure, especially when presented as part of a larger effort of like-minded countries. This is also in line with the conclusions of other recent works (Zolov 2020; Thornton 2021; Loaeza 2022). A reexamination of Mexico's autonomy from the United States is necessary to dispel both the triumphalist visions of absolute independence and the more pessimistic views that leave a small margin of action for Mexican political autonomy.

Studying efforts like Mexico's detente for Central America adds nuance to explanations of peripheral actors' foreign policy when confronted with hegemonic powers. While the Mexican government could not create the negotiating framework that it desired to prevent the escalation of the armed conflict, its efforts increased the political costs of American military intervention in the region. Mexico also helped advance the narrative that the conflict could not be explained only as part of the East-West confrontation; it also had to be explained as the result of profound structural socioeconomic problems. This framework allowed Mexico to work with Latin American and European actors (in bilateral and multilateral ways) to prevent further escalation of violence. By increasing the political and economic cost of escalation, Mexico's attempts to create detente in Central America and the Caribbean prevented further global tensions during the 1980s and limited the destabilizing effects of the Cold War in the region.

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