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Challenge to U.S.

Marxist Nicaragua has issued a dangerous challenge to the United States. On Sept. 19, Nicaraguan Defence Minister Humberto Ortega announced that his nation would acquire Soviet-made MiG fighters "by the end of the year." Surprisingly, this statement provoked little reaction in the North American media.

Until Ortega's announcement, Nicaragua had denied persistent U.S. charges that it had pilots undergoing advanced fighter training in Eastern Europe. Liberals in the U.S. scoffed at the Pentagon's warnings, accusing the administration of unfounded alarmism.

Reports from Washington suggest that Nicaragua will receive at least two squadrons of MiG-17s and more advanced MiG-21 interceptors. The MiGs will be based outside of Managua at the new airfield of Punta Huete, whose runway has been lengthened to accommodate supersonic aircraft. Revetments, maintenance facilities and anti-aircraft defences are already in place.

Nicaragua's MiGs will outclass and outnumber any of the other air forces in Central America. The U.S.-backed states of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have only an old, decrepit collection of ineffective, sub-sonic aircraft and trainers.

Besides posing a very real military threat to its neighbors, Nicaragua's MiGs clearly challenge the United States. Washington has repeatedly warned that it will prevent the introduction of Soviet warplanes into Central America. Nicaragua's Marxist junta must realize that its MiGs will surely provoke some sort of American response.

The issue here is not just Nicaragua or its substantial support for the Marxist rebels in El Salvador. The introduction of MiGs means that the Soviet Union has decided to directly challenge the United States in Central America. This could represent either a subtle blocking or the beginning of a major test of wills between Washington and Moscow.

Blocking works in the following manner: Once Nicaragua has a potent air force, any attempt at military intervention in the area by Washington will mean a more intense level of fighting. Instead of a local police action, the U.S. will have a real war on its hands, complete with military and civilian casualties.

The Soviets and Nicaraguans are hoping that these higher stakes will further embolden the U.S. Congress and media to frustrate any attempt by President Ronald Reagan to take military action. The U.S. would have little trouble wiping out Nicaragua's air force; but the very thought of such action horrifies timorous members of Congress.

It is worth noting that Russia has used this technique in Cuba: The island's military power was slowly increased over the years to the point where an invasion today would require 100,000 U.S. troops and a good part of its navy and air force.

Major Soviet bastion

Blocking U.S. action against Nicaragua may not be Moscow's only intent. The usually cautious Russians would not release MiGs to their Latin ally without first carefully weighing the consequences. Russia may have decided to directly challenge the U.S. in Central America by making Nicaragua into a major Soviet bastion.

In military terms, Russia would today be hard-pressed to support Nicaragua if the U.S. decided to reduce it by force. At best, Russia could hope only to threaten U.S. naval forces off the Nicaraguan coast with submarines and mines. But if Washington blinks and allows the Soviet arms buildup to continue, Nicaragua could, like Cuba, be turned in a few years into a very powerful fortress and staging base.

The U.S. simply cannot allow this geopolitical defeat to occur. One Cuba is enough; two would be intolerable. A militarily potent Nicaragua would quickly come to dominate Central America, and would obviously serve as a springboard for Russian penetration of Latin America and Mexico.

What can the U.S. do? There are three evident choices. Sit back and watch Nicaragua rapidly turn into a Russian Gibraltar. Negotiate a deal with Moscow to cancel the sale. Or, take some form of military action.

A military response would likely mean surgical air attacks to destroy the MiGs and their bases or a naval blockade to prevent delivery of the warplanes, which must come in by ship. Nicaragua's harbors could be mined, this time with real, deadly devices. As a more remote possibility, Honduras or Guatemala could be given modern U.S. aircraft: American "volunteer" pilots could take out the MiGs.

Unless this looming crisis is averted, we could be looking at the beginning of another Cuban missile crisis. Nor should we forget that some senior Soviet military officers have threatened to emplace medium-ranged nuclear missiles "near the U.S." This means either Cuba or Nicaragua.

Many Canadians have never fully understood the danger posed by a communist Nicaragua — or Cuba, for that matter. Those who say the crisis would disappear if only the U.S. would leave little Nicaragua alone fail to understand the dynamics of great power geopolitical confrontation. Power either advances or recedes; it never remains static. Russia is openly committed, by word and deed, to "supporting the march of socialism" in Central America. Some Russians have said that this is their way of getting back at the U.S. for its involvement in the Middle East.

We must hope that our new government will accept some responsibility for defence and security of the Americas by giving at least verbal and diplomatic support to American efforts to rid our hemisphere of growing Soviet penetration.

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