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U.S. Warms to Central America Plan, Hoping to Win More Aid for Contras

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration, hoping to win more congressional aid for the Contra rebels, is mouthing support for a new Central American peace effort despite its scant enthusiasm for a negotiated settlement with Nicaragua's left-Sandinista government.

The administration's strategy is to avoid the appearance of undercutting the negotiating plan, even as officials point out its weaknesses to El Salvador and Honduras, America's main allies in the region. "We strongly support" the peace efforts, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams told Congress recently. But, he said, "it is important to keep in mind that the . . . proposals at this stage are essentially an outline" that can be changed.

The skill with which the administration performs this balancing act could determine whether it persuades a reluctant Congress to continue funding the Contras, the U.S.-backed rebel movement that is fighting to overthrow the Sandinista regime. The White House, which claims it supports the Contras in order to prod Nicaragua toward domestic reforms and peace with its neighbors, is expected to ask Congress for at least \$105 million in aid this fall. Lawmakers, still angry over disclosures that the administration secretly funded the rebels when Congress prohibited such aid, are demanding assurances that President Reagan is pursuing diplomacy in Central America.

The Arias Peace Plan

A peace plan that Costa Rican President Oscar Arias proposed earlier this year is emerging as the focal point of this debate. The plan calls for the five Central American states simultaneously to grant amnesty to rebels, declare a cease-fire and begin discussions with internal opponents, and take steps toward "democratization." The plan also requests outside governments, such as the U.S., to stop aiding insurgent forces in the area.

In advance of a June meeting of the heads of the five Central American governments, President Reagan has dispatched Philip Habib, his special envoy to the region, to offer the U.S. view. Mr. Habib is warning that a cease-fire can't simply be declared; it must be negotiated between the warring parties. But, he notes, the Arias plan excludes the Contras from the negotiating process. He also is suggesting

that steps by Nicaragua toward political reforms should be verified before the Contras are called off.

"The worst thing that could come out of these negotiations would be a sham treaty in which everybody signs a meaningless piece of paper and goes home," says a senior U.S. official.

But critics complain that the administration's real goal is to bog down the process in the same kind of endless negotiating that has plagued another diplomatic forum, the Contadora regional peace talks, since 1983. This would give the administration the political cover it needs to continue aiding the war against Nicaragua while telling Congress it supports negotiations.

"One gets the sense that they're trying to find more reasons why it shouldn't succeed than why it should," says Sen. Christopher Dodd (D., Conn.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. "My sense is that the Reagan administration doesn't want to see any agreement that would recognize the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan government."

Paying Lip Service

Indeed, although President Reagan stresses the "two-track" policy of diplomacy and pressure whenever congressional votes on aid are on the horizon, there is little evidence of any White House inclination to push for peace with Managua. A year ago, Mr. Habib, a veteran diplomat, suggested in a letter to Congress that the U.S. would consider cutting off aid to the Contras if Nicaragua signed a peace treaty. He was quickly slapped down by administration hard-liners, who explained that Mr. Habib meant the cessation of aid might begin when the treaty was "implemented," not signed.

This year, though, pressure from Congress may force President Reagan to do more than pay lip service to diplomacy. Rep. James Slattery (D., Kan.) has the support of 110 other congressmen for a plan that builds on the Arias proposal and addresses some White House concerns. For instance, it is more explicit about what Managua has to do before the cease-fire begins, and it has more specific verification requirements. Rep. Slattery believes that the Central Americans, including Nicaragua and even the Contras, might be persuaded to adopt portions of the plan, and that it is in Mr. Reagan's interest to push it as well. "From the president's point of view, he can say he made a real offer, or he can come back to Congress and say, 'Look, I made the offer and they (Managua) wouldn't do it.' He wins either way."

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