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Comment: Central American Summit Accord Abandons Pretext Of Multilateral Character

by Deborah Tyroler

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In an article published in the New York Times (02/16/89), Mark A. Uhlig asserts that the results of the Feb. 13-14 summit in El Salvador can be summarized as a "hard-headed deal between two nations seeking to rid themselves of a common problem, in this case the contras." The agreement was not in the spirit of the 1987 regional peace plan, since it is unsuitable as a broader formula for regional peace. Prior to the summit, diplomats discussed strategies in terms of a universal effort to verify or police the 1987 regional accord. Foreign ministers who met at the United Nations to prepare for the summit reached agreement on a plan to use "mobile units" of UN observers from Spain, Canada and West Germany to enforce the security provisions of the regional plan, i.e., prohibiting signatory nations from supporting insurgent groups in other Central American countries, or allowing their territory to be used for that purpose by nations outside the region. At the summit, the five presidents failed to establish common ground on a general plan for verification and enforcement of the plan's political provisions that would be "intrusive enough to force democratic change in Nicaragua without making life intolerable for the powerful military and right-wing interests in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala." Nonetheless, Nicaraguan leaders acquiesced and even acted as cheerleaders for the agreement that emerged. Nicaragua was simply outnumbered. It could not prevent seeing general debate turn around its domestic politics, or force El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to accept the same scrutiny. Washington's power to define the terms of the Central American debate was evident. Democratic change inside Nicaragua for the US has become the litmus test of any regional peace process, regardless of whether the same standard applies to other countries of the region. Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto drafted a proposal for a verification scheme for the regional plan's political provisions. It consisted of an detailed set of measures, including the use of private and public international human rights observers, and official reports on a three-month basis. El Salvador, which has little to gain from such objective scrutiny of domestic politics, was the first to balk. Nicaragua then permitted the facade of a multilateral pact to fall to the wayside, by accepting intrusive "verification" measures that apply to it alone.

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