

# Informal regional diplomacy

## the Esquipulas Process

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**The civil wars in Guatemala (1969-96), El Salvador (1979-92) and Nicaragua (1961-79 and again in the 1980s) became known collectively as the Central American Crisis. Each conflict had its own specific characteristics but the causes, dynamics and solutions of the different conflicts in the isthmus also had a connected, regional dimension.**

Central America gained its independence from Spain as a confederation and it is widely regarded as a single cultural, economic and geopolitical system. It is not surprising that some of the structural causes of socio-political violence in the region share some commonalities: among them economic inequality, social and economic exclusion, weak political participation and representation, authoritarian and militarist political culture, and 'racist' political and economic elites.

The conflicts in Central America were also interconnected and regionalised through more manifest, physical 'spill-over' and cross-border dynamics, such as the displacement of more than two million people – around half a million to the US, and hundreds of thousands to Mexico, Honduras and Costa Rica. Neighbouring countries also provided sanctuary and support to some guerrillas; for example, support for US-backed anti-Sandinista Contras in Honduras and Costa Rica, or the alleged political, economic and military links between the Nicaraguan government, and Salvadoran and Guatemalan guerrillas.

At the beginning of the 1980s Central America seemed to be trapped in a regional security dilemma in which the incentives to cooperate and make credible commitments were counterbalanced by uncertainty over the real intentions of the 'other' warring parties. Mistrust was augmented by several inter-state border disputes – Guatemala/Belize, Honduras/El

Salvador, Nicaragua/Honduras, and Nicaragua/Costa Rica – but it can be better explained by two factors.

First, the region lacked credible and capable institutions to address regional conflict dynamics or build confidence. The Central American Common Market collapsed after the so-called Football War between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, while the Organisation of Central American States, created in 1951 to enhance regional integration, had disappeared by the beginning of the 1970s. The only functioning regional institutions in the 1970s focused on security cooperation to address threats posed by guerrilla movements. For example the Central American Defence Council (CONDECA) was the maximum expression of a regional security model, which concentrated on counterinsurgency rather than any concept of human security. It was conceptually linked to the prevalent 'Doctrine of National Security', which emphasised the fight against international communism and the 'internal enemy'.

Second, the Central American civil wars became internationalised and closely linked to Cold War politics through the involvement of extra-regional powers that took advantage of the political dynamics in Central America to pursue their own strategic interests. The Soviet Union saw the Central American crisis as an opportunity to erode US hegemony in its 'backyard'; although Moscow's involvement in the region was less decisive than Washington's, and declined rapidly with *Perestroika* in the mid-1980s. Cuba supported many Central American guerrillas as a means to spread the Communist revolution, and also to counter its isolation on the American continent.

For Washington, the victory of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) over the dynastic and corrupt Somoza

regime in Nicaragua in 1979 – the same year as the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan and the revolution in Iran against the US-allied Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – seemed likely to consolidate an already strong Havana-Managua axis and to further foment revolution in Guatemala and El Salvador. The US increased its support to military regimes in Central America and tried to erode the Sandinista Revolution through economic boycott, diplomatic isolation and military confrontation.

## Cross-border peacemaking in Central America: Contadora and Esquipulas

In the absence of viable or relevant regional institutions in Central America, the Contadora process emerged in the early 1980s to create a less formal regional diplomatic framework for dialogue, confidence-building and inter-governmental cooperation. Contadora culminated in the Esquipulas II agreement (1987), which paved the way for elections in Nicaragua (1990), and peace accords in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996), and also established a network of regional institutions designed to enhance the pacification, democratisation and integration of the region.

The Contadora Group originally comprised Panama, Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela, but was later expanded to include Brazil, Peru, Uruguay and Argentina. Its initial aims focused on confidence-building measures and promoting talks on the pacification, democratisation and integration of Central America. Despite some international support, the 1984 Contadora Act on Peace and Cooperation in Central America was rejected by some Central American governments as unworkable. The US also saw Contadora as an obstacle to its ambitions in Nicaragua. Nevertheless, Contadora helped to sustain international concern about the Central American crisis – and its resolution.

The election of new presidents in Guatemala (Vinicio Cerezo), Honduras (Jose Azcona) and Costa Rica (Oscar Arias), between January and May 1986, helped to reinvigorate regional negotiations. In May 1986 the five Central American presidents met in the Guatemalan city of Esquipulas and agreed to increase political cooperation and dialogue. Following the ‘Esquipulas I’ summit and subsequent presidential-level talks, the president of Costa Rica presented a peace plan in February 1987. The plan became the core of the 1987 Esquipulas II Accord that established measures to promote national reconciliation, end hostilities, hold credible elections and initiate democratisation processes, establish negotiations on security issues and arms control, and increase the assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons.

Esquipulas II established a road map – backed by the UN and the Organisation of American States (OAS) – for the

governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua to engage in dialogue with their respective armed opposition groups. It also sought to develop regional institutions (eg the Central America Integration System or the Alliance for Sustainable Development), as well as periodic presidential summits to discuss economic and security issues.

## Lessons from Esquipulas

Esquipulas was an ambitious attempt to overcome deep-rooted structural and historical socio-economic inequalities in Central America. It consolidated an autonomous regional space for dialogue that was sufficiently safeguarded from overbearing Cold War geopolitical imperatives and represented an innovative and *ad-hoc* Latin American regional initiative to resolve regional problems – when more formal regional structures were either compromised or inappropriate. Summits of the five Central American presidents that were developed through Contadora and Esquipulas became the primary regional diplomatic forum.

The presidents did not seek total international isolation, understanding the contribution of appropriate international support to the success of peace processes in Central America; for example, the diplomatic engagement of the European Community, or the recognition provided by the award of the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize to Costa Rican President Oscar Arias.

The UN and the OAS contributed to the political legitimacy and technical capacity of the process by participating in the creation of confidence-building measures, monitoring ceasefire agreements, and supporting the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants and the implementation of the peace agreements. This was done in particular through bodies such as the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) and the UN Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA).

The success of Esquipulas was also built on the innovative structure and principles of the negotiation process. Esquipulas adopted a two-track negotiation approach. The first track was regional international negotiations between the Central American presidents. The fact that the negotiations were held at the highest political level contributed to the confidence among the negotiating parties and to the credibility of the commitments made by each government. The second track was bilateral negotiations at the regional level between the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, and their respective opposition armed groups.

The *ad hoc* and flexible negotiation structure of Contadora and Esquipulas was also founded on important prior principles regarding the negotiation agenda, notably simultaneity,

international verification, gradualism, political recognition of armed groups and comprehensiveness.

The simultaneous compliance of scheduled commitments and their verification by an international commission – comprising the Secretaries-General of the OAS and the UN, the foreign affairs ministers of the Central American countries, the Group of Contadora and the Support Group – helped to create trust and overcome the aforementioned security dilemma.

Also important was the gradualism of the talks, which sequentially established an end to violence and then addressed the development and integration of Central America. The formal launch of the peace talks was facilitated by the Central American governments agreeing to recognise the political status and demands of the non-state armed groups, and not to demand a ceasefire as a prerequisite for initiating exploratory dialogue.

The comprehensiveness of a negotiation agenda sought to address not only the consequences of the war – displacement, demobilisation of combatants, economic and social impact of the conflict – but also some of its structural causes through solutions that went far beyond the traditional power-sharing arrangements.

But despite their diplomatic innovation, the peace agreements in Central America lacked the wide-reaching social support needed to become an effective agenda for economic and political transformation. The role of civil society during the negotiation process was marginal and there was a lack of popular ownership of the peace agreements – despite the fact that the Catholic Church facilitated the talks and has launched numerous initiatives for social reconciliation. Moreover,



Costa Rican President Oscar Arias (L) shakes hands with Panamanian President Martin Torrijos (R) as Guatemalan President Oscar Berger looks on after the ceremony commemorating the 20th anniversary of the signature of the Central American 'Esquipulas II' peace plan © MAYELA LOPEZ / AFP / Getty Images

the capacity of the guerrillas to lead the implementation of the peace agreements and the socio-political change was undermined by their failure to abandon hierarchical and militarised internal structures, and to adapt to a new environment of democratic, electoral competition.

The initial optimism of Esquipulas II was progressively eroded by the failure to implement the agreements. Central American integration was diluted through the 1990s, replaced by bilateral tensions and border conflicts; and transitions to peace and democracy were eclipsed by rising social unrest and criminality. Many governments in the region have resorted to uncompromising security responses, provoking new cycles of violence.

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