

**The Central American Formula: The Arias Peace Plan and the Esquipulas II Agreement (1986 -1990)**

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# THE CENTRAL AMERICAN FORMULA: THE ARIAS PEACE PLAN AND THE ESQUIPULAS II AGREEMENT (1986 -1990)

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*"Let Central Americans decide the future of Central America...Support the efforts for peace instead of the forces of war in our region."*

- Óscar Arias Sánchez<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the 1980s Central America faced a tumultuous political and security environment. The left-wing Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) took power in Nicaragua in 1979, leading to a counter-revolutionary war driven by the United States (US). At the same time, the civil war in El Salvador was escalating and Guatemala was experiencing a high level of violence as the military government sought to stay in power. In Costa Rica and Honduras there was severe economic decline and both countries were under pressure from the US to support the counter-revolutionary forces in Nicaragua.

Diverse international and national peacemaking efforts attempted to address these conflicts.<sup>2</sup> A prominent initiative was the Contadora process, a collective mediation engagement from outside the Central American region that began in 1983 and was instigated by the presidents of Panama, Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia.<sup>3</sup> Three years of mediation produced a peace agreement but did not yield peace.<sup>4</sup>

In May 1986 Guatemala's newly elected president, Vinicio Cerezo, convened a Presidential Summit known as "Esquipulas I," named after the border city of Esquipulas in Guatemala where it was held. The result was the Esquipulas Declaration of May 25, 1986, in which the five Central American presidents declared their support for the Contadora process.<sup>5</sup> However, the regional conflict dynamics posed several obstacles to progress: ideological disagreements between Nicaragua and El Salvador, the dependency of some of the conflict parties on US aid, and implacable US opposition to recognizing the Sandinista government. In addition, the perception that the Contadora group was not impartial reduced its leverage over the conflict parties.<sup>6</sup>

After the Contadora process failed, the newly elected president of Costa Rica, Óscar Arias, made another attempt. In 1987 he presented a peace plan, "A Time for Peace," introducing new conceptual approaches and specific mechanisms for resolving the crises. Assuming the role of regional mediator, he sought to simplify the negotiation objectives of the Contadora process and emphasized the need to democratize each country's internal political arrangements.<sup>7</sup> Rather than emphasizing security matters



Photo: One Stop Map

alone, the Arias Peace Plan combined military-security measures with national reconciliation through democratic reforms.<sup>8</sup> After six months of negotiations the five Central American presidents signed the “Procedure to Establish a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America,” known as “Esquipulas II,” that was based on the Arias Peace Plan. In 1987 Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

This paper focuses on the period from the start of Esquipulas I in 1986 to the Nicaraguan electoral process in 1990. It discusses the causes and features of the conflicts, the mediation process, the effects of regional conflict dynamics on the mediation, and mediation strategies to address these dynamics.

## Conflict causes and features

The Central American political crises were associated with a range of social and economic problems that shook the region during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Although each country had different internal dynamics and responded differently to the structural problems, they were interconnected by their geographic proximity, cross-border spillover of armed conflict, and external political engagements, especially the US involvement in sending military aid to its regional allies.

The economic and social crises of the 1970s laid the foundation for the political-military crises of the 1980s. The Sandinista revolution triumphed in 1979, with the FSLN taking power and introducing radical policies. In the same year El Salvador experienced a coup d'état that plunged its political system into a spiral of violence and state terrorism that ultimately led to civil war.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by the Sandinista victory, a revolutionary movement was formed to fight the military government. Guatemala was also engulfed by civil war, with the junta's counterinsurgency campaign against the guerillas and vicious attacks on social movements amounting to ‘crimes against humanity.’<sup>11</sup>

These national and regional dynamics were further complicated and exacerbated by the geopolitical context of the Cold War, as Central America became an arena of US-Soviet struggle.<sup>12</sup> The US provided direct military support to domestic actors, particularly the counter-revolutionary forces known as the Contras, who were fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. To this end, the US forged a military alliance with Honduras and used Honduran territory as a base for operations against the Sandinistas. By the end of 1988 it was estimated that between 10,000 and 12,000 armed Contras were operating in Honduran territory.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, with the support of Costa Rica's President Luis Alberto Monge, the US used Costa Rican territory as a forward operating base against the Nicaraguan government.<sup>14</sup> The US also provided military assistance to the armed forces of El Salvador and Guatemala in their respective wars against guerilla movements.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Soviet Union provided direct support to the Sandinista regime, which included the provision of weapons to Nicaragua.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of cross-border military engagement, the Sandinista government supported the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which was fighting the government of El Salvador.<sup>17</sup> Nicaragua served as a transit route, refuge and logistical hub for the Salvadoran guerrillas.<sup>18</sup> This became a source of severe tension between Nicaragua and El Salvador.<sup>19</sup>

The Cold War environment and US military involvement in the region thus pitted the governments of Honduras and El Salvador against the Nicaraguan government, with Costa Rica aligning itself with the US. In 1984 Nicaragua brought lawsuits against Costa Rica and Honduras before the International Court of Justice regarding their support for the Contras.<sup>20</sup>

Political shifts in the region eventually brought new prospects for peace. In 1986 Guatemala's President Cerezo came to power with a campaign promise to end the civil war in his country and, in his inaugural speech, declared Guatemala's neutrality in the Nicaraguan conflict.<sup>21</sup> Newly elected President Arias of Costa Rica emphasized the need for a peaceful solution to the Central American crises. Contradicting his predecessors, he resumed the country's traditional policy of neutrality and pacifism. This pivot was due to his conviction that regional peace was consistent with the country's national interest and quest for development. As Arias put it: “A violent and convulsed Central America was not the best terrain to attract the capital and investment needed to convert Costa Rica into the first developed country in Latin America.”<sup>22</sup>



*Contras during the disarmament period in 1990.*

*Photo: IHNCA*



*Presidents Signatories of the Esquipulas I and II Agreements, seated left to right: Nicaraguan President Ortega, El Salvadoran President Duarte, Guatemalan President Cerezo, Honduran President Azcona, Costa Rican President Arias. Photo: National Archives of Costa Rica, Image Number 26253*

## Mediation dynamics

The Central American peace process unfolded through multiple mediation efforts, grounded in the Esquipulas II Agreement and developed subsequently through periodic negotiation forums that took the form of presidential summits. In parallel to this regional mediation process, bilateral negotiations at the domestic level aimed to put the regional agreements into practice.

After the Contadora process ground to a halt, Arias emerged as a critical figure in the peace process, functioning as both a mediator and a negotiator.<sup>23</sup> His strategy included leveraging Costa Rica's status as a neutral country with no armed forces and distancing the country from the ongoing US military efforts against Nicaragua.<sup>24</sup> Although Costa Rica disagreed with the US intervention, Costa Rica's neutrality allowed it to maintain an open channel with Washington and build the international legitimacy of the peace process. Arias held bilateral meetings with presidents throughout the region and with representatives in the US Congress.<sup>25</sup> He also worked with the US Special Envoy for Central America, Philip Habib. Arias argued that the US, which doubted Nicaragua's willingness to honor a peace agreement, would be justified in returning to coercive action if the Sandinistas reneged on their commitments.<sup>26</sup> This dual messaging had a positive impact on Washington's stance toward the peace process.

Arias took advantage of the Central American leaders' concern that the US counterinsurgency efforts would escalate existing conflicts. A negotiated solution, he insisted, was the region's most viable way to avoid this. Arias managed to gain the trust of all the key regional players, including Nicaragua. He also established his credibility among various external actors, including the Contadora Group, the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations (UN) and European countries.<sup>27</sup>

In February 1987 Arias convened a meeting in San José with the Central American presidents, aside from Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, to discuss "A Time for Peace." Nicaragua's exclusion at this stage was intended to bypass the tensions between the region's countries regarding the financing of the Contras and relations with the US.<sup>28</sup> Arias' Plan proposed the establishment of mechanisms to facilitate national reconciliation, including ceasefires, amnesties, national elections, monitoring and verification, oversight of the implementation of the parties' commitments, and a timeline for fulfilling the commitments.<sup>29</sup> He sought to simplify the Contadora group's negotiating agenda and redirect the process from its exclusive focus on military-security to include democratization.<sup>30</sup>

The Central American presidents did not approve the proposal immediately. Still, it was treated as the basis for continuing the peace talks, with Nicaragua being invited to the next presidential meeting in August 1987. In the interim, Arias traveled to several Latin American countries and visited eight European countries to build support for the Peace Plan.<sup>31</sup> Arias and his foreign minister visited Managua and held discussions with Ortega and his cabinet.<sup>32</sup> They emphasized that the peace initiative was aimed at democratization and not isolation of Nicaragua.



Arias took advantage of the release of the Reagan administration's peace plan, known as the 'Reagan-Wright Plan,' before the scheduled Esquipulas summit. Reagan's plan was perceived as an attempt to take over the regional process, generating mistrust among Central American presidents. Arias used this moment strategically to persuade the presidents not to be co-opted by Washington.<sup>33</sup> A regionally owned approach was more appealing and provided a basis for including Nicaragua in the peace process.

The presidential summit in Guatemala City in August 1987 led to the final agreement, the "Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America" (Esquipulas II). The agreement was based on the concepts of peace, democracy and development. It delineated specific objectives and measures that included demilitarization of conflicts through ceasefires; prohibition of support for, and utilization of territory by, insurgents; promotion of national reconciliation through negotiated settlements; provision of amnesty to insurgents; repatriation of refugees; democratization of political systems through free and open elections; ending of states of emergency; protection of human rights; continuation of regional consultation through periodic presidential summits; and establishing a regional parliamentary body.<sup>34</sup>

The implementation process would be guided by the principles of simultaneity (several actions must be carried out at the same time), calendarization (deadlines for fulfilling the agreements), and transparency. Monitoring and verification were also critical: a key element of the agreement was the establishment of the International Verification and Follow-up Commission (*Comisión Internacional de Verificación y Seguimiento*, CIVS),<sup>35</sup> and an invitation to actors from outside the region to help ensure compliance.<sup>36</sup>

Esquipulas II did not end the Central American conflicts immediately but it created space for the presidents to address peace, democracy and security on their terms. As discussed below, the signing of the agreement was followed by a series of presidential summits to consider implementation and conduct further negotiations. It took almost three more years and five presidential meetings to achieve the Esquipulas II objectives.

## Effects of regional conflict dynamics on the implementation of the agreement

Through presidential summits held between 1987 and 1990, the Central American leaders addressed disputes and challenges related to the implementation of the agreement. The fact that the peace process's leadership was based in the region fostered a sense of ownership and mitigated concerns about bias and external interference. At the same time, it meant that the members of the mediation forum were also conflict actors and this generated acute tension within the forum. For instance, there were disputes over the parties' compliance with their commitment to prevent the use of their national territory for attacks against other states and to halt support for irregular forces and insurgent movements. Such disputes were exacerbated by ideological antagonisms between the presidents, rooted in different value systems.

A further set of implementation challenges concerned the domestic dimensions of the conflicts. The signatory parties had some latitude in interpreting provisions of the agreements and this sometimes resulted in frustration and mutual recrimination.<sup>37</sup> For example, the ceasefire provision was clear but the details of its implementation were largely left to individual governments.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, structural barriers, including constitutional challenges, impeded progress in critical areas, such as advancing national reconciliation in countries where government forces were still fighting insurgent groups.<sup>39</sup>

Domestic armies and insurgent forces were not themselves signatories to the agreement but they had the power to resist or influence its implementation. For instance, the FMLN in El Salvador initially opposed the Arias Plan and strongly rejected the parallel drawn between itself and the Contras.<sup>40</sup> In Guatemala, right-wing political forces pressured President Cerezo not to engage in any arrangement that placed the government and the insurgency on equal footing. The Contras resisted the demobilization agreement concluded at the Tela Presidential Summit in 1989, insisting that they were not signatories to the agreement.<sup>41</sup>

The US continued to play an ideologically motivated interventionist role. It was skeptical of Nicaragua's commitment to democracy, took actions that undermined Nicaragua's compliance, and continued to support the Contras. The Central American countries' heavy reliance on US economic aid allowed the US Republican administration to exercise leverage over the region's leaders and meddle indirectly in the negotiation process.

The simultaneity principle was another arena of contestation. For instance, a particular concern in Nicaragua was that the Contras refused to surrender their weapons until the country held free and fair elections as promised. The tension between Nicaragua and

Honduras persisted due to Honduras' insistence that it would only allow the UN to verify its commitments to demobilize Contra groups if Nicaragua withdrew the lawsuit it had filed in 1987 against Honduras at The Hague.

The presence of the Contras in the region remained an obstacle to conflict resolution. At the end of 1989 the Sandinista government announced the unilateral suspension of the ceasefire on the grounds that the Contras were not demobilizing as required.<sup>42</sup> The Contra presence in Honduras continued to generate animosity from Nicaragua. Relations between Nicaragua and El Salvador were also strained due to the increase of Sandinista troops on the border.

## Strategies to address the regional conflict dynamics

The presidential summits held between 1987 and 1990 were spaces for both negotiation and mediation. The signatories of Esquipulas II used these meetings to resolve disputes and move forward with the agreements. Arias played a central role as a mediator while the presidents negotiated directly with each other. The first three summits focused on the demobilization of the Contras and the electoral process in Nicaragua, after which the focus was on the peace negotiations in El Salvador between the government and the FMLN. At these meetings, the presidents renegotiated aspects of Esquipulas II and also forged new agreements, such as the 1988 Tela Agreements that addressed the Nicaragua lawsuit against Honduras, the demobilization of the Contras, and the role of verification actors.<sup>43</sup>

The most significant development in this regard was the decision at the Alajuela Summit in 1988 to strengthen the verification mechanism by establishing the Executive Commission, comprising the foreign ministers of the signatory states.<sup>44</sup> This heightened their attention and ownership and helped mitigate and manage the effects of the regional conflict dynamics. The Commission was responsible for overseeing the verification and follow-up of the Esquipulas II commitments. These functions, combined with the creation of technical committees that prepared agreements on specific issues, transformed the Commission into an additional negotiating forum.<sup>45</sup> Since the Commission convened prior to the Summit meetings, it was able to play consensus-building and problem-solving roles by addressing non-compliance and bringing draft agreements to the presidents for their consideration.

The Central American leaders also decided to involve external third parties in certain processes, such as those relating to cease-fires, demobilization of soldiers and disarmament of combatants. This provided much-needed technical expertise and enhanced the legitimacy of the peace efforts in the eyes of the international community and domestic stakeholders. Under UN coordination, Spain, Germany, and Venezuela became involved in verification efforts. At the Esquipulas Executive Commission meeting in Guatemala in 1988, a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was formed to draft the verification plan. At the Coronado Summit in 1989 the presidents approved the formation of the UN Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA).<sup>46</sup> ONUCA focused on the signatories' commitments to end support to irregular forces and insurrectionist movements and prevent their territory from being used for attacks on other states.<sup>47</sup>

The negotiation process that continued through the summits for several years resulted in the forging of new agreements at multiple levels. Esquipulas encouraged governments to adopt political reforms that made domestic-level peace negotiations more feasible. These efforts had vital outcomes: in Nicaragua, a ceasefire was reached in 1988 through the Sapoa Accord, followed by a transition of power through elections in 1990. The demobilization of the Contras in Honduras took place in 1990 with technical support from ONUCA. In El Salvador, the 1992 Peace Accord ended twelve years of civil war between the FMLN and the government. In Guatemala, informal talks began in 1990 between the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) movement, laying the ground for negotiations on the 1996 peace accords that ended over three decades of internal armed conflict.

Central American Peace Process Timeline	
1983	First Contadora meeting
1986	Final Contadora meeting
1986	Esquipulas I meeting in Guatemala
1987	Arias plan "A Time for Peace"
1987	Esquipulas II Peace Agreement
1987	President Arias receives Nobel Peace Prize
1988	Presidential Summit in Alajuela (Costa Rica)
1988	Sapoa Ceasefire Accord for Nicaragua
1989	Presidential Summit in Costa del Sol (El Salvador)
1989	Presidential Summit in Tela (Honduras)
1989	Presidential Summit in San Isidro de Coronado (Costa Rica)
1990	Elections in Nicaragua
1990	Montelimar summit (Nicaragua)
1992	Chapultepec Peace Accords for El Salvador
1996	Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace in Guatemala

## Conclusion

Prior to the mediation initiated by Arias, efforts to address the conflicts in Central America came from outside the region, concentrated on militarized interventions (exemplified by the US approach), and did not address the core political causes of the conflict. The Esquipulas II agreement, which emanated from the Arias Peace Plan, had an entirely different orientation. It entailed a 'Central Americanization' of the peace process and centered on dialogue, negotiation, and mediation that covered both intra- and inter-state conflict.

The exclusion of non-regional actors from the mediating body reinforced a sense of ownership as well as confidence in the possibility of negotiated solutions to regional conflicts. A strong focus on democratization addressed the political causes of the conflicts. Recognition of the Sandinista government and acceptance of the government as part of the mediation forum was crucial, without which progress would probably not have been made.

The Central American formula of addressing military-security concerns in combination with democratization initiatives proved effective. It achieved ceasefire agreements, free elections in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and democratic reforms in Guatemala and Honduras. Above all, it managed to address several interlocking domestic conflicts and the regional connections between them.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> ONUCA was present in all five Central American countries, but its main efforts were focused on Honduras' borders with Nicaragua and El Salvador. At first, it was a peace-observing mission with unarmed personnel. Its mandate later became broader and included peacekeeping, verifying the demobilization of the Contras and possibly even enforcing peace if the Contras resisted.
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