

The United States and Central America's Northern Tier: The Ongoing Disconnect

HÉCTOR SILVA ÁVALOS*



Today, the Northern Tier of Central America is a deeply troubled region. Organized crime controls important territories and permeates military and law enforcement agencies, corruption is widespread in weak state institutions, drug trafficking routes are firmly established in the region, and large-scale violence fuels the highest homicide rates in the world. Recent elections and political shifts in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador add new uncertainties to the complex challenges of building institutions, establishing the rule of law, and creating a future for the region's 28 million citizens. In recent years, the United States has become increasingly engaged with many of these issues.

This paper explores the extent to which US policies and programs in Central America are effectively aligned with the preferences and interests of the countries of the region. The central concern of the research is to identify the issues of agreement and difference between the United States and the Northern Tier countries—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—and to determine whether the United States and these three Central American nations are moving toward greater accord. Central America's "Northern Tier" is the US bureaucracy's name for the sub-region that includes Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Often addressed by Washington politicians and analysts—and even by local pundits in the region—as a place somewhat different from the neighboring countries to

the south, the Northern Tier is the half of Central America where violence and criminal non-state agents seem to have deeper roots than in the other half. From the perspective of US financial aid, the Northern Tier has been more important than the rest of the region: roughly 60 percent of the US Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) funds allocated to the six isthmus countries from FY 2009 to FY 2011 went to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Overall, Guatemala is the top recipient of aid, El Salvador is second, Panama third, and Honduras fourth.¹

More than twenty years ago, some of the bloodiest chapters of the Cold War were fought in Central America pitting Marxist-oriented liberation movements against national armies, often backed by the United States. Internationally acclaimed peace accords brought those wars to an end. Today, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are plagued by extensive violence once again.

Street and criminal violence are killing the Northern Tier's young.² Organized crime, fueled mainly by the revival of the northbound Central American drug corridor, is compounding corruption in already weak national states and pushing them

¹ GAO-13-295R CARSI Funding.

² The latest UNPD Human Development report says that the Northern Tier of Central America is the most likely place in the world to die in violent circumstances if you are a man between 18 and 24 years old.

*Héctor Silva Ávalos worked for fifteen years as an investigative reporter for *La Prensa Gráfica*, a major Salvadoran newspaper. He served as deputy chief of mission at the El Salvador Embassy in Washington, DC, and is now a research fellow at American University.

FOREWORD

The Inter-American Dialogue is pleased to publish this working paper by Hector Silva, an investigative journalist and former diplomat from El Salvador, now a research fellow at American University. Our aim is to stimulate a broad and well-informed public debate on complex issues facing analysts, decision makers, and citizens concerned about Latin America's policy agenda.

In this working paper, Silva offers a review of US security cooperation with the nations of Central America's Northern Triangle—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Organized crime, rampant corruption, and large-scale violence have stunted the region's economic and social development since the end of Central America's civil wars in the 1990s. As Silva notes, US aid has missed the mark and done little to reverse climbing homicide and crime rates. By examining the history of US engagement in the region and the political forces that have driven both US and Central American action, Silva reveals a disconnect between Washington's national security agenda and that of the region's leaders. According to Silva, it is this disconnect that has prevented the United States and the countries of the Northern Tier from pursuing the sort of comprehensive strategies needed to address the institutional weaknesses that lie at the heart of the region's security challenges.

This working paper is part of a series of studies carried out through the Dialogue's initiative on security and migration in Central America and Mexico. The project works with leading think tanks, research centers, and independent journalists in Mexico and Central America on these two pressing policy challenges. Our work seeks to influence the policy and media communities in the United States, Mexico, and the nations of Central America; introduce Mexican and Central American viewpoints into policy debates and discussions in Washington; and promote fresh, practical ideas for greater cooperation to address security and migration challenges.

This major Dialogue initiative has featured four important meetings in Washington, Guatemala City, Managua, and Tegucigalpa. These meetings, held in conjunction with regional partners, have brought together influential migration and security experts, including Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina and Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, for conversations on the prospect of US and regional cooperation on security issues; successful security policy, police reform, and judicial models; and the impact of migration trends on the region's development. This paper provides background for the fifth meeting of the initiative in February 2014, co-sponsored by members of the US Congress in Washington, to examine recent political and economic developments in the region and ways to enhance international cooperation on migration and security challenges facing the countries of Central America and Mexico.

To further enhance these efforts, the Dialogue launched a web portal to serve as a clearinghouse of data, analysis, legislation, and other resources related to security in Central America. For more information, please visit <http://centralamericasecurity.thedialogue.org>.

Silva's conclusions do not necessarily reflect the views of the Inter-American Dialogue. We are pleased to recognize the generous support provided by the Tinker Foundation for this work.

Michael Shifter

President

to the brink of failure.³ Economic growth, once promising from the early to mid-1990s, is now stagnant and, worse, social and economic inequity remain far worse than Latin American averages.⁴

The recent political picture presents a complex and uncertain landscape. Once reliable allies, these countries are now looked upon with skepticism by some in Washington's foreign policy community.⁵ US influence is fading with regard to priority agenda issues pressed by Washington, such as interdiction of drug flows or free trade.

In Honduras, a tight election last November handed a weak mandate in a divided country to the new president, Juan Orlando Hernández. His main rival, Xiomara de Zelaya, wife of ousted former president Manuel Zelaya, still refuses to fully recognize the Hernández victory. The incoming president inherits a country with profound problems. State institutions are overrun by organized crime, especially since Honduras became the main transit route for transnational traffic of cocaine in 2008. The government is riddled with corruption and impunity reigns. Poverty and severe poverty engulf more than half the population. The cost in human lives is one of the world's worst: 85 killings per 100,000 inhabitants in 2013, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The temptation is great to empower corrupt military forces to address security

and political problems. The incoming president is likely to apply old-fashioned strong arm (*mano dura*) tactics for combatting violence.

El Salvador, once the model of growth and resurrection following the 1992 peace accords, today faces relentless challenges. Economic growth has been sluggish and since 2000 topped 3 percent only twice.⁶ Political parties are penetrated by criminal organizations. In February, the smallest Central American country went to the polls to choose a new leader. The run-off on March 9 pits Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla from the FMLN ruling party, against Norman Quijano of ARENA, the rightist party. The two parties—each thoroughly tainted by corruption—represent the main opposing forces that fought the civil war in the 1980s and settled the peace in the 1990s. Either candidate may want to forge a pact with a third party led by former president Antonio Saca, formerly of ARENA. Drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have made their influence felt in politics by local campaigns of all parties. Allies of ARENA and Saca in Congress have been linked with DTOs in the past. Serious proposals of security policies have been absent in the year-long campaign, and silence prevails about the penetration of drug trafficking in politics and local economies. It is unlikely the winning party will have enough strength or political will to address insecurity or crime issues. Whatever the final outcome in the runoff, the race may intensify polarization across the political spectrum and could put in place a stalemated Congress incapable of advancing needed institutional reforms.

Guatemala seems to be, these days, the place where some signs of hope are developing despite the opinion of some that it is the worst of the three countries due to the influence of Mexican cartels and longstanding corruption in its law enforcement agencies. Recent important steps towards institution-building include the election of an independent attorney general, creation of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and a growing culture of public debate. Even with these advances, the homicide rate remains very high, well over half of homicides in Guatemala City go unpunished and impunity is the order of the day in corruption cases.⁷

³ Many US and Central American scholars and authors agree that the closing of the Caribbean corridor by the United States and the reshaping of international trafficking with the rise of the Mexican cartels in the 1990s reopened the Central American corridor, one that had been used by the Colombian cartels in the 1980s. See Bruce Bagley, "Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the XXI Century," Wilson Center, August 2012; Steven Dudley, "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle," Wilson Center, August 2010; Héctor Silva Avalos, "Infiltrados, Crónica de la corrupción en la Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador," UCA Editores, San Salvador, March 2014.

⁴ For El Salvador, GDP growth went from 2.2 percent in 2000 to 1.9 percent in 2012, with a low of -3.1 percent in 2009. For Guatemala, growth went from 3.6 percent in 2000 to 3.0 percent in 2012, with a peak of 6.3 percent in 2007 and a low of 0.5 percent in 2009. For Honduras, figures of growth are better: from 5.5 percent in 2000 to 3.7 percent in 2012; although, this country holds one of the worst figures of poverty in the region: in 2010, 70 percent lived under the line of poverty and some 50 percent under the line of extreme poverty (in El Salvador, for 2012, 45.3 percent lived in poverty and 13.5 percent in extreme poverty; in Guatemala, for 2006, 54.8 percent lived in poverty and 29.1 percent in extreme poverty). The Latin American average for 2010 was 16.1 percent. See CEPAL, *Panorama Social de América Latina 2012*.

⁵ In 2005, for instance, Honduras and El Salvador were among the first Latin American countries to send troops to support the US intervention in Iraq.

⁶ <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=es&v=66>

⁷ <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204664.pdf>

Moreso in the past than today, Washington conversation around the Northern Tier of Central America has at times seemed misinformed, guided more by ideological preconceptions and old-fashioned black and white “for us or against us” narratives that blame the Hugo Chávez regime in Venezuela and its Latin American allies for the drug-trafficking boom. Thus Washington’s security policies can appear to be driven by efforts to reduce the influence of “anti-American” political enemies. This Cold-War-inspired narrative usually overlooks or obscures the complex realities of drug trafficking, gangs and criminal organizations, poverty and economic stagnation, and weak and corrupt political parties and public institutions.

In this paper, I address (a) current social and political conditions in the Northern Tier of Central America, (b) the current state of Washington’s political strategy towards the region, and (c) domestic responses within and among the three countries to the most pressing issues at home.

The principal findings and conclusions of this study document ongoing, ineffective policies and the persistent disconnect between US policy-makers and the leading political forces in Central America.

- Violence remains a leading challenge to democratic stability in the region. An unusual and risky approach to combat violence was put in place in El Salvador through a pact with youth gangs, and Guatemala has experienced a slow but steady reduction in homicides since 2007. Violence still reigns in the Northern Tier. In 2012, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador remained at the top of the homicide rate ranking worldwide.⁸
- Sophisticated organized crime networks have spread and gained enough strength to control significant territory in the three countries and, in some cases, substitute the powers of the state. The expansion of organized crime is not always tied to an increase in violence. The government responses, however, have failed both to contain violence and to push back organized crime penetration of territory and institutions.
- Corruption and penetration by criminal groups in law enforcement institutions and political parties and

government bureaucracies have grown exponentially in the three countries during the last decade.

- The US State Department openly recognizes that responses from Northern Tier governments to organized crime and violence have failed. Yet, Washington lacks an effective strategy to help address these issues in the region. The US Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) is a simple cobbling together of pre-existing bilateral aid and cooperation programs that has proven relatively effective in drug interdiction, but has failed at the substantive challenges of institution-building, transparency, and accountability.
- In general, US law enforcement agencies on the ground greatly influence US approaches in each of the three countries.
- The most successful recent interventions by the United States have occurred when Washington political appointees and political officers have put aside ideological approaches and used pragmatism to push for reform. In Guatemala, quiet diplomacy by the US Embassy—along with the UN-backed CICIG—was essential to clean up rampant corruption in the attorney general’s office, to prosecute crimes of the past and thereby address the culture of impunity, and to galvanize an investigative unit at the National Civilian Police vetted by UN and US experts.⁹ It didn’t come by chance that Secretary of State John Kerry cited the example of Guatemala when he talked about his views on the hemisphere at the OAS in November 2013.¹⁰
- A new civilian revolution is needed in the Northern Tier, one anchored in the revitalization or creation of civil society and led by the talented, better educated newer generations of thinkers. Civil society must be empowered so that its voice can influence national agendas and wrest political discussions away from decrepit and often corrupt political parties. Today, civil society

⁸ United Nations Development Program, “Regional Report on Human Development 2013-2014. Citizen Security with a Human Face: Evidence and proposals for Latin America.” November 2013, p. 47.

⁹ After a United Nations official said in 2007 that Guatemala was on the verge of becoming a failed state, CICIG was created with wide support from the UN political office and with bipartisan support in Washington.

¹⁰ See Remarks on US Policy in the Western Hemisphere, delivered at an Organization of American States public event co-sponsored by the Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC, November 18, 2013, paragraph 16. <http://thedialogue.org/page.cfm?pageID=32&pubID=3427&ts=kerry>

organizations in the region have positioned themselves as interlocutors to economic and political power, asking basically for accountability, transparency and more flexible responses to the urgent demands for combating crime, corruption, and inequality. This peaceful revolution should progress from strengthening academia, the media, and knowledge production to political empowerment. The best available examples are, in Guatemala, the role of civil society—backed silently by the United States and publicly by other foreign governments and the United Nations (UN)—in securing the modest reforms of the police, the attorney general's office, and the judiciary which have led to the prosecution of war criminals, the creation of elite, mostly transparent police units, and a freer press. Honduras is the worst case scenario; there, the only attempt at pushing police reform came from a university rector who called for a clean-up after her son was killed.¹¹ In El Salvador, the best example is the outrage of some middle class college students who organized to press for a solution to a constitutional crisis between the Supreme Court and the officially controlled Congress.

■ The consequences of doing nothing to rein in security threats, fueled mainly by corruption and official tolerance of organized crime, will inevitably open the door to expansion of illicit economies, the decline of government presence in rural areas, and weakening of national states. Deterioration of law and order of this type will put at risk the very core of the political and social reforms and guidelines agreed to in the Peace Accords in the 1990s. All windows opening to a brighter horizon would be shut.

The dysfunction of institutions will, in the end, threaten the stability of democracy and the possibility of achieving healthy legal and economic structures. Without strong institutions, unchecked violence that becomes a real threat to US national security due to the empowerment of uncontrolled

criminal organizations and new waves of mass migrations becomes a possible scenario.

The unaddressed questions

This research was guided by questions that have been missing in the conversation among the political establishments in Washington, Tegucigalpa, Guatemala City, and San Salvador. The possible answers to these questions might well be the absent drivers of policy discussions on the urgent issues of worsening violence, human rights abuses, and ineffective law enforcement across the Northern Tier. The missing questions follow.

1. Is current US policy toward Central America—particularly policy aimed at improving regional and citizen security in the Northern Tier—anything more than

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the result of continuing bureaucratic battles between embassies and law enforcement agencies, primarily the military, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)? Is there anything resembling a coherent strategy?

2. Is there any coherent thinking in the Northern Tier, either in the individual countries or as a region, about shared strategies, approaches or policies that could be carried out jointly with the United States?
3. What are the prospects that US military, police and diplomatic agencies will consider changing their policies?
4. Is US aid viewed as functional and effective in the Northern Tier?
5. Is CARSI (Central America Regional Security Initiative) an effort capable of shaping US and Central American security policies as Plan Colombia was? Or is it just a Washington-centric instrument created to respond to political concerns in Congress?

¹¹ The reform didn't go anywhere due to blockage by political forces and the military, but the name of Julieta Castellanos, the rector, is now one of the most respected in Honduras.

6. How does Washington view local solutions floated or implemented in the region without consent from US policy-makers, such as Guatemalan president Otto Pérez's advocacy of legalization of drugs or, at the operational level, the Salvadoran gang truce, or the Honduran opposition to DEA action in areas controlled by drug lords?
7. Why has Washington failed to address police reform effectively when a number of stakeholders in the region, from former government officials to academics and civil society organizations, view police, military, and government corruption as a root cause of instability and insecurity in the region?
8. Is the Northern Tier, as some in Washington claim, beyond a point of no return? Or are the countries approaching stages of un-governability such as disregard for the rule of law mentioned by a UN envoy when describing Guatemala in 2007?
9. Does this stalemate where the law is so easily scorned deprive Washington of the ability to use its soft powers to push for reform? Are the only remaining tools of soft power conventional State Department-backed programs and the shrinking budget for bilateral assistance, and are they rendered ineffective by policy impasses?

This paper examines the disconnect between the United States and the Northern Tier through five chapters. The focus of these chapters is to describe the current political and social status quo in the region; the political views and proposals that the Obama administration put together during its first term; review the historical background of the US approach, mainly during the George W. Bush period; discuss the attempts within the region to sidestep US influence and chart an independent course in particular on security issues, such as calling for legalization of drugs or de-emphasizing regional policies oriented mainly toward interdiction; and forecast scenarios after the region's coming leadership changes are in place.

This paper is based on interviews by the author of a number of players both in the Northern Tier of Central America and in Washington, DC. Most of the sources talked on condition of preserving their anonymity to allow government officials to speak freely about domestic or foreign policy or to protect the safety of law enforcement officers, intelligence operatives, or individuals with ties to drug trafficking organizations. The persons interviewed include current

and former high-level law enforcement officials and government ministers in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador and current and former Congressional and diplomatic staff in Washington, DC and Central America.

I. The roadmap in 2013: Point of no return?

What Barack Obama and his first State Department encountered in 2009 south of his southern border, in Central America, was a deterioration of citizen and regional security fueled by the relatively recent arrival of Mexican drug cartels and the expansion of domestic drug trafficking organizations with access to extensive contraband routes, vast arsenals of weapons, and money laundering schemes. Both the Mexican and local criminal groups had managed to penetrate the governments and to shred the social fabric of the countries, thanks to support and protection from state agents and political patrons, as described in a 2012 UN report about organized crime in the region.¹² Violence raged. In 2009, homicides in the Northern Tier were well above the levels the UN and the World Health Organization consider of epidemic proportions.¹³ In 2013, despite a questionable drop in homicides in El Salvador and a slight decrease in Guatemala, the Northern Tier countries remained at the top of the list in Latin America. Last year, Honduras reported 81 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants and in Guatemala and El Salvador murders topped the mid-40s per 100,000.¹⁴ (See Figure 1).

Violence drove politics in the Northern Tier during the previous decade. Since the late 1990s, violence and the state response to it shaped electoral campaigns and undoubtedly shaped public policies aimed at addressing crime and insecurity in the three countries. Street violence has been among the top three concerns of citizens during at least the past five years, according to polling cited by the UN.¹⁵ In fact, street violence in Honduras and El Salvador, mainly produced by US-born youth gangs, triggered the *mano dura* policies that allowed jailing based merely on suspicion and imposed stiff prison sentences.

¹² Informe Regional de Desarrollo Humano 2013-2014. Seguridad Ciudadana con Rostro Humano: diagnóstico y propuestas para América Latina. Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The drug trafficking issue had been overshadowed by the gang narrative from the late 1990s through almost the entire first decade of 2000 in determining bilateral cooperation with the United States. The funding resources committed by Washington to prevent drug flows transiting Central America from reaching the United States were substantial. But, the “drug issue” taken as a whole was not yet a priority and was kept out of bilateral political dialogue for a good while. It was not the main policy issue.

There were, in fact, two parallel paths in the security narrative in the region. One was determined by the real political urgency for governments to combat rising violence in the Northern Tier in the late 1990s and in the last decade.

In Honduras and El Salvador, it became clear very early after the civil wars of the 1980s that gangs were the main drivers of the increase in high-impact crimes, mainly homicides and extortions. These crimes spread fear, heightened the vulnerability of citizens, and exacerbated the social outrage that would undermine the rightist/conservative governments then in power. So, the *mano dura* approach was born and a lot of resources were devoted to it.

The participation of gangs in different types of crimes varied from one country to another, but in general these organizations were the main perpetrators of homicides in

the last half of the 1990s and the first of last decade, due primarily to turf fights and initiation rituals that required members to commit murder. In Honduras and Guatemala, though, homicides directly linked to DTOs increased since 2006. In El Salvador, DTOs’ activities have been mostly related to white collar crimes and gangs are still responsible for most of the homicides.

The second path of the security narrative during these years (late 1990s through 2000s) had to do with the increasing organization and sophistication of the drug business itself in Central America. While gangs were growing after Bush’s massive deportations (from 2003 on), local contraband groups were transforming themselves into drug trafficking organizations.¹⁶ It is important to understand that the Central American DTOs are not, unlike their Mexican counterparts, essentially violent. Most of them are former longstanding contraband organizations that morphed into

¹⁶ For a thorough account of the evolution of smuggling organizations into DTOs see “The Criminal Diaspora: The spread of transnational organized crime and how to contain its expansion.” Edited by Juan Carlos Garzón and Eric L. Olson. Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. Washington, DC, 2013. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/CriminalDiaspora> “Drug trafficking and organized crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the Twenty-first Century.” By Bruce Bagley. Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. Washington, DC, August 2010. Interview with Antonio Mazitelli, Officer in charge, UNODC, Mexico City, October 2013.

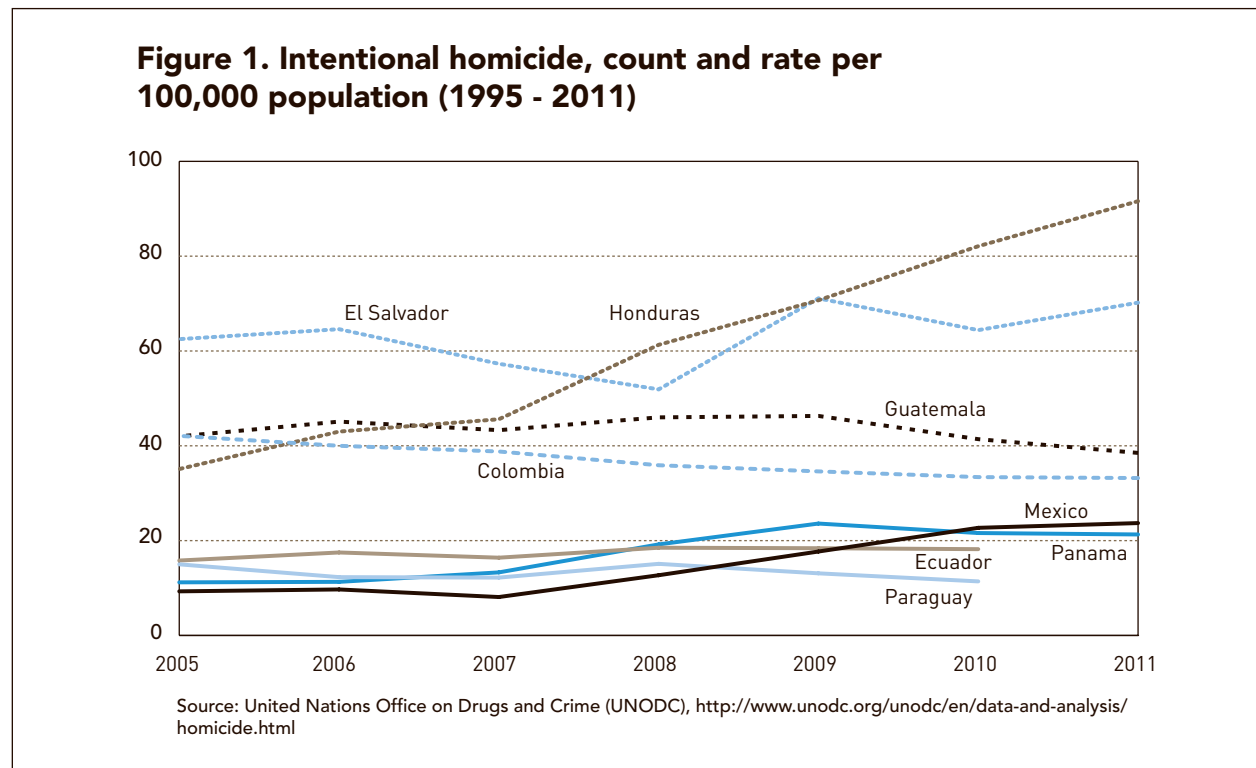


Table 1: Population, GDP, Income, Equality, and Poverty: Central America and Mexico

Country	Population	GDP (Current US\$)	Income (GNI per capita, PPP)	Equality (Gini Index)	Poverty (% of population at national poverty line)
Guatemala	15.08 million	50.23 billion	4,880	55.9 (2006)	53.7 (2011)
El Salvador	6.297 million	23.86 billion	6,720	48.3 (2009)	34.5 (2012)
Honduras	7.936 million	18.43 billion	3,880	57.0 (2009)	60.0 (2010)
Costa Rica	4.805 million	45.10 billion	12,500	50.7 (2009)	20.3 (2012)
Nicaragua	5.992 million	10.51 billion	3,890	40.5 (2005)	42.5 (2009)
Mexico	120.8 million	1.178 trillion	16,450	47.2 (2010)	52.3 (2012)

Source: World Bank. Data is from 2012 unless otherwise indicated.

cocaine movers and would rather bargain with authorities than fight them. That has changed over the years, mainly in Guatemala where the arrival of the violent Zetas cartel redefined the existing balance in the underworld.

By the second half of the last decade, US agents on the ground were concentrating on blocking and seizing drug flows offshore and the local criminal groups on the isthmus had already bought contacts from top to bottom inside the Northern Tier security apparatus. Gangs were growing; inland drug trafficking was incipient and still overshadowed by the sea routes, so the United States focused on its own goals of interdiction at sea and assistance to local allies with their principal and most urgent problem, violent gangs.

By the end of the George W. Bush administration, inland drug trafficking was not yet at the center of regional talking points considered by US and Northern Tier officials. In fact, inland routes remained a non-issue in Central American domestic politics. At the same time, infiltration in security forces by DTOs covered all echelons: contraband operations required bribes to local cops; and, by the mid-2000s, when inland routes were set from Panama to Guatemala, corruption had permeated the top levels in the military-led security institutions in Guatemala and Honduras and in the National Civil Police in El Salvador. By then, US agencies were prepared to tolerate corruption to protect some long-nurtured assets within those security corps.

To a large extent, the United States fought the Central American chapter of the drug wars during the mid-2000s with expensive interdiction programs designed to cut the flows coming from Colombia, principally shipped by sea. When cocaine moved inland, its regional operators used long-nurtured contacts with state agents to secure transit.

And when the drug flow and its money hit the Central American mainland, the long known historical weaknesses of the Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran law enforcement agencies—police or army—were so exacerbated the states' crime response capability was compromised. It was mainly drug money that corrupted great segments of local law enforcement agencies and prevented them from reforming themselves from within or securing external political support for reform. This was especially the case in Guatemala and Honduras.

Drug trafficking in Central America did not become a US problem until the mid-2000s. By then, the Caribbean route was mainly closed and Pacific maritime transit was heavily monitored beginning in the late 1990s when the United States set up a strategic radar position in El Salvador. By 2005, the Mexican cartels started opening “plazas” or controlled territory in the Northern Tier, political turmoil in Honduras enhanced the security of routes there, and El Salvador's weakened institutions opened up spaces for a safe retreat and for alternate inland routes.

Until that moment, gangs were the central issue, both for the United States—Bush domestic policies had made it so—and for Central American governments embattled by rising homicide figures and unprecedented street violence. Neither side had yet to understand the breadth and depth of growing penetration by DTOs in the political and administrative institutions and across society throughout the region.

When the Mexican drug cartels began their search for forward operating locations in Guatemalan territory, around 2005, the drug trafficking issue entered the regional security narrative and the Washington conversations that

shaped bilateral programs.¹⁷ In 2006, the Cartel Wars began in Mexico. After Felipe Calderón took power, he launched a policy of *guerra abierta* (open war) that deployed troops to hot spots and ended up pushing the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas south, mainly to Guatemalan highlands and northern jungles. The Mexican war on drugs was a game changer in the whole region according to Mauricio López Bonilla, Guatemalan minister of security.¹⁸

Then, in 2009, the fragile security situation in Honduras was weakened by the coup, with the result that the Atlantic shore and northern lowlands and jungles were opened to the increase in air traffic coming from the Venezuela-Colombia border region. A 2011 State Department mapping developed with on-the-ground intelligence data clearly traces the enhanced route through Honduran territory, which houses about 60 percent of transit on the region-wide Central American corridor. In 2011 alone, some 554 tons of cocaine passed through the Northern Tier, entering mainly in Honduras. Nearly half of the cocaine, 239 tons, was flown into Honduras directly from producing sites in Venezuela and Colombia, and then transshipped to consumer markets in the United States and Europe. The Honduras opening remained as wide as ever through the end of 2013, according to US, Salvadoran and former Honduran law enforcement officers on the ground.¹⁹

Today, what started as simply a drug trafficking problem for the United States and the region has spawned powerful non-state criminal actors that have created strong micro-economies in extensive territories in each of the Northern Tier countries (see Micro-economies.) The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) acknowledges the existence of at least twelve large sophisticated drug-trafficking organizations in the region capable of bribing officials, money-laundering, and transnational transportation, and wielding different degrees of political power. Most of them operate in Guatemala.

¹⁷ Most scholars in the United States and Latin America set the Mexican president, Felipe Calderón's war against the leading drug cartels as the event that drove these criminal organizations to seek safe havens further south. Possibly, successful DTOs also headed south seeking more business or lower-cost operations. Even though often considered a failure, Calderón's pressure, at least in the early stage, made it difficult for DTOs to penetrate some state institutions, mainly at the local level, but Central American plazas were there for the taking.

¹⁸ Interview. Guatemala City. April 2013.

¹⁹ Interviews by the author. April, August, December 2013.

Micro-economies

Metapán. This mid-sized city in northwest El Salvador is home to the illegal activities of the Taxis Cartel, one of the two leading DTOs in El Salvador identified by the UNODC. According to investigations by the Attorney General's Office and central government tax auditors, a significant portion of legitimate economic activity in Metapán is related to the Cartel. Ongoing investigations indicate that a fast growing agricultural mill established 10 years ago has flourished to the point of bankrupting the competition. An unexplained \$30 million investment helped the mill gain traction. Current and former government officials acknowledged that the state itself has brought crops to this mill as part of programs to assure domestic supply of corn and rice. The head of the company is listed as one of Taxis Cartel's main leaders.

Bajo Aguán. Almost completely destroyed by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, these lowlands, formerly rich farmland, have become an open highway for drug dealers. As the post-Mitch rescue and relief efforts showed 15 years ago, the presence of the Honduran state here was minimal: the work of rebuilding hospitals, schools and towns was done mainly with international relief funds, equipment, and personnel. Things haven't changed. Instead, non-state actors have taken over some government roles and rooted their influence in Bajo Aguán through violence and corruption and also by creating an economic system funded by drug money.

Las Verapaces. These Guatemalan highlands bordering the jungles of Petén have also witnessed the growth of criminal non-state actors. According to Mauricio López Bonilla, Guatemalan security minister, local law enforcement agencies have detected the presence of large poppy-seed crops that have bolstered the local economy in the past two years. Las Verapaces, part of the Guatemalan route that connects the drug paths coming from the south from Honduras and El Salvador with the Petén and Mexico, also seems to be hosting the first large laboratories for making synthetic drugs on Guatemalan soil. Minister López uses a story to explain the situation in this part of his country: "In a small town, a very poor town up north, the elected mayor had been putting in place a very sophisticated surveillance system; there were cameras at the town's plaza and borders. We found out that a drug organization that operates in the area had paid for it."

Some claim that US attention to the problem came too late: by focusing mostly on gangs and viewing drug trafficking as a problem of interdiction, the United States failed to address other basic and endemic challenges to the region's institutions that were deepened by drug money, such as corruption, institutional weakness, and collusion.

As the strength and territory commanded by DTOs grew, Central American governments tested some strategies of their own. In 2012, a truce in El Salvador between the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha-13) and Barrio 18 gangs, nurtured by the Funes administration without informing the US Embassy, challenged the prevailing anti-gang narrative long cultivated by the United States in San Salvador. (It was from El Salvador that the FBI intended to launch vetted anti-gang units to Guatemala and Honduras.) But the truce also unmasked what had been relegated to a second line of interest: the non-violent but pervasive influence of organized crime in fueling crime trends, such as money laundering or enhanced drug trafficking by organizations responsible for healthy relations with Mexican cartels, and transnational structures that continue trafficking cocaine, meth and undocumented persons onto US soil.

In Guatemala, timid institutional reforms were achieved in part because of a diplomatic push by the US Embassy and by the UN through its International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). These reforms include the creation of an elite counter-narcotics unit vetted by the CICIG, the appointment of an independent and by all accounts daring prosecutor—a woman with roots in the Guatemalan left—to the Attorney General's Office, or even the emblematic trial of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt on Guatemalan soil for genocide and crimes against humanity. (Some observers in Guatemala claim that the trial itself, although unfinished and now entwined with the usually docile and corrupt judiciary, can be seen as a turning point in the fight against impunity in the country.)

The arrival of Otto Pérez to the presidency—a retired military officer who campaigned around *mano dura* policies—brought a double standard when looked at from the Washington perspective. On the one hand, Pérez was the first Latin American president who publicly opened the debate on legalization as a new way to deal with the drug problem in the region. The Obama administration had strongly opposed this, and Pérez raised the issue just before the April 2012 VI Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, sparking a

legalization narrative that confronted Washington's position and brought certain embarrassment to the US delegation. Since then, Guatemalan analysts claim, Pérez has used the legalization script assiduously when addressing the drug problem in his country and the region and in Washington.

On the other hand, both US and Central American officials on the ground seem to agree that Guatemala is the best place to look for deliverables in the region's security portfolio. The Zetas, once a powerful force in the country, are now in disarray, mainly due to the weakening of the cartel in Mexico and a number of specifically focused operations—a change that has caused confusion and fragmentation in the leadership of DTOs and has not necessarily meant a drop in violence. Guatemala actively pursues a policy of extraditing drug lords to the United States. In El Salvador, there is a general understanding that some of the latest operations against bi-national Guatemalan-Salvadoran crime structures have been pushed from Guatemala City. But, above all, analysts consistently cite the timid institutional reforms as a possible path for future policy in the region.

By 2014, the common security agenda between Washington and the Northern Tier is stagnant to say the least. While flows of cocaine have increased in Central America and an incipient industry producing methamphetamine works its way down from Mexico, seizures have remained steady. From Washington, there are two explanations for the lack of progress: one claims it is related to the decrease of consumption in the United States partially compensated by a small increase in drug use in Europe and Mexico; the other, less public explanation rests on the ineffectiveness of the local partner, as in El Salvador where the latest US State Department report on drugs points to local authorities to explain the historic low level of seizures.

Longstanding bilateral cooperation programs have encountered obstacles to becoming truly effective to address even the main US goals of interdiction and intelligence sharing.²⁰ Some US officials on the ground have doubts about the level of commitment by local law enforcement agencies and political brokers that have avoided the long-pending

²⁰ DEA interdiction activities conducted on Honduran soil have proven disastrous and politically sensitive since 2010. But most importantly, US-funded military equipment intended to empower interdiction is underused according to US officials on the ground. Resistance to sharing information with US agents has intensified among local law enforcement authorities in Guatemala and El Salvador.

task of institution-building.²¹ Coming changes in local political leadership cast a cloud over the outlook for cooperation in the immediate future.

This is a time in which US foreign policy is and will be focused elsewhere. Central America, nonetheless, will remain a place of interest for a long time, dominated by US law enforcement and military agencies, mainly DEA and FBI, whose specific agendas in the region have become US policy by default in recent years.

Some in the region still claim that Washington has failed to address consistently and strategically the risk of brewing instability, caused mainly by lack of security and fueled by low economic growth.

Events and facts support the view that lack of attention to the Northern Tier by Washington was indeed a failure and not simply neglect. Under the noses of Washington officials, chronic corruption permeated the Honduran military and law enforcement bodies. Since 2005, alerts had been sounding about Guatemala's risk of becoming a failed state and the direct participation of at least two Salvadoran elected officials in conspiracies to introduce between 36 and 45 tons of cocaine into the United States from 2004 to 2008.²²

It is fair to say that one of the reasons behind the failure has been the willingness of Washington policy-makers—or at least US law enforcement agencies on the ground—to overlook corruption and weaknesses in local police or military partners in order to protect friendly assets or to preserve well-funded programs that have proven effective but are, again, limited by narrow focus: these are programs, not policy.

Often, the State Department's knowledge of corruption in Northern Tier government institutions is incomplete or biased. US agents on the ground are familiar with most of the claims of corruption, but at the end of the day some of

that data stays out of official memos and details are seldom available to Washington officials until the problem acquires gigantic proportions, as happened with the Guatemalan and Honduran police forces. The point is that corruption in its initial stages or when beginning to spread was often considered a minor problem or an issue that did not concern the United States. It is just now, even with the Salvadoran National Civilian Police (PNC)—considered the model law enforcement agency in the Northern Tier—that the United States has developed a general sense of worry. A Justice Department officer told me a couple of months ago, “There is very little we can do now with the PNC; all the [high-ranking] commissioners care about is power and money. We will need to look to the lowest ranks to try to rescue the police.”²³

Gaining control over the Central American corridors of illicit trade remains uncertain for the United States. Corruption seems to be a renewed concern in Washington, placed by some senior members of Congress at the top level of the agenda.²⁴ Above all, the flow of undocumented migrants from this region, still one of the world's most violent areas, remains constant and in fact has risen to new highs in the last three years.²⁵

The complexities of drug trafficking, combating DTOs with corrupt law enforcement agencies and rebuilding societies wracked by violence and clouded by dim economic prospects remain unaddressed in Washington, Guatemala, San Salvador, and Tegucigalpa alike. Talks with policy-makers and administration officials make it clear that they find it difficult to acknowledge that there is a boiling problem.

II. Obama's initial bet

The Northern Tier of Central America is again a subject of analysis and a matter of concern in the United States. The Obama administration showed awareness of the deteriorating security issues in the region from the beginning. The

²¹ One good example has to do with the implementation in El Salvador of a US-funded facility to intervene in communications for the purpose of investigating crimes. The feeling exists among US officials that Salvadoran authorities have been lazy or reluctant to use this center to its full capacity.

²² Congressmen William Eliú Martínez and Roberto Carlos Silva Pereira remain imprisoned in the United States. Martínez was sentenced in a Washington, DC court for drug trafficking from El Salvador. Silva was wanted in El Salvador for money-laundering and in Guatemala for his alleged participation in the killings of three fellow congressmen, and is still awaiting sentencing in Louisiana by an immigration judge.

²³ Interview by author. San Salvador, April 2013.

²⁴ In September 2013, Senator Patrick Leahy warned Salvadoran officials that he would not support funding for a second compact of the Millennium Challenge Corporation—a development cooperation program that would bring some \$300 million to El Salvador—if the Funes administration did not improve its stance on corruption and organized crime.

²⁵ A recent study by the Pew Research Center shows that while Mexican migration has decreased in the last decade, the number of Central American immigrants has escalated.

numbers spoke for themselves to the newly arrived Obama team. By 2009, some 85 to 90 percent of the cocaine consumed in the United States in the previous two years had passed through the Central American corridor. Also, and despite what then seemed a general downward trend in illegal immigration coming from Mexico, the flows of Central American *indocumentados* were growing and broadening the criminal portfolios of ruthless Mexican drug cartels that diversified into human trafficking to gain more profits.²⁶

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton identified drug cartel activity, corruption and impunity, and the illegal transit of goods and persons through the region as the principal threats to be addressed. The Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) was Obama’s main bet for elaborating a regional strategy to confront the challenges described by his secretary of state. CARSI is the sum of already existing bilateral programs with five of the region’s countries, masterminded mainly from the law enforcement perspective and focused heavily on drug interdiction, repression of

youth gangs, counter-narcotics intelligence sharing, and the strengthening of military, naval, and air force equipment.²⁷

In 2010, mainly through CARSI, Hillary Clinton’s State Department stepped up its efforts due to the increase of violence in the region and the outmaneuvering of weak local states by increasingly sophisticated drug trafficking organizations. By FY 2011, CARSI funding was beefed up to \$350 million for the year, drawn mainly from State Department monies. For 2014, the amount grew to \$650 million.²⁸

CARSI never was a strategy in itself, according to a number of stakeholders interviewed for this paper. It aimed to be a regional approach but was based on merely piecing together bilateral programs to overlay them on an agglomeration of countries that have never functioned as a region, at least as regards security issues related to the transit of illicit goods and trafficking of persons.

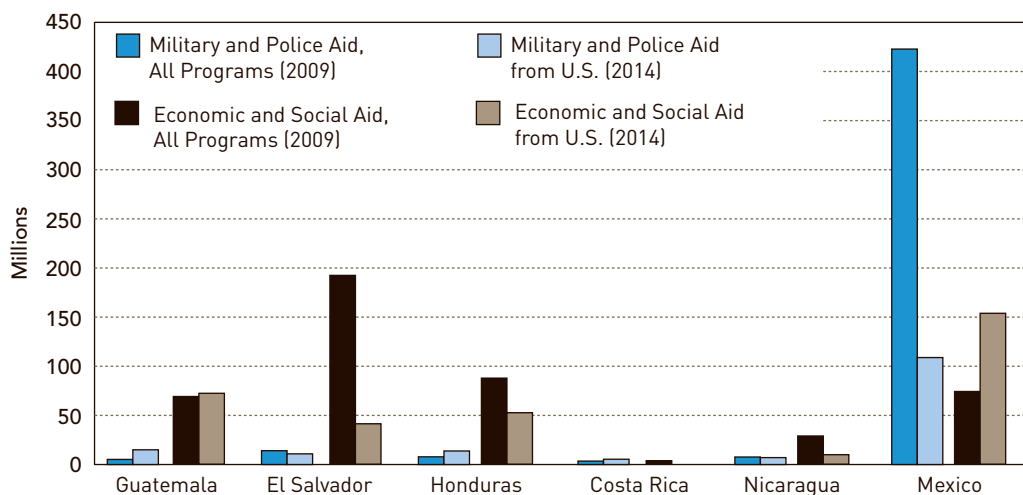
Despite the initial optimistic expectations both in the State Department and Congress, implementation of CARSI on the ground has encountered resistance. US agencies based in Central America have no appetite for stepping outside the boundaries of their own programs to fulfill a comprehensive

²⁶ In an October 2013 interview with the author, Mark Hugo López, vice-president of the Pew Research Center, said, “The number of arrests at the [US-Mexican] borderline and all the signs indicated that undocumented migration from Central America has increased in [recent] years.”

²⁷ See, for instance, CARSI FY 2010 Projected Allocation—El Salvador.

²⁸ State Department assessment on CARSI, 2013.

Figure 2. US Assistance (Military/Police and Economic/Social) to Central America and Mexico



Source: Just the Facts
http://justf.org/All_Grants_Country?year1=1996&year2=2014&funding=All+Programs&subregion=Central+America&x=68&y=11

approach to security problems within a country, and much less so when it involves working across the region or in two countries with similar problems. Underlying this agency mindset at US posts in the Northern Tier are three distinguishable factors: history, the unavoidable agenda imposed by geographic location, and the ascendancy of a new type of anti-American narrative, the Chávez factor, in the 2000s.

The place these countries occupied in the Cold War battles of the 1980s, and Washington involvement in them, gave the CIA and the military officers at US embassies great powers.²⁹ In the late 1990s, the Department of Defense, through its Southern Command, deepened its presence carrying out drug trafficking surveillance operations in the region, preserving the influence of military personnel with the upper echelons of local governments.

Geography and what some scholars have called the balloon or cockroach effect—the migration of criminal activity to a safer haven when pressed out from a particular location by effective law enforcement—revitalized the Central American drug bridge in the late 1990s.³⁰ Aware of this, Washington gradually expanded DEA and FBI operations on the ground, mainly in the Northern Tier. Geography and particular conditions are, of course, distinctive to each one of the three countries, and the involvement of these agencies in counter-narcotics operations varied from one capital to another.

The rise of Chávez, and his circle of influence in the region, produced a new geopolitics from the mid-2000s on. Through its Western Hemisphere bureau, the George W. Bush State Department focused on a regional effort to contain what was understood as a wicked attempt from Caracas to launch a new wave of anti-Americanism throughout the region and elsewhere. The Chávez narrative brought back

to the region political intelligence activity that had been influential in the way programs had been shaped in the previous decade.

Then came the Honduras coup in 2009. It was to be the “ground zero” year for the regional approach proposed by Clinton’s State Department. Instead, this traumatic event redefined entirely the Washington view of the region. Whatever urgent priorities had been set for reducing corruption, impunity or criminal violence were put aside in Honduras, in the region, and along the banks of the Potomac by the political turmoil caused by the ousting of pro-Chávez Manuel Zelaya in Honduras. The crisis also undermined Washington’s ability to dialogue with Honduran law enforcement agencies and the military, and law enforcement institutions, always under suspicion for corruption and human right abuses, were now entangled in the political mess.

The Honduras crisis also meant that the Central American drug corridor was poised to open up wide in the Honduran uncontrolled regions of Bajo Aguán and Olancho. There is general agreement in Honduras that the Zelaya administration is responsible for opening the regions of Olancho, Atlántico, and Bajo Aguán to drug traffic, but it is also widely accepted that the coup militarized public institutions and gave the army absolute power to control or give territorial control to others. Perhaps the best example of aggrandized military power post-coup is how army officers managed to thwart the intended police reform—supported by the Inter-American Development Bank and Honduran civil society but with no funding from the United States.

For US intelligence officials, the Honduras affair also gave life to new forms of suspicion towards the newly elected administration in El Salvador of leftist Mauricio Funes and the FMLN party, formerly the Marxist guerrilla front.

In short, the initial policy shift in Washington towards the region proclaimed by Secretary Clinton focused on good governance to counteract the spread of corruption and take down the influence of drug cartels quickly receded. A stage of political discourse emerged in which law enforcement and intelligence agencies seemed to overpower other types of political and diplomatic dialogues. CARSII, an already fragmented proposal built as a collection of existing programs, ran up against a very complicated scenario when it finally hit the ground wholly funded by 2010.

²⁹ A number of declassified communications from the 1980s and the 1990s between Washington and the posts in San Salvador, for instance, show how the military officers deployed there had the last word in delicate issues, such as the handling of information related to the killing of six Jesuit priests and two of their aides in 1989 and the involvement of two US military personnel in the investigation of the massacre. In that case, then US Secretary of Defense, Richard Cheney, had the last word on the information coming from the US post in El Salvador that was to be passed to a special Congressional task force headed by Rep. Joe Moakley. Interview with Rep. James McGovern, Washington, DC. November 2013.

³⁰ US scholar Bruce Bagley uses the term “cockroach effect” to describe the migration of organized crime by criminals who move, like cockroaches, to those places where filth creates a good living environment for them.

The main CARSI administrator was William Brownfield, former ambassador to Colombia and one of the US officials that had helped put together Plan Colombia. From the beginning, due to political suspicions principally in Tegucigalpa and San Salvador and a regional outcry that protested CARSI as a unilateral US proposal, Brownfield could not bring about a regional approach. Instead, he promptly focused on making each bilateral program work according to the main US priorities: interdiction and intelligence sharing.

Brownfield's efforts hit a dead end in May 2012 when a Honduran military unit, backed by DEA agents, killed four indigenous civilians in an obscure drug interdiction incident at the Patuca River in Bajo Aguán.

In 2014, with Obama's State Department definitely focused on other parts of the world, the leading insecurity issues of the region, and the attached ills of corruption and impunity, remain unaddressed and are spreading. Although the rate of violence has diminished a little, due to a remarkable drop of homicides in El Salvador following a government arranged gang truce and a lesser reduction in Guatemala, the rate of killings in the Northern Tier remains among the worst in the world. Results for the US priority of interdiction, measurable by seizures in the region, hold steady at best, according to the State Department.³¹

However, other worrisome signs have arisen: an increase in the activity of DTOs and deterioration in the ability of local states to confront criminal organizations and violence. As pointed out by the latest DOS report on drugs, Washington now considers all Central American countries as "principal" in the global drug trafficking map.³² The appearance of Caribbean-style money laundering havens in the region has become an issue of concern and the proliferation of new types of narcotics, such as methamphetamine, has brought unprecedented challenges to local law enforcement.

On the ground, even some US officials talk about a new type of scenario, one marked by the excess of corruption within local police agencies and the sensation that US money is being wasted.

Central America is now heading toward several elections that will probably change or at least reshape the political scenario in ways that may not suit many in Washington. At the least, the changes could produce a less amicable situation than the one that existed when Barack Obama went to the V Americas Summit in April 2009 to announce a new era in hemispheric relations. The ongoing disconnect is shaping up as a widening gulf.

III. The unfulfilled approach

Early on in the Obama presidency, clear signals came from the State Department that a new, comprehensive approach would be taken to the Central America region.³³ The vision was first articulated in a brief prepared by the staff of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the US Congress in 2009 that described in-depth the challenges the Obama administration was to address in the isthmus. The brief was part of the lobbying effort to secure appropriation of \$260 million for FY2010 to fund the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).

On paper, CARSI was supposed to be not just a plan extracted by the Obama administration from Bush's Mexico-centric Merida Initiative. Rather, CARSI was conceived as the policy instrument to refresh and re-launch Washington's relationship with Central America.

The preeminent message that US diplomacy was trying to send to the region—as understood by Capitol Hill staffers in 2010 and as State Department bureaucrats still argue today—was that Washington cared enough to commit exclusive funding and policy to the region.

The goals advanced by President Barack Obama in his May 2010 National Security Strategy make clear that drug trafficking and its associated criminal networks in the hemisphere were to be at the top of the Washington agenda for Central America. The strategy argued, "Global criminal networks foment insecurity abroad and bring people and goods across our own borders that threaten our people."³⁴

Barack Obama's White House and Hillary Clinton's State Department envisioned rather different approaches to the region, one focused on drug trafficking and criminal

³¹ US Department of State. International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. 2013. Chapters for Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/>

³² Department of State. International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/>

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ National Security Strategy. The White House. Washington. 2010, page 8. http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf

organizations and the other aligned with the newly adopted narrative of shared responsibility of the United States and Central America in the long and unproductive drug wars that now are fought in Mexico and on the plains, roads and shores of the embattled isthmus. The views of the secretary of state encountered barriers among seasoned Washington bureaucrats, driven either by their own ideological views of the role of Central America in Latin American geopolitics—now marked by the anti-Americanism of Hugo

Chávez—or by the agendas of their own agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Department of Justice-Federal Bureau of Investigation (DOJ-FBI), or the US Southern Command.

The initial intention—this is now common knowledge in Washington, although seldom stated publicly by administration officials—was to include Central American capitals in the shaping of priorities, or at least to include them in the inside-the-beltway political maneuvering to reassess and

**FY 2010 APPROPRIATIONS SPENDING PLAN
Central America—Central America Regional Security Collective
CENTRAL AMERICA REGIONAL SECURITY INITIATIVE (CARSI)
APPROPRIATED FUNDS UPDATE, FY 2010**

(\$ in thousands)

Account	FY 2008 Supplemental	FY 2009 Omnibus	FY 2010 Omnibus	FY 2010 Cap
Economic Support Fund	25,000	18,000	23,000	11,000
<i>Of which, Economic Social and Development Fund</i>	<i>25,000²</i>	<i>12,000</i>	<i>20,500*</i>	<i>8,500³</i>
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement	24,800	70,000	65,000⁴	65,000
<i>Of which, INL Centrally Managed⁵</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>10,588</i>	<i>10,588</i>
<i>Criminal Youth Gangs</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>8,000</i>	<i>8,000</i>
<i>International Law Enforcement Academy</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>2,100</i>	<i>2,100</i>
<i>Interregional Aviation Support</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>288</i>	<i>288</i>
<i>Demand Reduction</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>200</i>	<i>200</i>
Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining & Related Programs	6,200	0	0	0
Foreign Military Financing	4,000	17,000	7,000	7,000
Total, Foreign Operations	60,000	105,000	95,000	83,000

**FY 2010—CENTRAL AMERICA REGIONAL SECURITY
INITIATIVE ACCOUNT BY OBJECTIVE**

(\$ in thousands)

	TOTAL	P&S	GJD	Program Support
Total	95,000	55,038	35,462	4,500
Economic Support Fund	23,000	–	23,000	–
<i>Of which, ESDF</i>	<i>20,500</i>	–	<i>20,500</i>	–
International Narcotics Control & Law Enforcement	65,000	48,038	12,462	4,500
<i>Of which, INL Central Managed</i>	<i>10,588</i>	<i>10,588</i>	–	–
Foreign Military Financing	7,000	7,000		

Source: This chart was attached to a report presented by the US Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (DOS-WHA) to Congress before approval in 2010.

*INL stands for Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the US Department of State.

**ESDF stands for Economic and Social Development Fund.

then remake Washington's foreign policy towards the region. The first moves were by Clinton's Western Hemisphere Affairs Bureau (WHA), initially headed by academic Arturo Valenzuela, which was assigned to handle political negotiations on the ground with Central American governments on regional security and was given final say. Through WHA, for instance, State tried to engage all the Central American countries in a regional conversation about funding and priorities. The vehicles for the dialogue were to be through the formal channel of the Central American Integration Secretariat (SICA) or through talks with the US-endorsed leadership of individual countries to move forward the regional agenda.

On paper, CARSI was supposed to be not just a plan extracted from Bush's Mexico-centric Merida Initiative, rather it was conceived as the policy instrument to refresh and re-launch Washington's relationship with Central America.

The first Clinton WHA crew did engage in talks with officials from Costa Rica and El Salvador about the possibility of transferring some monies out of existing bilateral programs with Colombia to fund new priorities in the isthmus. The departure of Valenzuela in August 2011, and the March 2012 transfer of the deputy assistant secretary for Central American and the Caribbean to Uruguay left the Colombia proposal on stand-by. In the end, no action was ever taken.

The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) is the main funder of CARSI and INL's chief executive, Ambassador William Brownfield, has been, for all practical purposes, the main interlocutor for CARSI since the first Obama term and especially after Valenzuela's departure. So, counter-narcotics got the bulk of the attention and funding the State Department directed to the region, mainly through INL and Department of Defense (DOD) interdiction programs. Institution-building programs were funded through US support to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). In the case of El

Salvador, there was a strong focus on gangs: the second largest CARSI allocation to the country went to an anti-gang unit of the Salvadoran civilian police vetted by the FBI.

CARSI never was an easy sell in Congress. Leaders of both parties had serious reservations about the program. House Republicans in the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, headed by Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Connie Mack in 2009, doubted the efficacy of allocating funds to a plan that was conceived as a regional one when reports from posts in Guatemala, San Salvador, and Tegucigalpa talked about three different scenarios: a monolithic almost-failed-state approach to Guatemala, a Chávez-centered narrative in Honduras, and

prevalence of gangs in El Salvador and insignificant presence of DTOs. (The reality on the ground, even in 2009, was more nuanced but the subtleties were not perceivable in Washington. In fact, institutional reform was slowly gaining space in Guatemala through CICIG; the chaos in Honduras, although influenced in good part by Chávez's regime was also shaped by the decrepit and ruthless elites in the country; and DTOs had already infiltrated Salvadoran politics.) To get

Republicans to engage on the CARSI program, acknowledging the Chávez factor in the narrative was essential.

At the Democratic controlled Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, skepticism ran high. Democratic staff close to Chairman John Kerry viewed CARSI merely as a sum of existing programs that did not drive policy but could, if directed exclusively to Central America and beefed up with some extra funding, be a good operational guide. Under Kerry, the Committee proposed to create a commission to elaborate a security strategy for the Western Hemisphere (there is even a draft, but it never saw the light of day).

By the end of 2010, State's WHA tried to create an international approach to Central America, with CARSI as the main US proposal, to be supported by the European Union and executed under the umbrella of SICA. Lack of real collaboration among Central American administrations made that idea a non-starter from the outset.

In January 2011, Clinton again signaled support for a strong policy for the region. “The US is committed to citizen safety in Central America. We are doing everything we can in the fight against corruption and impunity, in providing the equipment and the support that law enforcement and the military require, and helping to build civil society to stand against the scourge of drug trafficking,” wrote Secretary Clinton in an official memo about CARSI in January 2011. It is disputable whether Central America was ever a US priority, but Clinton’s first aggressive approach and messages, Obama’s visit to El Salvador in March 2011 as part of his only Latin America trip so far, and even the audacity of trying to shift away from the traditional “backyard” approach that Chávez influence revived in the region, fueled overly optimistic expectations.

By the time Obama was reelected in 2012, Central America was long gone from State’s list of priorities. (They would hold, however, that at least in the context of Latin America policy, Central America remained a major concern, reflected in the fact it was the only line item in the 2014 WHA budget that saw an increase.) The latest effective closures and small successes by the United States in the three countries of the Northern Tier around touchy issues can be attributed to what the Hillary Clinton team characterized as “the correct use of soft power.” That is, the exercise of leverage by US Embassies to push for specific results in specific cases. In Guatemala, the diplomatic post played an important role in bringing Ríos Montt to trial and also provided a kind of diplomatic shield for Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, whose face symbolizes the timid institutional reform in that country. In El Salvador, FBI and Justice Department attachés have pressed the newly appointed attorney general’s office to produce results quickly in the investigation of one of the country’s main drug trafficking organizations. In Honduras, which faces the worst security situation, the US Embassy has tried, with lesser results, to rescue a misguided police reform.

As for now, US policy towards Central America and the Northern Tier could be defined as a patchwork that pieces together the separate approaches of individual agencies or embassies. Overall, the expectation of a broad strategy is still unfulfilled.

IV. The background: The roads most travelled and the ideological factor

The US government remains a powerful presence in Central America. But now it seems to be a fading one. The foreign policy priorities set by Washington have shaped how local governments approached citizen and regional security after the civil conflicts of the 1980s in the region. The sense of a common enemy—guerrillas, communism,

As for now, US policy towards Central America and the Northern Tier could be defined as a patchwork that pieces together the separate approaches of individual agencies or embassies. The expectation of a broad strategy is still unfulfilled.

and national liberation movements—cemented tight relationships between the US security apparatus and its counterparts in the Northern Tier.

From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the security issue was monopolized by the national security and counterinsurgency doctrine that prevailed throughout the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Sr. That narrative was to be re-written some 10 years later as a new type of national security doctrine developed in Washington after 9-11, the ascent of the Chávez regime in Caracas, and its influence in Central America through old US foes such as the Salvadoran FMLN and Daniel Ortega’s Sandinistas.

In the 1980s, Central America was at the center of the US foreign policy agenda when Reagan’s Washington declared the region as the last frontier in the geopolitical fight against communism and, as a direct consequence, shored up the domestic military regimes with financial aid that created or solidified US-dependent economies.

The links with the United States remained strong after peace processes advanced in the region, with international and domestic support, abetted by the collapse of the Cold War and the exhaustion of war in countries devastated by bloodshed, inequity, and the destruction of almost all means

of economic production. The end of warfare, a process that began in 1992 with the Salvadoran Peace Agreement and formally ended with the signing of the Guatemalan settlement four years later, did not weaken or sever the strong ties already established between the United States and the region. The newfound connection, though, was to be less political and more social, cemented by rising migration from the region to US cities and the economic and social implications of this mass movement.

The Bill Clinton administration focused on supporting the peace process in the region—and in the case of El Salvador, his State Department's intervention was important in pressing the Calderón Sol administration to fulfill the pending parts of the Peace Accords, such as police reform, cleansing of the army, and support to reinsertion programs for former combatants. But on the ground US posts were still concerned about the possibility that criminal groups formed by war veterans or ex-guerrillas would turn rogue.

It is true that the counterinsurgency narrative started to fade from the mid-1990s. But it was taken up again by US posts and by veteran US State intelligence operatives in the early 2000s, fueled by a kind of perfect storm: the return of the hawkish approach in Washington after 9-11, the growing power of Chávez in Caracas and, through his rule and that of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, the spread of a new anti-American narrative.

A shift in US concerns with Central America and economic and political programs in the countries took hold in the early 1990s. The US political establishment turned its attention elsewhere, driven by new and more urgent foreign policy needs around the world. Healthy economic growth experienced in the region—fueled mainly by intraregional commerce, remittances sent by Central Americans living in the United States, and exports to the United States—after three decades of stagnation, along with the birth of formal democratic processes, were to become the shining face of the new era. The then unforeseen violent scenarios created by the marginalization of young and militarily trained exiles who were to become members of Central American youth gangs on US soil were to become the dark face of that era and bring new concerns to the United States.

But that came later. The 1990s were marked by a sense of progress in northern Central America. A more buoyant outlook was sustained by structural reform, the most robust economic growth in at least three or four decades,

improvement in many health and education indexes, and the illusion that a path to overcome poverty had been found within the tide of neoliberal reforms sweeping Latin America. And there was the undeniable fact that some of the formal advantages of democracy—opening of political participation to the left, the creation of a slow, timid process advancing toward freedom of speech and citizen participation—had arrived for good. There appeared to be no expectation of cause for concern in the short term. But the shortcomings of reform processes, revealed mainly by rapid growth of a new type of criminal violence and the persistence of endemic inequity and poverty, were soon to overshadow optimism.

By the mid-2000s, Central America had been off Washington's radar as a hotspot for almost a decade. In the Northern Tier, the fresh taste of peace and democracy was the main official narrative, one that allowed very little space and patience for apocalyptic forecasts. Some scholars and writers argue that this entire period was an illusion, but even now, when economic stagnation and violence have set off alarms again, it seems futile to deny that the region took important steps to leave behind definitively the years of horror.

It is also true, however, that with the 1990s bonanza came the nurturing of sophisticated organized crime in the region. Weak and isolated criminal structures with ties to corrupt, old regimes were to become the new carriers of cocaine when other routes for the illegal export from Colombia became unfriendly for *narco*-traffickers, thanks mainly to US-driven interdiction policies. By the turn of the century, Central America had become an important route for the *narcos*, and the Northern Tier, already plagued by violence and corruption and condemned by its proximity to the growing *narco* power of Mexico was on its way to becoming the “hot spot of the bridge,” as a Guatemalan officer describes the penetration of *narco*-fueled organized crime into his country and its neighbors.

And the 1990s also brought the gangs. During the two terms of George W. Bush, from 2001–2009, a new but common enemy arose, the Central American youth gangs of exiles born in Los Angeles and then spread to various US cities. The gangs became the new privileged link in the Washington mindset driving the bilateral approach to citizen and regional security in Central America. The gang issue is now no longer a domestic issue in the US security

narrative, or at least became a less urgent matter by the end of last decade, after trials driven by federal attorneys through the RICO law in Fairfax, Virginia (2005) and Greenbelt, Maryland (2007) dismembered the most powerful cliques of MS-13, and after heavy investments in prevention programs through education boards brought down crime figures in some counties. But gangs were considered a major national security issue both at the federal and local level at least until the end of the Bush era.

The gangs became a domestic security threat in Central America as the result of Bush's Operation Community Shield policies which implied massive deportations of gang members from US cities to Central American towns, mostly in Honduras and El Salvador. This fueled violence, causing a sharp spike in homicides and other violent crimes such as kidnappings and extortions in the region.

Washington then responded, through DOJ-FBI, with aid packages aimed at dismantling youth gangs through elite anti-gang units funded and vetted by the United States. In short, gangs became the main driver of bilateral security policies in Washington and in the region's capitals, and dominated US funding to the region and often proved the winning strategy in local presidential races.

At this stage, Central American governments developed a sense of unfairness about the relationship: top officials in San Salvador and Tegucigalpa thought that Washington was responsible for a potential regional crisis with its deportation policies and that alternatives offered through law enforcement aid were inadequate to contain an imminent catastrophe. These same officials, however, kept accepting political and financial benefits from US programs to address the growing gang problem.

By the end of last decade, even when the gangs were no longer a significant cause of violence in US cities, they remained a driver of the foreign policy security agenda: the Central American gang threat had brought new and well-funded programs to the DOJ-FBI that were quickly exported as vetting of police units in Central America.

From 2000 on, a new scenario was to be shaped, one that would bring the region once again to a severe crisis. Despite neglect by Washington's political elite, a new bilateral link

created by unprecedented flows of migrants coming mainly from the troubled Northern Tier spawned new realities that, again, will strengthen the bonds of the region with the United States. Massive immigration from the region to the United States, with the collateral phenomenon of fueling youth gangs, the steady weakening of political reform due to unfettered endemic corruption in national democratic institutions established after the regional wars, overlooked marginalization of vast numbers of Northern Tier citizens, and the arrival of the *narcos*—attracted by these very ills of weak states—reverted the trend of optimism. When Washington next turned its attention to the region by the end of last decade, the Northern Tier was on fire again fight-

The counterinsurgency narrative started to fade from the mid-1990s, but was taken up again by US operatives in the early 2000s, fueled by a perfect storm: the return of the hawkish approach in Washington after 9-11, the growing power of Chávez, and the spread of a new anti-American narrative.

ing a different type of war, one that by the early years of the decade had put Honduras and El Salvador among the top five most violent places on earth.

V. Home-grown Solutions

It could be said that at some points, the Northern Tier countries have found their own solutions—or attempted policy responses—and have put them to work without the indulgence or knowledge of Washington. Two examples of this illustrate both the complexity of addressing violence and crime in the region and what seems to be the fading effectiveness of US say on such matters.

The Guatemalan Model

In 2007 Anders Kompass, the UN envoy, warned that Guatemala was about to become a failed state. Violence was at its peak and the drug wars in Mexico had pushed at least two drug cartels—Sinaloa and El Golfo—to look for forward operating locations down south. This was also the year of the assassination on Guatemalan soil of three Salvadoran deputies to the Central American Congress (PARLACEN), a case that unveiled the depths of corruption and penetration of organized crime inside the National Civilian Police.

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By then, some 6,000 people died violently every year in Guatemala and only 2 percent of homicide cases were ever prosecuted in a court of law. According to the United Nations, organized crime had “infiltrated the Guatemalan state.”³⁵

In August 2007, abetted in part by the crime surge, a long push by civil society that began in 2002 resulted in approval by the Guatemalan Congress of a law that allowed the state to grant sovereignty to an external entity to enforce the law. With the political backing of the United Nations and financial support from the US Congress and European countries, the Guatemalan International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) was created.³⁶ In sum, the legal reform gave international prosecutors the capacity to investigate crimes committed on Guatemalan soil.

CICIG went after high profile criminal cases, such as the PARLACEN killings or even corruption allegations against former president Alfonso Portillo who left office in 2004.

Soon, the first CICIG commissioner, Spanish judge Carlos Castresana, began pushing for changes in the Attorney General’s Office and for reform of the Guatemalan judiciary. As a result of his efforts, which won backing from external powers and were carefully maneuvered by domestic backers in Guatemala’s halls of power, the country has been able to conduct a quiet reform that allowed for a progressive and honest lawyer to be elected as attorney general, special tribunals have been set up for sensitive cases, and vetted units have gained power within a police force that has been incapable of driving out corruption.

The United States has accompanied the process in its entirety. First, during the Bush years, White House staffers and congressional aides helped press for the creation of CICIG despite forceful opposition from traditional Guatemalan elites. More recently, the US Embassy in Guatemala City has actively followed and quietly supported the work of Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz and some sensitive cases such as the recent trial against General Efraín Ríos Montt, former de facto president accused of genocide and crimes against humanity.

The creation of CICIG, and the ultimate results of its work, was a Guatemalan idea advanced first by local human rights NGOs and then backed by scholars, a few politicians, and the international community. But, from beginning to end, it has been a Guatemalan solution.

Comments by current US Secretary of State John Kerry in November 2013 about Central America leave the impression that Guatemala is now an example for the region. “In June, I went to Guatemala and met with Attorney General Paz y Paz. She has made extraordinary progress in combating corruption and organized crime, protecting women from violence, and prosecuting human rights violations,” Kerry said in public remarks at the Organization of American States in Washington last November.³⁷

³⁵ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*. September 2012. http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_Exsum_english.pdf

³⁶ For a complete description of CICIG see www.cicig.org

³⁷ See Remarks on US Policy in the Western Hemisphere, delivered at an Organization of American States public event co-sponsored by the Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC, November 18, 2013. <http://thediologue.org/page.cfm?pageID=32&pubID=3427&ts=kerry>

The Salvadoran Gang Truce

The negotiation between imprisoned gang leaders and envoys of the Funes administration, with the mediation of a Catholic bishop and a former guerrilla commander, was boiling by mid-February 2012. Half a dozen intelligence agents supervised by the military had been following up on conversations with some 20 jailed leaders of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs to cut a deal to improve their prison conditions in exchange for a reduction in homicides. Behind those talks was the open recognition by the Funes administration that the gangs had it in their hands to control the killing and had overwhelmed law enforcement agencies despite the *mano dura* policies. It was a very risky political operation, so the government proceeded with absolute secrecy... until it leaked. By March 2013, *El Faro* newspaper, citing intelligence sources, unveiled the truce deal. Undecided on how to handle the pact publicly, then Minister of Security General David Munguía Payés prevaricated and gave four different explanations for the first direct government action in pursuit of the truce: the transfer of 20 gang leaders from the maximum security prison to less secure facilities. Munguía's boss, President Mauricio Funes, never acknowledged government participation in the first stages of negotiating and implementing the truce.

Despite the suspicion created by government mishandling of information and concealment of the initial terms of the pact, homicides quickly dropped after gang leaders were moved. Killings went down from ten to twelve per day to about five to seven per day. (Official figures were never accurate due to differences between government institutions.) It was, indeed, an historic decline.

From the outset, the US government opposed the truce. The very same week that *El Faro* broke the story on the pact, then-US Under Secretary of State María Otero said in San Salvador that “gangs must disappear.” Later, the US Treasury Department declared the MS-13 to be a transnational criminal organization and said six of its leaders (two of them directly involved with the truce) are US targets.

At home in El Salvador, the truce never gained traction among the public. One opinion poll showed that more than half of Salvadorans had negative views of the pact, mainly because the gangs never refrained from their extortion schemes, their most profitable enterprise. There were also a lot of doubts about the accuracy of the new homicide

figures. Some officials publicly aired concerns that gangs may be burying their victims to hide killings.³⁸ But, despite all the doubts, the drop in homicides remained steady at least until late 2013.

Some of the most informed critics of the truce claimed that in order to become a viable policy, the pact had to be sustained with funding that allowed the state to intervene in gang-controlled territory with prevention and rehabilitation programs. A program of “municipalities without violence” was announced, but the Salvadoran government never funded it. In short, the state failed to give the truce it helped bargain the financial and political backing it needed to become an effective public policy.

One thing, though, remains undisputed: the Salvadoran gang truce has been so far the only measure that has proved effective in reducing the extremely high homicide rate in the country.

The day after

The current security situation in the Northern Tier can fairly be described as a crisis. The US Partnership for Growth Initiative, proposed by President Obama to El Salvador in 2010, describes insecurity as the main obstacle to economic growth and sustainable development in the region. Leaving aside historical causes for this impasse, it is widely accepted that violence and crime, along with the corruption that feeds them and the weaknesses it brings to national states, are the main threats to democratic stability today.

Some argue that Washington's prolonged disengagement with the region helped cause the new scenario, or at least did not help prevent it. According to one line of reasoning, when the United States was overwhelmed by the violence of Central American youth gangs, it exported the problem to the streets of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Guatemala City, and San Salvador by deporting the gang leaders. No help was provided to the region to deal with the influx of criminals. It was Washington's lack of common sense that avoided making a proper previous analysis of the implications of drug trafficking for the region.

Another argument holds that the corrupt state agents and political parties of the region—most of them shaped

³⁸ The recent discovery by the Attorney General's Office of eight clandestine graveyards seems to give some credibility to the thesis.

and populated by decrepit versions of the dual antagonism of the Cold War-style, black and white analysis of “for us or against us”—had no real interest in reform or lacked enough interest in genuine change to withdraw from new or old alliances with rich and not always lawful partners.

The most accurate analysis seems to lie in the middle. The local economic and political elites neglected to create national policy platforms strong enough to combat violence and inequity. Their narrow views were focused on retaining power in public offices. In some cases, the Washington foreign policy apparatus overlooked and even encouraged these shortcomings, in part because its analytical capacities to understand the region were undermined by a piecemeal approach dictated by the interests of particular agencies on the ground. Thus, the fragmented approach ended up superseding a sound and holistic strategy capable of addressing the challenges posed by deteriorating security across the region.

The US dialogue with the region had been tense throughout the postwar era. In general, the region's capitals escalated their complaints about the amount and relevance of US aid after the massive deportations in the early 2000s. Washington has regularly, and almost always in private, protested that millions of dollars end up being worthless when poured into corrupt and ineffective bureaucracies. That claim is matched, however, by a double standard on the ground in the Northern Tier where national security priorities have overshadowed concerns about the inadequacies and sins of local partners.

The Obama administration proposed some sort of grand bargain in the form of the CARSI initiative, but due to the

lack of strategic thinking behind that plan and the resistance it encountered on the ground, this option has never been anything more than a piecemeal approach that pulls together existing programs designed to interdict drug flows without addressing concerns about weak institutions in the Northern Tier.

The Guatemala model seems to speak for itself and give analysts in Washington and Central America plenty to think about in terms of effective ways to improve citizen and regional security in the northern part of the isthmus. The quiet but firm backing of political and civil society solutions targeting corruption and impunity is producing results regardless of how it may hurt old and decrepit allies in the halls of power. US-funded programs seem to be drained of effectiveness in countries which lack a culture of accountability.

When in 2010 Secretary Clinton set the goals for her proclaimed strategy in Central America, she wrote them to be: 1) Create safe streets for the citizens of the region; 2) Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband within and between the nations of Central America; 3) Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American Governments; 4) Re-establish a state presence and security in communities at risk; and 5) Foster enhanced levels of security and rule of law coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region.³⁹

Each and every one of these goals remain outstanding challenges in the Northern Tier.

³⁹ CARSI overview. 01-27-11. U.S. State Department.



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**1211 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20036**

PHONE: 202-822-9002 ■ FAX: 202-822-9553

EMAIL: iad@thedialogue.org ■ WEB SITE: www.thedialogue.org