The boomerang effect in US-Northern Triangle relations

Philippe Fournier
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Résumé
Ce rapport fait état de la posture américaine à l’égard des pays du Triangle Nord (Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala) et de leurs ressortissants depuis les années 1980 et tente de démontrer que les politiques mises en place par les États-Unis dans les quatre dernières décennies ont contribué à l’augmentation de la pauvreté, de l’insécurité et des migrations dans la région. Plus précisément, la militarisation des sociétés centroaméricaines dans le contexte de la guerre froide, la libéralisation forcée des économies de la région, les vagues de déportations vers le Triangle Nord et les programmes axés sur les réformes judiciaires, militaires et policières montrent que les politiques des États-Unis sont réactives, à courte échéance et fondées sur des priorités domestiques. Au final, ces politiques dénotent une préférence marquée pour des politiques sécuritaires dictées par les élites politiques et l’opinion publique américaines plutôt que pour des programmes de développement conséquents.

Abstract
This report looks at the United States’ policies towards the Northern Triangle (Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) and its citizens in the last four decades and attempts to demonstrate that they have contributed to a gradual rise in poverty, insecurity and migration in the region. In particular, the militarization of Central American societies, the somewhat forced liberalization of the region, the waves of deportations from the United States and the US aid initiatives centered on judicial, military and police reforms show that US policies are reactive, short-term and rest primarily on domestic interests. In the end, these policies speak of a clear preference for security measures dictated by US public opinion and political elites rather than on comprehensive development programs.

Citation

1 Research fellow at the Montreal center for international studies (CERIUM) and lecturer in political science, University of Montreal
Introduction

Countries in the so-called Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala) have experienced a marked increase in violence from 2007 onwards. Despite a recent downturn, homicide rates in the region remain among the highest in the world outside of war-torn countries. Authoritarian tendencies, climate change, gang violence and the lack of economic opportunity continue to drive people out of their home countries. This situation has engendered internal displacements in all three countries and a surge in migratory movements towards the United States and Mexico. This report aims to show how and through what specific policies and discourses the United States has contributed to the development of this humanitarian crisis. To do so, it proceeds in four steps. First, it examines the consequences of the US’ Cold War policy in the region. Second, it looks at the promotion of liberalization through bilateral aid, free trade agreements and multilateral programs. Third, it considers the deportation policies of successive US administrations and the securitization of Central American migration. Finally, the report focuses on some of the US’ recent plans and programs to respond to the crisis up to the current day. Throughout, it highlights the international/regional consequences of US domestic rationalities of government and policies. In all, US policy towards the Northern Triangle is characterized by neglect and has been based on short-term domestic priorities rather than on comprehensive and solidaristic development programs.

Although countries in the Northern Triangle have their own distinct historical, political and social make-ups, they share a range of problems such as high levels of violence, poverty and dysfunctional institutions, which explains why the US aggregates them in cohesive regional programs.
The legacy of the Cold War and precarious peace

The links between countries in the Northern Triangle and the United States go back more than a century. They have long been considered a part of the US’ “backyard”. In the second half of the 20th century, the power of landowning bourgeoisies of Spanish descent was contested by a range of actors who favored more or less radical land and socioeconomic reforms, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala. Such distributional conflicts came to a head on several occasions, pitting social-democratic and Marxist-Leninist political groups against right-wing military regimes, resulting in prolonged and bloody civil wars. Although Honduras did not suffer the same fate as its neighbors, it nonetheless provided a launching pad for US backed paramilitary groups to attack the left-leaning Sandinistas in Nicaragua. As illustrated by Lafeber’s study *Inevitable Revolutions* (1983), the United States had a significant role in installing or defending political regimes that vowed to protect its economic and geopolitical interests. In the context of the Cold War, successive US governments led covert operations to prevent the emergence of left-leaning regimes as a way to limit the potential extension of Soviet influence.

The military’s connivance with economic elites is a longstanding feature in the region but the United States’ active support for these regimes has stoked armed conflict and furthered the militarization of these societies. US interventions have also worked to undermine and ultimately prevent the emergence of socio-political movements that aspire to better living conditions and comprehensive redistributive reforms. As Gandin argues, US foreign policy has effectively severed the link between freedom and equality, demobilized civil society and paved the way for neoliberal policies that unfolded in the region from the 1980s to our day (Gandin 2000 and 2004).

After a brief period of reform from 1944 to 1954, the US backed coup against Jacobo Arbenz ushered in military rule in Guatemala until the mid 1980s. With the acquiescence of the local oligarchy and of successive US governments, it controlled...
large swaths of the economy and the political process. Over three decades, the state and the military brutally repressed, tortured and killed tens of thousands of peasants, who appealed for land redistribution, socioeconomic reforms and cultural recognition. Although it was difficult for the US to send military aid to Guatemala before 1985 because of the pushback from American public opinion (Pearce 1998, 588), it continued to send economic aid. This was particularly true for Ronald Reagan, whose administration increased economic aid from 11 million in 1980 to 104 million in 1986. During that time, General Rios Montt, who took control of the state for 17 months from 1982 to 1983, orchestrated the massacre of over 10,000 peasants of indigenous descent. As a result, many Guatemalans sought refuge in neighboring Mexico or in the United States. From 1977 to 1989, the number of Guatemalan immigrants entering the United States, both unauthorized and legal, rose from 13,785 to 45,917. Although the Reagan administration initially denied 98% of asylum claims by Guatemalans for political reasons, a lawsuit forced the federal government to relax its policy by 1991 (Jonas 2013).

The Guatemalan civil war, which lasted 36 years, formally ended with the 1996 peace accords. Under the supervision of the United Nations, the peace plan laid out ambitious reforms that were meant to address structural inequalities, land ownership, human rights, civilian control of the army, rights and cultural recognition for the country’s indigenous majority, refugee resettlement and a new Constitution and electoral system. Although some of these provisions were implemented, the more far-reaching changes on civilian control and indigenous rights did not materialize because the required constitutional amendments were voted down in the 1999 referendum. The latter signaled a profound lack of trust in political and juridical institutions, as fewer than 20% of eligible voters took part. The accompanying tax and land reforms, intent on addressing deep-rooted inequalities in Guatemalan society, also failed to be implemented. In all, the social conditions for civil strife, most notably those related to land and impunity (Green 1999, 172), remained in place after 1996. Without the incentives of the Cold War, the United States gradually lost interest in
the country and redirected its assistance under the mantle of democratization and macroeconomic reform, much like the rest of the international community (Pearce 1998). Overall, these reforms consolidated existing disparities and did little to quell the increasingly violent make up of many Guatemalan cities.

In El Salvador, the most densely populated country in Central America, the availability of land presents a particularly acute problem to this day. In close alliance with the local oligarchy, the military kept a firm hold on political power and blocked all attempts to instigate meaningful land reform. Tensions flared in 1972, as the military refused to accept the Christian Democrats’ victory and forced many of its leaders into exile. This led to renewed activism from Salvadoran civil society and left-wing guerrilla groups. Internal mobilization and international pressures to end political repression, most notably from the Carter administration, prompted the Junta to include leftist elements into the governing coalition and to propose a range of reforms. However, many of those reforms proved too radical for the United States and were not put in place.

Those that were implemented were limited in scope and had little impact. As a result, left-leaning political actors gradually lost momentum and the more conservative elements of the military regained control. Once it was clear left-wing guerrillas could inflict damage on government positions, the military responded by launching deadly attacks on left-wing militias and their civilian sympathizers, often through shadowy paramilitary groups called the Death Squads. Reagan’s support for the military was tainted by his strong anti-communist bent and he committed substantially more military and economic aid than his predecessors to defeat the left-leaning Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMNL). El Salvador’s civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992, saw 75 000 people killed. As a result, approximately half a million Salvadorans fled to the United States throughout the 1980s. The Reagan administration refused to grant asylum to Salvadorans fleeing the war as it would have contradicted its own foreign policy. This meant that the vast majority of
Salvadoran immigrants had no legal status in the United States, a situation that was partially amended after the American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh (ABC) settlement and the granting of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to foreigners unable to return safely to their country. We should mention that TPS has been periodically renewed, most notably after a series of devastating earthquakes in 2001. In 2018, the Trump administration announced it was revoking TPS but the decision was challenged by a federal judge in California and the case is still pending (Menjívar and Cervantes 2018).

Peace negotiations between the Salvadoran government and the FMNLF resulted in the 1992 Chapultepec agreement. As in neighboring Guatemala, one the main issues consisted in bringing the military under civilian control. In practice, this meant reducing the number of active duty military personnel and creating new institutions such as the National Police Force to manage internal security (Kincaid 2000). However, as of 1998, public security was deteriorating rapidly as youth gangs and criminal groups spread in many parts of the country. Deportation of Salvadoran gang members from US metropolitan areas, in particular Los Angeles, ongoing poverty, limited access to land and faltering institutional and judicial reform, all contributed to making El Salvador the most dangerous country in the region.

Although Honduras escaped civil war, it experienced many of the same problems as its neighbors, including authoritarian military rule and stark socioeconomic inequalities. US influence on the country was particularly pervasive as it controlled many parts of its economy and political class. It more or less turned Honduras into a one-crop economy and owned most of the best lands to grow bananas, which were then transported to the United States. During the Cold War, Honduras was seen by the US as a buffer between El Salvador and Nicaragua, where leftist movements were more influential. More deferential to the US than other Central American countries and highly concerned with its own security in a volatile region, Honduras came to depend largely on American aid, even as assistance levels
were deemed insufficient by successive Honduran governments. The US famously used Honduras as a training ground for contras looking to topple the Sandinistas in neighboring Nicaragua and kept a strong military presence in the country. Reagan’s election coincided with a dramatic increase in military aid (Shepherd 1984, 116) and his policies further encouraged the militarization of Honduran society whilst turning a blind eye on human rights abuses. After the Cold War, aid to Honduras was reduced significantly and although the country remained relatively stable, Hondurans have been among of the poorest and least educated in the hemisphere.

Going back a century and a half, it is no secret that US’ policy in the Northern Triangle has largely been dictated by narrow economic and strategic interests. Through its support of authoritarian regimes, it contributed to the militarization of the region and ultimately to the normalization of violence in everyday life. From that perspective, Reagan’s tenure was particularly damaging. Although the discursive and strategic logics of the Cold War had been at play since the 1950s, Reagan saw the ascendency of left-wing forces vowing to remove US-backed oligarchies as an existential threat. In a speech to the Joint Session of Congress on April 27, 1983, Reagan affirmed that: “the national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy”. The discursive construction of Central America as a strategic priority, even as the Soviet Union showed little interest in the region, was part of the plan to reverse the “malaise” (in Jimmy Carter’s famous words) that had gripped the US public in the late 1970s, induced by the perception of decline on the world stage, economic hardship and the erosion of traditional social bonds in the throes of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. A cohesive foreign policy based on a clear friend/enemy distinction provided the grounds for renewed patriotism and national unity, a notion that Reagan freely borrowed from anti-communist commentators and policy advisors such as Jean Kirkpatrick and Norman Podhorezt.
Indeed, as David Campbell (1998) has shown, the constitution of American identity has always depended on the differentiation with an internal or external “Other”.

**Remaking the Northern Triangle’s economy**

From 1950 to 1980, the Northern Triangle saw sizeable growth rates and investments in public infrastructure. However, growth was far from evenly distributed and access to land for small farmers became an increasingly serious problem. Economic growth did not keep pace with population growth and all three national economies struggled to absorb the surplus labor. In keeping with modernization’s notion of progress and techno-scientific rationality and with the willingness to check the expansion of communism in the region, John F. Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress, which was the first major US development plan for Latin America. Although the Alliance supported export-led industry in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors, it never reached its financial commitments (Dunkerley 1988, 203) and failed to address socioeconomic inequalities in the region. The Alliance was also an opportunity for US capital to expand in all three countries. US and foreign capital turned to developing maquiladoras, low wage manufactures tasked with the assembly or finishing (Dunkerley 1988, 205) of products then sent to the United States. This nascent industrial sector did not generate broad-based growth and added little value to the economy, which remained focused on agricultural products. In the 1970s and 1980s, Central America’s main agrarian exports such as coffee, bananas, cotton, sugar and meat suffered from stagnant or dropping prices on world markets (Klak 2004). What’s more, the appropriation of land for cattle farming and other large crops for exports led to waves of expropriations of small and subsistence farmers, not to mention the pervasive use of pesticides which were highly damaging to local ecosystems. This often compelled displaced *campesinos* to migrate to urban centers or to the United States. New arrivals swelled the ranks of precarious and informal workers and built settlements with no infrastructure or services.
In parallel, the spiraling debt crisis in the developing world, partly as a result of the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979, did not spare Central America. To different degrees, countries in the Northern Triangle resorted to borrowing to keep their economies afloat (Bulmer-Thomas 2003, 313). This increased the influence of bilateral and multilateral entities like the Agency for International Development (US-AID), the World Bank and the IMF over their macroeconomic policies. From the end of the 1970s onwards, there was a concerted effort from those institutions to accelerate the transition from state-led development and import-substitution industrialization (ISI) to private sector development, free-trade agreements and integration in global value chains. USAID thus became an important source of funding for free-market groups in the region (like FUSADES in El Salvador) and worked to disseminate policy prescriptions derived from neo-classical economics (Robinson 2003 and Pearce 1998, 5992). The region was also affected by the worldwide recession, the contraction of credit from private banks and the dramatic rise in US interest rates in the early 1980s. This added to an already volatile social context, where growing numbers of dispossessed campesinos demanded a greater share of land, wealth and resources.

As mentioned above, the Reagan administration reacted to political mobilizations in the region by helping local oligarchies suppress popular movements. On the economic front, it launched the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI). Both part of the US’ Cold War strategy and in line with the emerging developmental rationality of the donor community, the Initiative furthered the expansion of US capital in the region, in particular the implantation of garment factories, encouraged the privatization of public assets, lowered or eliminated tariffs for some products exported to the US and encouraged diversification. The initiative emerged from the Kissinger Commission in 1983, which included an “Emergency Stabilization Program” for weak national economies, and “a medium Long-Term Reconstruction and Development Plan”, intent on building democratic institutions and advancing socioeconomic redistribution. However, most of the political, social and institutional provisions included in the Commission’s report were put aside in favor of a much
narrower economic compact. The plan was based on the notion that the marketplace would work its magic and was undoubtedly more a reflection of the US’ own economic rationale than a genuine business opportunity. The neoliberal rationality that gradually redefined the parameters of public administration, remade the identities of individual citizen and affirmed the benefits of free-trade and privatization, were transposed to the administration and conception of US foreign aid and upon individual citizen in Central America (Fournier 2011).

Honduras, more stable than both of its neighbors, was the first country to enter into a preferential trade agreement with the United States. The agreement included production-sharing with multinational apparel companies like Hanes and Fruit of the Loom and duty-free entries for some apparel products assembled in Honduras. As a result, maquiladoras started to flourish. In time, this model was extended to El Salvador and Guatemala. In 2014, US bound apparel represented a total of 54% of all exports from the Northern Triangle to the United States. On average, maquila wages in the region represent 13% of the minimum wage in the US (Crossa 2015).

The passage of the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act in 2000, which provided Caribbean Basin nations with North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)-like preferential tariff treatment, further boosted the maquila sector. Adopted in 2006, the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), only furthered the liberalization of trade in goods and services. The idea behind such plans was to confirm that “‘non-traditional exports such as maquila production, tourism, and new agricultural and agro-industrial products (would) form the basis for a reorganization of the region’s productive structures (that) reflect the globalization process” (Robinson 2003, 234). Although foreign aid programs for Central America were aligned on the World Bank’s by then hegemonic notion of good governance, the Clinton and Bush administration’s development plans for Central America essentially insisted on diversifying activities of
production and income sources. Again, this orientation was sustained by a particular cultural and developmental model. As U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Roger F. Noriega asserted; “poverty will disappear only when individuals are granted their creative genius and profit from their labor” (Noriega 2005). Enterprising individuals were the building blocks upon which dynamic economies, civil societies and democratic institutions would develop. The deepening of the free-trade agenda was generally welcomed by local elites but the US’ unwillingness to improve aid packages and relax restrictions and tariffs on agricultural imports was not as well received.

The US’ efforts to integrate the three countries’ economies in its own production networks from the 1980s onwards set the stage for a largely unequal relationship. In general, the US’ direct or indirect involvement in regional economic networks, and its active promotion of deregulation, budgetary discipline and private sector development, has had a decisive influence on the region. Although there was a slight decrease in inequality and extreme poverty in El Salvador, close to 60% of the populations of Honduras and Guatemala still live in poverty (World Bank data in Meyer and Taft-Morales 2019). Both countries also have very high levels of income inequality.

![Figure 2. Poverty Rates in the Northern Triangle](Image)


*Note: Data from most recent year available: 2017 for El Salvador, 2014 for Guatemala, and 2018 for Honduras.*
Partly as a result of worsening economic condition, the immigrant population of Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the United States nearly tripled between 1990 and 2016 (Cohn and al. 2017). For the same period, there was a fivefold increase in the immigrant population from Honduras, 70% of which was irregular. Although this surge can partly be explained by the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, which left 1.5 million people displaced on a population of 6 million and destroyed 90% of the banana crops, it can be largely attributed to the chronic lack of economic opportunities in Honduras. In proportion to the country’s population, Hondurans have become the largest group of illegal immigrants in the United States and have also constituted the largest group of deportees (Reichman 2013).

Despite improved economic performance, mainly as it relates to GDP growth, extreme poverty in the Northern Triangle has not diminished and has even increased in the last few years, particularly in rural areas. Overall, the pledge to transform Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala into dynamic export-led economies did not factor in the highly unfavorable terms of global trade, the dependence on agricultural commodities and the lack of adequate infrastructure, technology and financing opportunities. Despite the efforts to include the three countries in regional trade agreements and to create favorable business environments, they remain at the periphery of the world economy and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Although natural disasters and climate change are significant factors behind the migratory surge, enduring poverty, underemployment and unemployed are deeply entrenched structural problems that help explain the emergence of criminal gangs and migration. Whilst the US is not entirely responsible for the Northern Triangle’s difficulties, its economic and developmental policies for the region have generally been ill-conceived and unsuccessful.
Immigration reform, deportations and gangs

Over the course of three decades, gang activity in Central America has become an increasingly serious problem. US deportation policies are seen as one of the main drivers behind this phenomenon, which is accompanied by a steady increase in violence and criminality. In spite of the reservations expressed by some reports (see for example UNDOC 2007) and authors (Bruneau and al. 2011) as to the lack of empirical evidence on the links between US deportations and gang activity in the Northern Triangle,² it seems clear that such policies have been detrimental to all three countries. The latter, plagued by chronic poverty, unemployment and disintegrating communal and family structures proved to be fertile grounds for the proliferation of gangs. It is also difficult to deny the influence of California gang culture on the codes and rituals of Central American gangs, who have adopted a number of traits like dress, hairstyle, drug taking, alcohol consumption and extremely violent methods. Even if we see the latter as anecdotal evidence, we do know that most violent crime in the region is linked to the drug trade and drug trafficking, and that the better part of the drugs transiting from South America are headed for the US domestic market. All of the above factors suggest that the US is partly responsible for the rise of gang violence, criminality and drug trafficking in the region and, more generally, that the US and Central America are closely entwined at the economic and cultural levels due to the continuous flow of people, money and goods between the two.

The deportation of often young offenders from the Northern Triangle, especially Salvadorans, increased dramatically after the Clinton administration (albeit with a republican-controlled Congress) signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) into law in 1996. Partly a response to the rise in illegal immigration from the Southern border and of anti-immigrant sentiment in the

² This is made more complicated by the fact that US authorities do not provide a complete criminal record for deportees.
US, the bill sought to strengthen immigration laws by imposing stiffer penalties for undocumented and even legal immigrants committing crimes, including misdemeanors and felonies. The changes were made retroactive, which meant that people who had settled, started families and were employed in the US became eligible for deportation overnight. The deportation process was expedited by expanding the government’s detention powers, as well as by circumventing access to legal counsel and hearings before a judge. After 1996, it also became a lot more difficult for undocumented immigrants to obtain the right to remain on US soil. The law made it easier to remove any person who had been in the US for less than 10 years (versus 7 years before 1996) and immigrants had to demonstrate that they would face “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship” if deported (versus “extreme hardship” before 1996). Once a relatively rare occurrence, deportations from the US increased exponentially after 1996 (Massey and Pren 2012, 8). The number of deportees went from 70,000 in 1996 to roughly 400,000 a year through Obama’s first term.

The Clinton administration also worked to improve and expand enforcement at the border by adding funds and personnel. This opened the way for even stricter enforcement both at the border and inside the United States, most notably after 9/11. Judging by his administration’s reforms, Clinton undoubtedly wanted to be seen as “tough on crime” and “tough on immigration”. He saw democrats and liberals in general as particularly vulnerable on these issues. Clinton’s political program incorporated conservative views on social and economic issues in the hope of better capturing the views and aspirations of middle America, but also in the hope of renewing the democratic party and making it more electable. Whereas immigration was not considered a hot button issue by the US electorate throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s, it became so in the 1990s. Although it is difficult to identify a single source for the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, the social, economic and cultural dislocations brought about by globalization certainly contributed to make immigration a widely-shared concern among the US public. In the late 1980s, California became the epicenter of this debate. As illustrated by the adoption of
proposition 63 in 1986, which made English the state’s “common language” and proposition 187 in 1994, which called for stricter screening of individuals (and their legal status) claiming public services, public feelings about illegal immigration were increasingly negative and gained a national platform (Dittgen 1999). It is no accident that Pat Buchanan launched presidential bids in 1992, 1996 and 2000, running to the right of mainstream republicans by advocating, among other things, a reduction in immigration and a repudiation of multiculturalism.

The conflation of illegal immigration and criminality was also more and more common in conservative circles and was to be used regularly in the following years, culminating in the rhetoric of candidate and president Donald Trump. The increase in the number of deportations must then be understood in the context of official discourses that feed off but also contribute to stoke anti-immigrant sentiments. Political elites have largely contributed to making security a priority in public discourse. The purchase of drones, the use of biometric technologies, the addition of personnel or border barriers, the detention and deportation of Central American migrants are all visible measures aimed at assuaging the public's anxieties. It denotes a preference for short-term measures over a more complex and economic and political re-ordering.

As is well known, most gangs that are currently active in the Northern Triangle originated in US cities, in particular Los Angeles. In the throes of the civil war in the 1980s, close to a million Salvadorans fled their country, most of whom settled in the United States. Many of those immigrants found that they were not welcome in largely Mexican neighborhoods and were routinely preyed upon (Valdez 2011, 25). This led young Salvadorans to join gangs like *Mara Salvatrucha* (or MS-13 for affiliates of the Mexican mafia) or *Calle 18*. Whilst membership to the former was limited to Salvadoran immigrants, as least initially, the latter was largely made-up of Mexicans and Central Americans. Both gangs are known for their particularly brutal methods and initiation rituals that include group beatings, sexual violence and even murders.
Stricter enforcement by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service from the early 1990s onwards as well as the adoption of IIRIRA in 1996, contributed to a significant increase in deportations of illegal aliens back to Central America. Many of the deportees were thought to be experienced gang members. Gangs that emerged in economically deprived and often dangerous American inner cities, that is at the cultural and economic margins of US society, came to thrive in countries who were chronically poor, vulnerable to natural disasters, scarred from drawn-out civil wars and ill-equipped to arrest or prosecute criminals and murderers.

As gang activity and criminal networks expanded throughout the Northern Triangle in the early 2000s, local governments, buoyed by public support, opted for harsh anti-gang laws, which resulted in massive incarceration rates and spiraling violence. As a rule, the *Mano Dura* (Hard Hand) approach used by conservative governments in all three countries was largely aided by successive US administrations. As we will see in the next section, most US programs were focused on bolstering law enforcement rather than on prevention. According to some commentators, the repressive approach favored by local governments and to a large extent the United States, has forced gangs to “rethink their operations”, notably by developing extortion rackets and becoming more cohesive and secretive. High incarceration rates incited gangs to regroup and refine their strategies. Prison was also an opportunity to better coordinate their actions and to link-up with drug-trafficking cartels, thereby contributing to their expansion and internationalization (Cruz 2011, 392).

The *Mano Dura* strategy proved largely ineffective and attracted criticism from foreign donors who complained about human rights abuses in the region. This persuaded local governments to modify and soften their policy. However, it is unclear how new approaches like *Mano Amiga* (friendly hand) or *Mano Extendida* (extended hand) really depart from previous policies and whether they are not just a way of appeasing foreign donors (Jütersonke and al. 2009, 388). So-called second-generation policies, focused on community-based approaches that seek to address the root
causes of gang membership and violence, have been largely funded and promoted by bilateral and multilateral donors other than the United States (Jütersonke and al. 2009, 388).

Up until now, the United States has failed to reform its complex immigration system. The lack of clarity and potential loopholes surrounding immigration laws have certainly contributed to migratory flows. In addition, the Obama administration’s expansion of the cooperation between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement led to an important spike in deportations, with a particular focus on migrants with a history of violent crime (Shifter 2012, 21-22). According to ICE reports, US deportations reached 409,849 in 2012, with Mexico and Central America topping the list. Although ICE has detained a record number of illegal aliens under the Trump administration in 2018, it has not deported nearly as many as Obama (ICE 2018).

**Recent US Aid and security programs for the Northern Triangle**

The increase in violence related to drug trafficking and gang activity in Central America and rival cartels in Mexico contributed to a surge in illegal immigration from the mid-2000s onwards. Whilst the number of illegal immigrants from Mexico decreased after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the number of Central Americans trying to enter the US illegally increased significantly (see graphic on the next page). This situation prompted the US government to respond through a variety of aid and security programs.
After the Cold War, there a considerable drop in foreign aid to Central America. In the early 2000s, additional resources were provided to El Salvador and Honduras through the Millenium Challenge Account (MCA) in the mid-2000s. The MCA was the US’ own version of the UN’s Millennium goals and showed a willingness to do away with the strictures of congressional control as they apply to the State Department and the Agency for International Development. The MCA and its executive organ the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), supplied aid money only to countries that met three broad eligibility criteria, namely “ruling justly”, “investing in people” and “economic freedom”. These criteria were split into 16 more specific benchmarks and compliance was assessed by conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Freedom House as well as US-backed International Financial Institutions (Soederberg 2004, 296). The countries that were selected needed to have a satisfactory score on all indicators. More explicitly attuned to the goal of building functioning market economies, the MCA was predicated on the idea that sound
institutional reforms would attract foreign investment and unleash entrepreneurial energies. It then seemed to double-down on a model that had proved ineffective for Central America and reinforced the idea that individual countries were ultimately responsible for their faith. Even as they pushed for good governance and judicial reform, the MCC’s programs generally failed to consider the structural causes behind the rise of violence and criminality in the region.

Responding to president Calderon’s and Central Americans governments’ call for assistance in the fight against violence and drug trafficking in 2007, the Bush administration requested $1.4 billion over three years for what came to be known as the Merida Initiative. A mere $60 million was allotted for the whole of Central America (Negroponte 2009, 2). The Central America portion of the Initiative was focused on “criminal gangs, improving information sharing between countries, modernizing and professionalizing the police forces, expanding maritime interdiction capabilities, and reforming the judicial sector in order to restore and strengthen citizens’ confidence in those institutions” (Shannon 2008). In line with the Merida Initiative’s priorities, namely border security and law-enforcement, the bulk of the funding did not go to development programs emphasizing prevention and job creation.

In 2010, the Central America component of the Merida Initiative was renamed the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). The program, modeled after Plan Columbia, was largely centered on law enforcement, strengthening state capabilities and counter-narcotics. As noted in a report by the Wilson Center, the United States’ narrow focus on counter-narcotics had the effect of prioritizing “arrests over community-based approaches to reducing crime and violence” (Olson 2015, 4), thus validating the Mano Dura approach adopted in the region. This contributed to the militarization of law-enforcement in all three countries. Just like in Mexico, day to day policing operations were increasingly carried out by the military. However, the hiring of ex-military officers who took part in mass killings in Guatemala, the amendment of the Honduran constitution to allow the army to assume police
functions, the break with the post-civil war tradition of appointing civilians rather than military officers to top security assignments in El Salvador and the deployment of US special forces in places like Honduras, all pointed to an authoritarian past and an ill-considered US foreign policy (Main 2014, 66-67). The Wilson Center report also found that the crime and violence prevention programs implemented by USAID were one of the few successful endeavors in the Initiative (Olson 2015, 5). However, such programs could rarely count on the support of local governments and on sufficient funding by the government.

Responding to the unprecedented surge in unaccompanied minors trying to enter the United States in 2014, the Obama administration devised a new multi-agency plan called the Strategy for Engagement in Central America. The plan’s objective was to attain “an economically integrated Central America that is fully democratic; provides economic opportunities to its people; enjoys more accountable, transparent, and effective institutions; and ensures a safe environment for its citizens.” (US Department of State in Meyer 2019, 5). By moving beyond the near-exclusive focus on economic growth and crime reduction and proposing a more integrated approach to foreign assistance, the Obama administration seemed to recognize that previous efforts had failed to address the roots causes of violence and migration. Out of the $2.1 billion appropriated by Congress starting in FY2016, about 41% went to “development assistance”, which included the expansion of violence-prevention programs administered by USAID. However, strict conditions were attached to the aid. For example, all three countries had to dissuade their citizens from making the journey north and to show that they were engaged in meaningful reforms to combat corruption and improve transparency (Meyer 2019, 13-14). We should note that although the Obama administration had a better grasp of the challenges facing the Northern Triangle and deployed more resources than previous administrations to deal with the crisis, it apprehended 239 000 migrants from the region at the border and deported 122 000 of them in 2014 alone (Domínguez and Rietig 2015, 5 and 8). As a result, the United States stepped up pressure on Mexico to
secure its border and apprehend more migrants. Since then, Mexico has deported more migrants from the Northern Triangle than the US.

The incentive to prevent migration to the United States is the operating principle behind another major plan for the region called the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle (A4P). Backed and partly funded by the United States, the 22 billion initiative was launched by the governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in 2014, with the technical assistance of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). It complements rather than replaces the Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Its four main objectives are to stimulate the productive sector, develop human capital, improve public safety and access to justice and strengthen institutions and promote transparency (Meyer 2019, 14-15). These goals are largely in phase with the standards set by bilateral (such as USAID) and multilateral donors. In what feels like a familiar and ill-fated recipe, the A4P aims to develop public-private partnerships, create special economic zones and deepen regional integration. If the past is any indication, such plans have resulted in low-wage/low-skilled work, an anti-union stance and marginal economic growth. In addition, the plan does not really address important areas of socioeconomic development such as tax-law, healthcare and education. The security component of the plan is largely in line with CARSI, which has contributed to the militarization of policing in Mexico and the Northern Triangle. In a letter sent to the presidents of the United States, Mexico and countries in the Northern Triangle in 2015, 75 civil society organizations from all over the world stated that the “plan reinforces the same economic policies that have resulted in skyrocketing inequality, widespread abuse of workers’ rights and increased violence against labor leaders, and forced displacement throughout Mesoamerica” (GHRC-USA 2015), adding that they were not invited to take part in the elaboration of the plan, which was developed by the IDB, the US and local governments.
The Trump era

Aside from the repeated rhetorical assaults on migrants and harsh dissuasive measures like family separations at the border, the Trump administration has reduced aid to the region by 30% from 2016 to 2019 (Meyer 2019, 12) and has recently threatened to cut it off completely, although this will likely be challenged by Congress. In the same vein, it has decreased the number of refugees that can be allowed in the United States, revoked the Temporary Protective Status for Hondurans and Salvadorans and halted the Central American Minors (CAM) Refugee/Parole Program which allows children from the Northern Triangle who have a parent residing legally in the United States to apply for refugee status or parole. Threats and punitive measures are an integral part of the current administration’s strategy to force the Northern Triangle’s governments to prevent their citizens from making the journey north. This is based on the assumption that local governments and Mexico have the necessary resources and capabilities to stem the flow of migrants and refugees. In line with president Trump’s transactional approach, it is also based on the idea that the recent increase in aid money should have produced immediate results. As attested both by the president and his Secretary of State, aid money should be used to physically stop people from leaving their country, not address the causes of their departure (Hudson and Deyoung 2019).

Such policies are not just the machinations of a demagogue, they are the starkest expression of the anti-immigrant sentiments that have been simmering in the United States since the 1990s. In many ways, the current administration’s policies do not represent a radical break with the past, but they do signal a radicalization of existing tendencies and reflexes. Donald Trump and other conservative lawmakers have ceased upon the anxieties or even the outright racism of Americans who, rightly or wrongly, feel marginalized in a more outwardly multicultural country. Official discourses have both relayed and produced feelings of insecurity. Such feelings have been stirred up to the point of creating a crisis which required urgent attention and
immediate, drastic measures. In this context, one can see that it is much easier to assuage fears through tangible, short-term measures like executive orders, hiring more border patrol or deploying soldiers at the border than through long-term or tentative development plans.

Conclusions: Security versus development and the idea of regional solidarity

From a cursory look at the last few decades, we can attest that the United States’ policy toward the Northern Triangle has been one of relative neglect and narrow self-interest. This is apparent on at least two fronts: the choice of security over development and the tendency to ignore the consequences of US domestic policies and discourses on regional dynamics.

The articulation of security and development is commonplace in most aid programs, as both objectives are seen as mutually reinforcing. In the academic realm, what has been called the security/development nexus has generated much debate. One of the primary difficulties is that it is marred in conceptual confusion (Stern, M. and Öjendal 2010). As signifiers, security and development are interpreted in a great variety of ways, from the progressive connotations of human security to the colonial or imperial underpinnings of contemporary development policies. However, if we keep to their dominant interpretations and operationalizations over the course of several years, we can evaluate their respective uses and potential and think of them as markedly different political choices. As illustrated by recent programs for the Northern Triangle, the US government has seen security from a largely militaristic and juridical perspective. Overall, the vast majority of funds have been directed at law-enforcement and have thus privileged order over the improvement of social conditions. As mentioned above, this inclination is linked with the political imperative of producing a tangible and rapid response to sources of insecurity. The latter, partly
produced and reproduced by official discourses, are often linked to refugee and migrant populations, which have been specifically targeted and stigmatized by the Trump administration. Again, the political responses to refugee and migrant flows in the US have been largely dictated by domestic considerations, not through a recognition of the global or structural nature of the problem and even less through an appeal to some form of transnational or regional solidarity.

One of the more influential critical articulations of the security and development nexus comes from Mark Duffield. Duffield (2007) suggests that the new wave of Western interventionism in the 1990s and beyond, which is evident in the growing presence and increasing variety of development actors in the global South (NGOs, International Organizations, regional organizations, etc.), has contributed to maintain what he calls the “life-chance divide” between Western and non-Western countries. This divide finds its fullest expression in the fact that life in the global South is not sustained by the same welfare systems as in the North. Instead of working to instate the same protections, which would require building up a functioning state apparatus with the requisite knowhow and resources to create and manage social services, liberal internationalism has attempted the remake the identity of individual subjects in the developing world to make them more resilient, adapted and resourceful. This means that development can be attained not through the transfer of knowhow and resources, which is likely to end up in the hands of corrupt and ineffective political elites, but through the diffusion and acquisition of the necessary dispositions within civil society to initiate the process. Under the cover of humanitarianism and transnational solidarity, this strategy’s implicit goal is both to prevent populations in the South from migrating and to preserve the welfare systems of the North from being overrun. Duffield argues that this kind of interventionism amounts to biopolitical rule. As originally stated by Foucault, biopolitics works through a form of power that takes life itself as its main material and “deals with the population as a political problem” (Foucault 1997, 241-244, 252). From the 1990s onwards, Western countries seek not to extend colonial domination but to export and
transpose their modes of government and subjectivity to the developing world in more suggestive ways, namely through programs and civic actors that seek to further democratization, ownership, local participation and empowerment.

Although Duffield’s critique is compelling, the use of biopolitics to illustrate the workings of liberal internationalism is misleading in two ways. First, biopower, as articulated by Foucault, applies to a very specific social, historical and geographical context, namely France and England in the late 18th century. As Foucault moved towards the notion of liberal and neoliberal governmentality, he continued to focus on advanced Western states like the United States and Germany. In fact, the conditions of possibility for biopolitics and (neo)liberal governmentality are linked with precise economic, administrative and political parameters. The “scaling-up” of governmentality to the international sphere is problematic in that it does not rest on similar or evenly distributed material, technical and intellectual capital. This means that likening contemporary modes of development with biopolitics, which also presupposes the widespread integration of specific standards of conduct, is one step too far. As we have seen, US foreign policy towards the Northern Triangle is defined more by neglect than by a concerted plan to shape and control subjectivities and socioeconomic structures. Although the main objective of recent US policies has been to stem the flow of refugees and migrants from the region, the focus is clearly on blocking such flows and not on preempting them with elaborate and well-funded developmental plans. If there was an obvious imperialistic tinge to the US’ Cold War politics in Central America, the ensuing aid and development programs from the 1990’s onwards were content to promote regional integration, free markets and democratization from a distance and with limited resources.

Although the meaning of both security and development is highly contested, they are part of the rhetorical and political resources that have been wielded by successive US administrations until now. Again, what transpires from the dominant interpretations and operationalizations of both terms and within the relatively narrow
realm of public policy options, is that coercion generally trumps prevention. If both security and development can have negative connotations, we should be allowed to state that one option is worse or better than the other. This is not to say that there are no emancipatory visions of security but that its potential is more abstract and remote. On the other hand, development, which can admittedly point to the dissemination of unregulated capitalism and the disengagement of western States through the “good governance” agenda (Chandler 2007), is more directly concerned with the concrete aspects of socioeconomic organization and has thus more potential as an emancipatory idea and a set of policies. It is a notion that we cannot entirely dispense with as it refers to a primary moral responsibility to others and to the need to address profound material and social inequalities in the global realm (Wainright 2008). Many will argue that “development” has invariably meant imposing modes of knowledge, socioeconomic formulas and cultural tropes that are both foreign and damaging to non-Western peoples. It may be that some communities would rather preserve an ancestral way of life and do away with techno-scientific planning and development benchmarks, but populations in the developing world are generally favorable to the material improvements brought about by social and infrastructural programs, so long as they benefit the majority.

Having said that, development policies are extraordinarily complex and have to factor in the nature of political and cultural regimes, environmental imprint and how money is spent, by whom and for what purposes. The objective here is not to provide a step by step guide on how to manage, distribute or quantify aid but simply to suggest that development, broadly conceived as a transfer of resources to improve living conditions in poorer countries and a means to express solidarity, is a better avenue than security as currently understood by political elites. Put otherwise, we argue that pouring resources into training police forces and army personnel or stepping up border control instead of trying to spur sustainable economic growth is both morally inadequate and ineffective as a policy.
The fact that successive US administrations have preferred security over development also denotes a failure to recognize the multiple relationships between the United States and the Northern Triangle. These relations shape cross-border cultural identities and generate economic links through trade, tourism and remittances. They also create circles of dependency whereby, in some cases, the only way for migrants to pay off their debts in their home country is to have access to US wages (Johnson and Woodhouse 2018). In all, it has become increasingly clear that immigration and security measures cannot be shaped solely on the basis of US public opinion, with no assessment of their repercussions outside the United States. If neither deep-seated economic and cultural links nor philosophical notions of solidarity and moral responsibility are sufficient to initiate a reform of immigration laws, increase foreign aid and encourage the constitution of functional, transparent and representative governments, then the more prosaic goal of policy effectiveness should guide the US’ efforts.
References


