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Improving Regional Security in Central America's Northern Triangle

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The recent wave of unaccompanied minors from Central America further proves that the Obama Administration can no longer continue ignoring the security issues of Central America's Northern Triangle. Rampant levels of crime and violence have reached a critical point, and the U.S. needs to address these issues head on. U.S. security assistance in the region is largely dictated by the Central American Regional Security Initiative, which was implemented in 2008 under President George W. Bush to supplement the Mexican-focused counterdrug and anti-crime Mérida Initiative.

The Administration's reductions in defense spending, combined with reallocation of foreign assistance toward development rather than security,¹ continue perpetuating this climate of insecurity. Complicating this situation is the White House's lack of a coherent policy toward Central America. It supports burdensome legislative restrictions that punish willing partners such as Honduras while rewarding anti-American leadership in El Salvador with preferential aid programs.²

In order to stem the violent conditions and economic conditions that push out citizens of Central America's Northern Triangle, Congress should urgently consider implementing the following four policies.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4240>

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1. Remove Withholding Requirements on Foreign Assistance to Honduras

At the epicenter of the region's turmoil is Honduras, where violent crime has been skyrocketing since 2009, seemingly unabated. Under the Obama Administration, the U.S. has played a major role in the country's descent. Following Honduras's constitutional crisis of 2009, the U.S. suspended critical aid and joint military operations, largely in the form of counternarcotics assistance. Land, sea, and air counternarcotics operations were weakened and, along the Caribbean coast, virtually halted.³

The subsequent security vacuum along the Caribbean coastline was quickly filled by drug trafficking organizations. Since fiscal year (FY) 2012, Congress has withheld a minimum of 20 percent of security assistance on the basis of human rights concerns. It maintained this provision in FY 2013 and, in FY 2014, increased the hold to 35 percent despite the country making great strides in both human rights and democratic governance. Congressional appropriators should ensure that the FY 2015 budget does not continue suppressing the U.S. security engagement.

2. Allow Honduras to Repair Its Fleet of F-5 Jet Fighters

Congress recently blocked Israel from contracting to repair Honduras's fleet of Cold War-era F-5 jet fighters provided by the U.S. in the 1980s.⁴ Despite Honduras's membership in the F-5 Technical Operation Group, the quality of the fleet leaves much to be desired.

The Obama Administration should recognize that repairing the fleet is a critical component in the country's efforts in protecting its territory from

both inbound and outbound drug flights. Honduras is currently the transit point for an estimated 79 percent of northbound South American drug flights, and this number is expected to increase. The repair of this fleet would also support the country's much-needed expansions in aeronautical radar technology.

3. Recognize Guatemala's Critical Position and Relieve Burdensome Legislative Restrictions

Congressional restrictions on Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) toward Guatemala undermine regional security efforts, hinder the promotion of human rights, and reduce the ability of the U.S. to promote democratic values and professional military education.

In 2013, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) supported the new Guatemalan Interagency Task Force, which provides infrastructure and operational anti-trafficking support along the Mexico-Guatemalan border, yet FMF and IMET restrictions have impeded this cooperation.⁵ Guatemala shares a 600-mile-long border with Mexico and is a major transit point for travel to and from Central America. Nonetheless, there are only eight formal points of entry. With the surge in unlawful border crossing, an estimated 350 informal crossing points have been created. The U.S. should support Guatemala's efforts to secure its border.

4. Increase Maritime Interdiction Capabilities

Highly lucrative profits from cocaine trafficking continue funding Central American gangs, and defense budget cuts are reducing the U.S.'s ability to

intercept maritime trafficking. According to General John Kelly, Commander of SOUTHCOM, asset shortfalls directly resulting from budget cuts have left the U.S. unable to prevent 25 percent of suspected maritime drug smuggling in FY 2013.

Currently, SOUTHCOM only has one Navy frigate. The Coast Guard sails four cutters in the region, yet only two of these are permanently tasked with counternarcotics. Naval assets are nowhere near where they should be, as General Kelly contends that he needs 15 more ships solely dedicated to intercepting and monitoring maritime drug trafficking routes.

Security vacuums created by these asset shortfalls have led to the resurgence of 1980s-era trafficking routes through the Caribbean corridor. The assets available and allocated to SOUTHCOM fall short of suitable for protecting U.S. national interests. Considering the current and proposed defense budget cuts, President Obama's mandate for a 40 percent reduction in U.S.-bound drugs from Latin America is inconceivable.

Building Partner Capacity to Ensure Regional Security

As Congress deliberates about the future of the unaccompanied minors, it should also work toward implementing effective development policies. Reductions in foreign security assistance will continue to severely limit regional security cooperation activities and create economic and security conditions that drive unlawful immigration. Congress should recognize that the region is at a critical juncture and that the U.S. needs to reorient its policy accordingly.

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1. Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, May 6, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf> (accessed June 17, 2014).
 2. James M. Roberts, "Obama's MCC Rewards Bad Behavior in El Salvador," The Heritage Foundation, *The Daily Signal*, September 20, 2013, <http://dailysignal.com/2013/09/20/obamas-mcc-rewards-bad-behavior-in-el-salvador/>.
 3. See Ana Quintana, "The United States Needs to Expand Security Cooperation with Honduras," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4115, December 31, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/12/the-united-states-needs-to-expand-security-cooperation-with-honduras>.
 4. Defensa.com, "¿Adquire Honduras F-15?" June 2, 2014, http://www.defensa.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=12414:iadquiere-honduras-f-15-&catid=55:latinoamerica&Itemid=163 (accessed June 17, 2014).
 5. General John Kelly, U.S. Marine Corps, posture statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, March 13, 2014, <http://www.southcom.mil/newsroom/Documents/SOUTHCOM%202013%20Posture%20Statement%20FINAL%20HASC.pdf> (accessed June 17, 2014).
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