

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Does the U.S. Need a “Plan Central America”?

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Due to the crisis on America’s southwest border, several Members of Congress and special interest groups have proposed replicating Plan Colombia in Central America. While it has become apparent that current U.S. policy toward Central America is not working, instead of creating a new plan, the U.S. should reform the existing system of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Citizen security indicators show that CARSI is in dire need of refinement.

The Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras should not be considered nor approached as a monolith. Despite cultural and demographic similarities, each country’s experiences with the region’s security crisis are unique and relative to their domestic situation. Nicaragua, an anomaly in the region, should also be analyzed. Despite its geographic proximity to the Northern Triangle and weak economic conditions, an infinitesimal amount of Nicaraguans were part of the mass exodus.

Congress should strengthen existing U.S. policies, namely CARSI, and should ensure that congressional withholdings and “Leahy laws” promote national security.

### Deficiencies in Current U.S. Policy

CARSI has largely dictated U.S. policy toward Central America for nearly a decade. It is designed as a framework for areas of improvement rather than stated goals.<sup>1</sup> Successful metrics are designed within individual programs, not the security initiative as a whole. Its loose structure leaves it vulnerable to politicization. Changing attitudes about the U.S.’s role in Central America have altered the implementation of CARSI, despite its short existence.

Under the Obama Administration, there has been an overemphasis on potentially wasteful economic development assistance. In addition to distorting the local economies, in many cases economic aid alleviates the fiscal responsibilities of local governments from implementing necessary reforms.

The Administration’s focus on economic aid was further highlighted by President Barack Obama’s emergency funding request. The President requested \$295 million for the State Department’s Economic Support Fund (ESF) for the “reintegration of migrants” into their home communities and to “address the root causes of migration” through economic development. Such funding is \$37 million greater than ESF funds appropriated in the past seven years through CARSI to all of Central America.<sup>2</sup>

The implementation of Leahy law—human rights provisions governing foreign security assistance—has also complicated U.S. security cooperation efforts. An important lesson from Plan Colombia was the dangers of unchecked Leahy laws. According to a recent report by the U.S. Joint Special Operations University, the U.S. contributed to a “succession of major defeats that put Colombia’s survival in jeopardy”<sup>3</sup> due to Leahy law restrictions imposed on the U.S. It has

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been proven that withholding aid is far less effective than investing in training and education. Such holds have been placed against Honduras and Guatemala.

The 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 funding restrictions have impeded this cooperation. Guatemala shares a 600-mile 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 crossings, an estimated 350 informal crossing points have been created.

Following Honduras’s constitutional crisis of 2009, the U.S. suspended critical counternarcotic assistance.<sup>4</sup> Land, sea, and air counternarcotic operations were weakened and, along the Caribbean coast, virtually halted. Congress has withheld a minimum of 20 percent of security assistance on the basis of alleged human rights concerns. It maintained this provision in fiscal year (FY) 2013 and, in FY 2014, increased the hold to 35 percent despite the country’s great strides in both human rights and democratic governance. The U.S. needs to ensure that Leahy laws reflect national security priorities.

### Studying the Case of Nicaragua

Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua share many problems, the same drug-trafficking route, a colonial legacy of underdevelopment and an agrarian economy, 1980s-era conflict and insurgency, as well as weak governance. Unlike the other three countries, however, Nicaragua has so far been immune to high levels of violence. Security strategies adopted during the post-conflict period of the late 1980s and early 1990s paved the way for Nicaragua’s exceptional conditions. Partially because of community policing programs and a demilitarization of domestic security forces, Nicaragua has some of the lowest crime and murder rates in the

region. Of tens of thousands of unlawful Central American migrants in 2014, only 194 were Nicaraguan. Although Nicaragua has significant progress to make in democratic governance and economic development, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras should replicate Nicaragua’s successful police reform policies wherever possible.

The U.S. should:

- **Formulate clear goals for CARS.** CARS was originally designed as a supplement to the Mexico-focused Mérida Initiative. Regional security issues and threats have evolved since then. CARS should reflect these changing dynamics.
- **Lift congressional withholdings that undermine U.S. security efforts.** Current withholdings against Guatemala and Honduras continue to weaken U.S. regional counternarcotics efforts. Increasing levels of U.S.-bound drug trafficking and accompanying violence will continue to destabilize Central America, and Congress should recognize the need for continued engagement.
- **Recognize the importance of supporting civil society in Central America.** In the U.S. and other Western democracies, civil society functions as the intermediary between the government and the public. Democratic and governance institutions in many of these countries are weak and in many cases corrupt. The U.S. should support groups and organizations that hold regional governments accountable.

Plan Colombia’s success was due to the Colombian government’s efforts and the U.S.’s persistent and unwavering engagement. Fifteen years later, the U.S. and Colombia remain committed and enduring partners in countering illicit narcotics. U.S. political will existed because of the drug-terror nexus. The financial connections between cocaine, the FARC (Revolution-

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1. Ana Quintana, “Improving Regional Security in Central America’s Northern Triangle,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4240, June 23, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/06/improving-regional-security-in-central-americas-northern-triangle>.

2. David Inserra, “Border Crisis: Emergency Budget Request Misses the Mark,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4249, July 15, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/07/border-crisis-emergency-budget-request-misses-the-mark>.

3. Mark Moyer, Hector Pagan, and Wil R. Griego, “Persistent Engagement in Colombia,” Joint Special Operations University, July 2014, [https://jsou.socom.mil/PubsPages/JSOU14-3\\_Moyer-Pagan-Griego\\_Colombia\\_FINAL.pdf](https://jsou.socom.mil/PubsPages/JSOU14-3_Moyer-Pagan-Griego_Colombia_FINAL.pdf) (accessed October 17, 2014).

4. 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>.

ary Armed Forces of Colombia), and other regional insurgent groups were clear. Claims of drug-terror connections in Central American have not been verified.

In developing policy considerations to promote security in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. should be wary of promoting potentially ineffective assistance programs. Clearly defined outcomes that promote U.S. national security must be the cornerstone of any policy.

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