

The Northern Triangle: A United States Foreign Policy Issue

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Introduction

Located in the central part of the American continent, also known as Mesoamerica, the Northern Triangle countries (NTC) consists of the countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. All three were once part of the Federal Republic of Central America (consisting of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) which existed from 1823 to 1841. Due to political differences, this country ceased to exist but their legacy and sense of brotherhood does continue to exist. These historical details are important as one can see there is a shared sense of unity these three nations have; they all celebrate their independence from Spain in the month of September. Although great pride characterizes them, there are a set of challenges they face. These countries are currently the biggest sources of undocumented migrants to the United States (USA). As aforementioned, it is important to know that these countries have similar histories and cultures which also means they have a shared ancestry as well. Salvadorans, for example, are currently one of the biggest Hispanic groups in the United States with Mexicans and Puerto Ricans being the top two, respectively. As their population continues to grow, so will their cultural influences. This paper will talk about the Northern Triangle as a region, its background, and why it is important for the United States to consider it as a foreign policy issue. Furthermore, it will discuss about the migration crisis and why this an important topic to address in order to create prosperity. This paper will also operate with the idea that both United States and the NTC should both work together in order to achieve good cooperation where both regions can benefit from economic growth, especially the later. Although the history and migration patterns of both regions goes back many years, I will be focusing on the recent patterns of migration from the last few years, 2019 until the present year 2021. There is a lot that can be written in regards to both regions but for the sake of simplicity, it will be condensed in order to make this broad subject more narrow. My argument lies in the idea that both the US should invest money in the Northern Triangle and work together in ways they can cooperate for a shared future, I will use some in class readings arguing that media and foreign policy and public opinion are intertwined. Moreover, I will use sources on the web from reputable think tanks and news channels which talk about the Northern Triangle and US foreign policy.

Background

Before talking about the Northern Triangle as a foreign policy issue, it is indispensable get some background information and numbers in regards to the NTC. Although the media has recently highlighted the migration crisis from these countries towards North America, the history goes back many years ago; this is to say the migration has been present for many years but it is in the past few years that it has intensified more, especially when in 2014 there was news about unaccompanied minors coming through the border of the United States. In terms of number of people living in the region, there are approximately 30 million inhabitants in the NTC, this means it's approximately less than 10% percent of the USA's population.¹ The income per capita of all three countries is \$3,603 on average and almost half of the population lives below the poverty line.² Historically, the Northern Triangle countries of Central America have had histories, events and natural disasters which have hampered the economic growth of the region and created unfavorable situations for the most vulnerable. El Salvador had a civil war which lasted from 1979 to 1992. During this period, around 75 thousand people died and many others were forced to flee the country in order to survive and have a new life elsewhere; a big number of those refugees came to the United States. Honduras had a natural disaster when hurricane Mitch hit in the late 90's. They also suffered from the 2009 coup d'état which further destabilized the country resulting in some of the population migrating. Guatemala, alike El Salvador, had a civil war that went from 1960 to 1996.³ The nation also suffers from great inequality and a big gang problem. What's more, a big part of their demographic population is of Maya indigenous population which also lives in poverty, when compared to the rest of the country. Following the aftermath, a big part of the population of these countries has fled to USA in search of a better life. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, there are approximately 2.3 million Salvadorans living in the USA (according to the numbers of 2017). This group includes the immigrants from El Salvador and those who trace their origins to this nation; currently, they are the third largest Hispanic population group (tied with Cubans). A big number of them live in the states of California, Texas and New York. The second demographic group relevant to this study are Hondurans, the number of Hondurans in the country is roughly a

¹ Savoy, C. M. (2021, October 15). *Economic opportunity in the northern triangle*. Economic Opportunity in the Northern Triangle | Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/economic-opportunity-northern-triangle>

² Savoy, C. M. (2021, October 15). *Economic opportunity in the northern triangle*. Economic Opportunity in the Northern

Triangle | Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/economic-opportunity-northern-triangle>

³ Remitly. (2021, December 8). *A brief history of Guatemalan immigration to the U.S.* Remitly. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://blog.remitly.com/lifestyle-culture/brief-history-guatemalan-immigration-the-u-s/>

million, including those who were foreign born and individuals who trace their origin to that country; Texas, Florida and California are the states with the biggest population. Lastly are Guatemalans, the number of them is roughly 1.4 million and the biggest populations are concentrated in California, Florida and Texas, respectively.⁴ All in all there are roughly 5 million people from NTC living in the USA, if we are to sum up the numbers. These are numbers from 2017 statistics which can only suggest that the current numbers might be even higher. Given the current pandemic going on with COVID-19, the number of migrants fleeing from Central America have only increased and they will continue to rise. However, it will get slower depending on how well the challenges of the NTC countries are met.

Importance

As suggested above, there are historical ties between United States and Central America with migration towards the USA going back at least a century. Previous administrations have noted this to be true, including the present one.

This is important because it's a foreign policy issue which affects both the United States and the countries of Central America. Given the poverty, insecurity and lack of a solid economy in the region, their inhabitants have been making their way north. Needless to say, if opportunities are not created at home and if safety is not dealt with, migration will continue and the inhabitants will find a way to flee to avoid persecution. These aspects are fundamental and there has to be a change at the country's level in order for prosperity to happen. The Northern Triangle Migration has been a topic in the news recently in many news channels. The Biden Administration talks about improving the situation of those immigrants from Central America which are already in USA's soil as well as attacking the root of the problem, which lies in addressing the issues in the countries of origin. Vice President Kamala Harris announced in May that there are \$750 millions of dollars in commitments from companies such as: Microsoft, MasterCard, Chobani and Duolingo in order to help boost economy in the region. In an article written by CNN this month, she mentions the efforts they are doing in the region in order to bring more prosperity. "These people are our closest neighbors and partners. We want to do the right thing for root causes, but also as a broad approach to migration," said the Vice President to reporters in a briefing call.⁵

By investing in the people, this will bring prosperity and there will be less of an incentive to migrate. Although migration will take time to slow down, it will create opportunities for the youth and the marginalized by giving them jobs. Chain migration is likely to continue as many migrants will still travel to seek family reunification.

Another pillar which keeps the engine going is the remittances. This is a big part of the economies of the NTC and

they are fueled by remittances, which is money immigrants in the USA send home. This is usually to their families and friends. Thanks to these efforts, it contributes to an important part of the economy which members use to consume and buy goods. In Honduras and El Salvador, almost 20 percent on their economy is based on remittances. In Guatemala it is around 10 percent. This money does not stay in the United States and is usually sent with money orders in Western Union and MoneyGram locations around the country. From what is sent, some families are able to make a living, send their kids to school, consume goods and eat food. If this money would not be sent, the economy would definitely take a bit and become weaker. This is yet another example of how frail the economies in Central America are, to the point they have to rely on money sent from elsewhere in order to make a living for an important part of the citizens. Yet another reason for the United States to invest in the NTC.

From a demographic standpoint, the population is young. 16 million people are under the age of 24. However, 1 out of 3 of the youth are unemployed. Having a young population means their population will increase in the coming years so making sure an inclusive economy reaches everyone can decrease the chances of violence, unemployment and other negative aspects which can hurt the economy. A high population growth rate also means that if the economy does not keep up with this demographic bonus, jobs will not be created, which will create poverty and the poverty will likely lead to the children joining gangs. Hence, the cycle of poverty will not be broken.

Role of Media and Public Opinion

Media plays a very powerful role and influences how people view a topic, indeed. The Northern Triangle may not be a topic many people have heard of. However, it is indispensable for people to have some knowledge on the subject which can, in turn, fight discrimination and other negative consequences. In the United States, this foreign policy issue could be seen differently depending on the person's background and political party. Many people in the United States dislike the idea of undocumented immigrants making their way to up north and defend the idea of protecting the southern border, which is how many of the undocumented migrants make their way into the country. On the other side, many people view it as a humanitarian crisis which needs to be addressed with US responsibility and leadership in the lead. According to the *article The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis* by Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, media does indeed shape public opinion about

⁴ Noe-Bustamante, L., Flores, A., & Shah, S. (2020, January 3). *Facts on Latinos of Guatemalan origin in the U.S.* Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/factsheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-guatemalan-origin-latinos/>

⁵ Wright, J., & Alvarez, P. (2021, December 13). *Harris to announce new private sector investments in Northern Triangle.* CNN. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/13/politics/kamala-harris-private-sector-investments-north-triangle/index.html>

foreign policy.⁶ One can see there is a lot of prejudice towards the people of Central America despite the efforts made recently.

The public opinion is also a big factor in influencing and shaping this foreign policy issue. Depending on people who read about this policy issue, some segments of the American population may not be informed about the Northern Triangle and what it entails. Hence, public opinion can be influenced by media and what they read and consume in social media or the news channels. By relying on media to deliver information in regards to the Northern Triangle Migration crisis, people might not be fully aware of the social and humanitarian issue which is in close proximity of the USA. Similarly, public opinion is sometimes not exposed enough on the issue which does not help with communicating viable solutions that can be taken so the NTC deal with undocumented and irregular migration.

Role of Actors

There are main actors which have had an important role in shaping this Foreign Policy Issue. For starters, the Biden Harris Administration has been crucial in developing this topic. The president and vice president have both mentioned their efforts to invest in the NTC in order to create jobs and good economic prospects for the three countries. On the same note, the governments of the countries have invested in their citizens. President Joe Biden has developed a four year plan with \$4 billion in order to address the factors which trigger migration from Central America.⁷ These would aim to increase private investment in the region, improve security and rule of law, address corruption, prioritize economic development and reduce poverty levels. The Biden Harris Administration also understands that it's not an effort only led by the United States, this is something which the countries of the Northern Triangle also have to take part of. It is important the teamwork in order to work towards prosperity. Currently, around 1% of US Foreign Assistance goes to Central America. A big part of the programs which are spent are used for strengthening law enforcement and security.⁸ The main actors here are the governments of United States and the respective countries of Central America. Others such as the USAID play a crucial part in the development of the region.

Support for Argument

There is substantial information which back up my claims that United States and the Northern Triangle should cooperate and work together, some of these sources come from the news channels and others from think tanks. As

previously mentioned, the Biden Harris Administration understands how important it is for both regions to help each other. Respectable think tanks in the Washington D.C metro area, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) also recognize the importance of not neglecting this region so that it does not become more vulnerable to humanitarian crises, poverty and a source of irregular migration to the USA.

Results

Despite not yet seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, there has already been some results by strengthening security and the rule of law in some countries. For example, homicide rates have gone down in El Salvador by 53% where organizations such as USAID have been present to help. The World Food Program (WFP) has also provided food assistance in a region called The Dry Corridor of El Salvador which has been home to many droughts. Guatemala has also had some results, especially in its agriculture sector, rural farming sales increased 51% and created around 20,000 jobs. This is helping Guatemala transform itself into a USA's partner. 230,000 children were also reached in regards to combating malnutrition. It also helped combat the natural disasters caused by Hurricane Iota by providing emergency shelter, food and hygiene supplies. Lastly, in the case of Honduras, homicide rates have also gone down thanks to efforts by USAID. Homicide rates have been lowered by 73% thanks to combined efforts. At the same time 89,000 people have been lifted out of extreme poverty and disaster relief materials have also been given in light of hurricanes and natural disasters. This shows what a combined effort can do in order to combat the issues in the Northern Triangle.

Threats and Challenge

Currently, there are some threats which can compromise both regions. For starters, COVID-19 has been devastating not only in North America but in the NTC as well. This pandemic has made the country's frail infrastructure even weaker and because of these calamities, poverty levels have risen. A more recent phenomenon has emerged with climate change starting to become a threat to the livelihood of many people in the NTC who rely on agriculture for as a way to make a living. In Honduras, for example, 33 percent of the economy comes from agriculture. According to data from the World Bank, approximately 2.1 million people, or 1 percent of the population of NTC, will be forced to flee due to factors related to climate change. Before the year 2050, the region's temperature is set to rise one degree.⁹ Floods,

⁶ Baum, M. A., & Potter, P. B. K. (2007, November 7). The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www-annualreviews-org.proxy-ygw.wrlc.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060406.214132>

⁷ Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website. (2020, August 4). *The Biden plan to build security and prosperity in partnership with the people of Central America*. Joe Biden for

President: Official Campaign Website. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://joebiden.com/centralamerica/>

⁸ *U.S. assistance to Central America promotes security, economic development, and rule of law*. USGLC. (2021, June 8). Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.usglc.org/us-assistance-to-central-america/>

⁹ *U.S. assistance to Central America promotes security, economic development, and rule of law*. USGLC. (2021, June 8).

drought and unpredictable weather patterns are set to increase in the region. In consequence, it will cause crop failure affecting the lives of many people who live off farming and agriculture in order to subsist.¹⁰ Already there are double the number of people facing hunger in Guatemala, in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

Another big challenge will be informing the public diplomacy and the media which also comes with its sets of challenges. We live in a world where we increasingly consume our information through social media and other sites in order to get news. Needless to say, disinformation is prevalent and it definitely matters.¹¹ This influences public diplomacy, especially in countries like the USA where there is. During the Biden administration, there has been a lot of attention in the southern border crisis and migration which was also a hot topic during the Trump Administration.

In regards to crime, the challenge is very hard as one is dealing with a gang problem that affects all three countries at once. At the heart of the problem is the MS-13 gang. They were born in Los Angeles in the 1980's and started spreading in the East and Central part of the city. As they become more powerful, a lot of them started to get jailed in big numbers in the late 1980's and early 1990's.¹² By the mid 1990's, foreign born residents guilty of committing crimes were captured and deported; a big chunk of these were sent to the respective countries of origin El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Once they reached their country of birth, however, the government of these countries was not able to cope with the influx of people coming from abroad so these MS-13 members started growing and getting more powerful. Of course, the vast majority of them were not able to integrate into Central American society because they had been living in the United States for such a long period of time that all they knew was United States' culture. Nowadays, the infamous MS-13 gang is spread in many parts of the world. However, it is prevalent in the Northern Triangle and the United States. They have infiltrated themselves in all sorts of ways which affect the day to day lives of ordinary people. This organization also operates with extortion which means people have to pay them in order for them to not attack and intimidate others. Many of them also work with the Mexican mafia and control drugs. Of course, the people most affected by the problem of extortion and vulnerability are the poorest inhabitants of these countries. Thanks to their ruthless nature, the Northern Triangle has become a region with high homicide rates. Indeed, as noted throughout the paper, the gang problem is a formidable challenge which needs to be attacked if the Northern Triangle is to become a prosperous region.

In terms of government challenges, the key question also lies in consistency. How long can these changes be

implemented? Will they have impacts which have long lasting results in the future? These are all important details to consider given that past administrations have not been able to totally end the migration crisis. On the same token, how will the Central American countries handle their endemic corruption? What will be the measures taken to assure their growth can be sustainable and not just end up in the pockets of the few and elite? There are definitely considerations to have in mind when it comes to addressing weak institutions where there are broken law systems.

Conclusion

This paper outlined a public policy issue which is of great importance to the United States and has been in the news lately. The Northern Triangle is located in the American continent, relatively close to USA. Both North America and Central America have economic and historical ties which have triggered the migration north for many years thanks to characteristics like proximity, chain migration and having immigrants who are looking to unite with their families. Humans migrate wherever they can have a better future give the best to their families; United States is generally this place for people from the NTC. However, in the last few has it only intensified and with the COVID-19 pandemic even more so. As mentioned earlier in the paper, migration from the Northern Triangle to the USA is not a new phenomenon and has been happening for a long time in different waves. However, it has been in the past few years that their numbers have increased and the people fleeing violence, poverty and persecution has skyrocketed. In light of the recent pandemic, the situation has gotten worse as COVID-19 has increased the existing inequality in the region and weakened their economies. As if poverty and violence were not enough, climate change is already taking a toll in the frail region and the people fleeing weather pattern changes is only set to increase in the coming years. Of course, there are many challenges ahead to tackle. Poverty, corruption and violence all have to be managed in order to create livable places for the people in these countries. United States' presidential administration has committed in helping aid the economy of the region, according to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. One must also take into account the power that media has in influencing the actors and people in charge of these crucial policy issues. What would happen if this region becomes neglected? The immigration crisis is only going to increase and these refugees will be seeking the USA as a place to be safe and sound. It is indispensable that the Biden Administration works with the presidents of all 3 nations for a plan which can benefit both regions so there is prosperity for all. Support from reputable sources such as the CSIS, the World Bank, the Biden Harris Administration and the Migration

Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.usglc.org/us-assistance-to-central-america/>

¹⁰ Rosario, A. (n.d.). *Climate change is hitting Central America hard. here's why it matters*. The Years Project. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://theyearsproject.com/learn/news/climate-change-is-hitting-central-america-hard-heres-why-it-matters/>

¹¹ Robinson, P. (n.d.). *Eresgw-WRLC-org.proxygw.wrlc.org*. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from https://eresgw-wrlc-org.proxygw.wrlc.org/x/docs/gelm/glaser_charles/Dean-Arresting%20the%20Opposition%20-%202020.pdf

¹² InSight Crime. (2021, September 22). *MS13*. InSight Crime. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13-profile/>

Policy Institute all mention this as a foreign policy issue. If investment is taken seriously, the region could become an example for other places around the globe of how they can go from being backwaters to prosperous places where people want to live and thrive.

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