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U.S. Foreign Assistance to Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

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Current proposals in Congress would cut foreign assistance in response to the crisis at the border. As Congress considers any measures, it should be careful not to disrupt programs that serve U.S. interests and address the security conditions that have contributed to this problem.

In particular, programs such as those run by the Department of Defense and other relevant federal agencies also contribute to security assistance efforts.

Regional Security Conditions

It cannot be denied that Mexico and Central America's Northern Triangle countries—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—are all facing chronic citizen and economic insecurity crises. Rampant corruption and weak state institutions have made it virtually impossible to combat threats posed by violent transnational gangs and organized criminal groups. Coupled with the issue of endemic corruption, the regional debt crises and weak state institutions plague the region. Honduras has the world's highest homicide rates, averaging 91 per 100,000 citizens. El Salvador is fourth in the world with an average of 41 per 100,000, and Guatemala is fifth at 40 per 100,000. (In comparison, the U.S. average is five per 100,000.) Located along a critical trafficking route,

the isthmus is particularly vulnerable to illicit smuggling. Honduras alone is a layover spot for upwards of 79 percent of northward-bound drug flights.

Despite declines in Mexico's overall homicide rates, the threat that crime and violence pose has not diminished. Mexican cartels operate as full-scale criminal enterprises, controlling vast systems of illicit distribution networks throughout the U.S., Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. They account for the majority of illicit drugs in the U.S., and they are also involved in human smuggling and trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and arms trafficking.¹

The Utility of Foreign Security Assistance

U.S. security objectives in Central America are codified in the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which focuses on:

- Creating safe streets for citizens in the region;
- Disrupting the movements of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America;
- Supporting the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments;
- Re-establishing effective state presence and security in communities at risk; and
- Fostering enhanced levels of security coordination and cooperation among nations in the region.²

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4245>

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Implementation and funding for these programs come from four State Department accounts: International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE); Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Relations Programs; Foreign Military Financing; and the Economic Support Fund. In addition, there are various agencies implementing CARSİ objectives outside the State Department's funding purview: the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Department of the Treasury. A number of security assistance accounts, such as the International Military Education and Training (which promotes professional military education) and the Democracy Fund supplement these initiatives.

U.S. security cooperation with Mexico is codified in the Merida Initiative, which is grounded on four pillars:

1. Disrupting the operational capacity of organized crime;
2. Sustaining the rule of law and respect for human rights in Mexico;
3. Creating a 21st-century border (which includes support for securing Mexico's porous 600-mile-long border with Guatemala); and
4. Building strong and resilient communities.³

Like CARSİ, INCLE is the dominant source account in Merida. Following the State Department and USAID, the DOD represents the largest foreign assistance provider. Concerns about violence levels in Mexico and drug-related violence in the U.S. has prompted high levels of cooperation between the U.S.

and Mexican security forces. Joint operations have resulted in numerous arrests of high-profile drug kingpins and record-breaking seizures.⁴ In addition to joint operations in Mexico, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Joint Task Force-Bravo operates out of the Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, conducting and supporting activities against transnational organized crime and joint military engagement activities.

How Congress Should Protect U.S. Interests in Mexico and Central America

Rather than cutting foreign assistance, the U.S. should be looking for ways to better engage with regional partners in Latin America. The U.S., Mexico, and countries in Central America all have a shared interest in regional security. Recent developments in the region offer opportunities for expanding security cooperation.

Honduras's recently inaugurated president, conservative Juan Orlando Hernandez, has emphasized a willingness to improve relations with the U.S. after the Obama Administration's mishandling of the 2009 political crisis.⁵ Additionally, the U.S.'s renewal of a market-oriented aid program, the Millennium Challenge Cooperation compact, is a positive step forward. Congress also should:

- **Recognize that defense cuts have adversely affected the U.S.'s drug interdiction capabilities.** Defense budget cuts are reducing the U.S.'s ability to intercept maritime trafficking, and as a result, profits continue to fuel Mexican cartels and Central American gangs. Current asset shortfalls left the U.S. unable to prevent 25 percent of suspected maritime drug smuggling in fiscal year (FY) 2013.⁶

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://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf> (accessed June 3, 2014).

2. Government Accountability Office, "Central America, U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives," September 2013, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/658145.pdf> (accessed July 3, 2014).

3. Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin Finklea, "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Merida Initiative and Beyond," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, April 8, 2014, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41349.pdf> (accessed July 3, 2014).

4. *Ibid.*

5. 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>.

6. See 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>.

- **Support Mexican and Guatemalan border security efforts.** In 2013, SOUTHCOM supported the new Guatemalan Interagency Task Force, which provides infrastructure and operational anti-trafficking support along the Mexico–Guatemalan border. Yet despite the heroic efforts of U.S. armed services, civilian personnel, and regional partners, congressional withholding requirements continue to hinder security cooperation efforts.
- **Increase security cooperation with Honduras.** As the home of the world’s highest murder rate, Honduras is also the largest source of unlawful immigrants. Yet U.S. restrictions on security assistance have been in place since FY 2012.
- **Allow Honduras to repair its fleet of F-5 jet fighters.** Congress blocked Honduras’s recent attempts to contract Israel’s repair services. Repairing this fleet would help offset the burden on the U.S. and support the country’s much-needed aerial interdiction capabilities.

Moving Forward

In recent years, chronic insecurity in Mexico and Central America has threatened regional stability and U.S. security interests. This recent crisis on the southwest border has raised concerns about not only U.S. immigration policy and border security, but also the utility of foreign assistance.

When used wisely, foreign aid is a key national security tool. It ensures U.S. partnerships, promotes like-minded democratic institutions, and provides the U.S. with leverage abroad. Congress should understand that as security conditions in the region continue to deteriorate, cutting foreign aid would undermine the U.S.’s security interests.

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