



Central America's Northern Triangle: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021

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Instability in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (the Northern Triangle of Central America; see **Figure 1**) is among the most pressing challenges for U.S. policymakers in the Western Hemisphere. The United States historically has played a prominent role in the political and economic development of the region, which has long struggled with widespread insecurity, fragile democratic institutions, and high levels of poverty and inequality.

Already difficult living conditions have deteriorated over the past year due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and two hurricanes. The World Bank *estimates* the Honduran economy contracted by 9.7% in 2020 and the Salvadoran and Guatemalan economies contracted by 7.2% and 3.5%, respectively. Approximately **2.9 million** Hondurans, **1 million** Salvadorans, and **3.7 million** Guatemalans are contending with crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. Although the pandemic and government lockdowns initially disrupted criminal activities, reports *suggest* domestic violence increased and gangs and illicit trafficking groups quickly adapted to the changed circumstances. Some government officials have sought to take advantage of the disorder, allegedly engaging in *corruption*, repressing *dissent*, and undermining the *rule of law* to advance their personal and political interests.

These interrelated socioeconomic, security, and political challenges could have far-reaching implications for the United States. Although the Biden Administration has urged potential irregular migrants not to make the “*dangerous journey*,” U.S. authorities have encountered *growing numbers* of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans at the Southwest border. Many analysts expect these mixed migration flows of asylum-seekers and economic migrants to swell over the course of 2021, especially once governments ease COVID-19-related border restrictions. Conditions in the region also could affect illicit trafficking patterns, as some analysts *warn* that criminal organizations may exploit the situation to further tighten their grip on the “economies, people, and politics” of the Northern Triangle.

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Figure I. Map of Central America

Source: Congressional Research Service.

Since FY2016, Congress has appropriated more than \$3.6 billion of foreign assistance through the [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#) to improve conditions in the region and address the underlying drivers of migration. The Obama Administration devised the strategy after a surge of unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle arrived at the Southwest border in 2014. The Trump Administration maintained the initiative but [suspended](#) most foreign assistance for the Northern Triangle in March 2019. It reprogrammed \$396 million to other foreign policy priorities and withheld most of the remaining assistance for more than a year while it negotiated a series of [border security and asylum agreements](#) with the Northern Triangle governments. The aid suspension resulted in U.S. agencies closing or scaling back programs throughout the region.

U.S. policy in Central America is now at a crossroads. The United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F), signed into law in December 2020, directs the State Department, in coordination with other U.S. agencies, to develop a new five-year strategy to advance inclusive economic growth, combat corruption, strengthen democratic institutions, and improve security conditions in the region. On February 2, 2021, President Biden issued [Executive Order \(E.O.\) 14010](#), directing his Administration to begin preparing a strategy to address the root causes of Central American migration. The [proposed](#) U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 (S. 348/H.R. 1177) would authorize \$4 billion over four years to implement the strategy.

As Congress considers potential authorization and appropriations legislation, it may assess the effectiveness of the programs implemented under the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. It is difficult to evaluate the full impact of that strategy, because congressional holds on funding [delayed implementation](#) until mid-2017 and the Trump Administration suspended funding for many programs less than two years later. Nevertheless, a 2019 Government Accountability Office [study](#) and a 2020 State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [progress report](#) suggest U.S. programs achieved mixed results.

U.S. efforts to foster structural changes in the Northern Triangle have faced significant resistance from a small but powerful group of elites who benefit from the status quo. Their opposition to anti-corruption and good governance reforms has left Northern Triangle institutions without the [resources](#) or capabilities necessary to respond to the region's challenges and susceptible to [cooptation](#) by private and criminal interests. It also contributes to a [sense of hopelessness](#) among citizens of the region that conditions could ever improve. Accordingly, many analysts argue that combatting systemic corruption should be the U.S. government's top priority in the region. Among other policies, they [recommend](#) increasing political and

financial support to reformers inside and outside of government while using diplomatic pressure and targeted sanctions to spur political will among those resistant to change. Although Congress has placed anti-corruption conditions on assistance to the Northern Triangle governments and has created other [anti-corruption sanctions authorities](#), prior Administrations have appeared reluctant to use those policy tools in the region. The United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act requires the President to produce an annual list of corrupt actors, due by June 2021, and directs the President to impose visa sanctions on those identified.

Sustained improvements in the region—and at the Southwest border—likely would require years of concerted efforts by the Northern Triangle countries and international donors. Although there is some [evidence](#) that foreign assistance can alleviate some drivers of forced displacement, such as violence and food insecurity, economic migration appears to be more linked to long-term demographic and development trends. To manage migration pressures in the near term, some analysts [argue](#) that policymakers should increase legal U.S. pathways for temporary laborers and asylum-seekers while working with partners throughout the Western Hemisphere to strengthen humanitarian protection systems. Pursuant to [E.O. 14010](#), which calls for the development of a collaborative migration management strategy, the Administration has [suspended](#) the 2019 asylum agreements with the Northern Triangle countries, [reestablished](#) the Central American Minors program to reunite children with parents in the United States, and [begun processing](#) asylum-seekers previously returned to Mexico. Congress may consider additional measures, including S. 348/H.R. 1177 and H.R. 6, which would modify the legal pathways available to those in the region and adjust the status of some Central American immigrants in the United States.

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