

Biden-Harris Foreign Policy towards the Central American region

Velia Govaere
U.S. Institutes for Scholars





Introduction

1

Overview of US Foreign Policy in the region and its problems.

2

The situation in Central America, especially in the Northern Triangle.

3

The Biden-Harris foreign policy in the region.

Overview of U.S. foreign policy in CA

- The United States has been involved in the political evolution of Central America since the California Gold Rush of 1850 (huge undertaking from east to west coast),
- The Accessory Transit Company opened a route: by steamer from NY to the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, from there by river, lake and 5 km of land, to a port in the pacific, where another steamer travelled to SF.
- Of course, Nicaraguan 's authorities wanted a FEE....
- In 1854, for the first time CA entered U.S. political history when the U.S. Navy bombarded a Nicaraguan port, to ensure the regular operation of ATC.
- Thus began the strategic political interest in the region: the possibility of building an interoceanic canal, which was finally constructed in Panama in 1914.

U.S. foreign policy in CA

Since then, the United States has had an enormous interest in the political stability of the region, “their backyard”

- During the Cold War, the United States looked with suspicion at social and democratic struggles. Cuba was very present in its mind, and they feared that the fall of Central American dictators would result in the establishment of communist regimes in the region.
- While Panama and Costa Rica have had a predominantly democratic and peaceful political evolution, with consequently high levels of human development, from Nicaragua to Guatemala, the situation has always been one of great instability, with military dictatorships, enormous social inequality and poverty levels that even today reach up to 50% of the population.
- 47-year Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua after an intervention that produced iconic figures as Sandino.

U.S. foreign policy in CA

Since then, the United States has had an enormous interest in the political stability of the region, “their backyard”

- In 1977, Jimmy Carter changed his foreign policy to the defense of human rights and democracy.
- Two years later, in 1979, the Sandinista revolution against Somoza triumphs in Nicaragua, and the rest of northern Central America erupts in civil wars (Northern Triangle)
- Reagan supports the dictatorships and support for the counterrevolution in Nicaragua.
- The entire 1980s saw the efforts of pacification in the region, due in part to a regional effort, lead by Costa Rica.

Overview of U.S. foreign policy in CA

All this history explains, in part, the political fragility of the region. It also explains how the United States came to understand the need to address the economic development of the region to generate welfare for the population and political stability.

Even if Reagan supported the dictatorships, at the same time he established a special system of preferential tariff concessions (CBI) to encourage U.S. investment and promote exports (83-2006).

This regime stabilized with an FTA (CAFTA).

The situation in Central America stems from this long-suffering history.

I will focus the migration problems from the region to USA on the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador

Why??

- ✓ Because Nicaragua is in Sandinista hands and their population tends to go to the south and
- ✓ Costa Rica and Panama are relatively stable and prosperous

North triangle

- Guatemala
- El Salvador
- Honduras



I will focus on four main parameters:

1. At the **political level**: regimes highly corrupt, inept and fragile under the influence of drug trafficking.
2. **Socially**, the region is among the poorest in the world/huge social inequality/low education/high unemployment and a history of violence (gangs or drug trade).
3. **Economically**, it has low competitiveness, focused on agricultural products, with deep territorial gaps.
4. **Environmentally**, CA is in one of the world's fiercest hurricane paths and is the world's youngest land layer still subject to earthquakes, plate movements and active volcanoes. Natural disasters are compounded by climate change.

All these layers forces many families to look for a better future in US.

Level of poverty



The Biden-Harris Foreign Policy

- Biden is the first president in U.S. history to have personal experience in the Central American region. Not only has he been a congressional opponent of aggressive U.S. policies in Central America, but he personally addressed Obama's agenda for the region.
- The Obama administration understood that the origin of migration was rooted in social problems, understood the complexities of the region and the necessity of massive economic support.
- Trump administration focused its fight to prevent migration with the construction of a wall. Economic support to the region was interrupted.
- Add hurricanes and for the first time in memory there were caravans of tens of thousands of people crossing CA and Mexico on foot to reach the US. And then the pandemic came...

The Biden-Harris Foreign Policy

- The Biden-Harris program has as an important asset: Biden's own experience in the region.
- The Obama administration addressed social and economic issues but was hampered by corruption. Economic support was monopolized by large groups close to power.
- With Biden-Harris, the problem is understood to have three main roots:
 1. Promoting investment and economic development
 2. Supporting social problems with access to opportunities.
 3. Fighting corruption and drug trafficking.

It is the first time that the USA has a holistic approach, and it sees its Achilles Heel: the corruption of political regimes.

Questions?

