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The Northern Triangle Needs Some TLC

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As the incoming Biden administration looks to Latin America, the "Northern Triangle" countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras rank near the top in the risk of crises that could impact U.S. domestic politics, as well as lost opportunities for the U.S. to strengthen security, prosperity and its position in the hemisphere.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the region hard, with economies tied to the United States hurt by decreased imports, investment, tourism and remittances, and strengthened border closures. El Salvador's GDP alone is expected to [contract 8.7%](#) in 2020. Honduras will [shrink by 7.1%](#).

Northern Triangle governments with limited resources and the ability to borrow were ill prepared to compensate fragile small businesses and large informal sectors for long periods for the disruptions of the pandemic, nor respond effectively as the gangs became the [enforcers of curfews](#) and [distributors of aid](#) in some neighborhoods. Criminality is likely to become worse as social control measures are lifted and street life resumes with more desperate populations.

As fiscal realities set in across the region, governments will be obligated to make difficult budget cuts, while publics no longer obliged to maintain social distance, mobilize politically to express their indignation about the lack of jobs, corruption and poor government performance exposed by the COVID-19 crisis. Municipal workers in El Salvador shut down streets in October [over not being paid](#), while protesters in Guatemala [set fire to Guatemala's Congress](#) over the new budget.

In the context of such challenges, the PRC is poised to continue the advance that it begun in the region with the 2018-2019 diplomatic flips by Panama, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador. Although delayed by U.S. pushback and the pandemic, the PRC has promised multiple investment projects to El Salvador, from a [water treatment plant](#), to a library, to [tourism infrastructure on El Salvador's coast](#). A China-built and -operated port facility and associated free trade zone at [La Union](#) remains a possibility as well. Honduras, which continues to recognize Taiwan instead of the PRC, has been tempted by [Chinese investment in the "dry canal"](#) transport corridor being constructed to connect the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, complimenting the PRC role in the construction of the [Patuca III hydroelectric facility](#).

For the incoming Biden administration, the Northern Triangle should be a place to achieve early, badly needed victories. Biden, as vice president, played an important personal role in the Alliance for Prosperity initiative for the region. He is reportedly [considering temporary protected status](#) for Guatemalan and Honduran immigrants in light of damage from Hurricanes [Eta and Iota](#), as well as the [reversal of Trump-era immigration policies](#), including [restrictions on asylum seekers](#).

If President Trump's often conflictive posture on immigration at times impeded relations with the Northern Triangle, the Achille's heel for the incoming Democrats is arguably the presumption of guilt with which some treat the region's political and economic elites and security forces. The COVID-19 relief bill passed at the end of 2020 [unilaterally cut funds for security assistance](#) for El Salvador, and threatened to do so for Guatemala

and Honduras, kicking the stool out from under the legs of the U.S.'s partners there, at their time of their greatest need.

While the actual amount of security assistance cut by the provision is not substantial, it will contribute to worries by Central American elites about what is coming next. Will a Biden administration pressure Guatemala to reinstate a new version of the United Nations anti-corruption body CICIG, [expelled from the country](#) by the previous government of Jimmy Morales? Will it press for the reinstatement with expanded powers of the OAS counterpart body MACCIH in Honduras (whose mandate was allowed to [expire in January 2020](#))?

In El Salvador, will the Administration push back against President Nayib Bukele for authoritarian impulses such as bringing the military [into the Salvadoran Congress in February 2020](#)? In Honduras, will the independent investigation of the U.S. Justice Department indict sitting President Juan Orlando Hernandez, publicly [named during the trial](#) of his brother Tony, for suspected association with organized crime?

The millions of Northern Triangle immigrants in the US, associated remittances, and trade have long made good relations with the US vital for their governments. US leaders have become accustomed to submissive, accommodating responses by their governments, whether on immigration, or corruption and human rights.

In the current environment, however, if the recent cutoff of security assistance is followed by a disrespectfully hard line on corruption and human rights and a lack of prioritization for a the needed assistance promised by then-candidate Biden, the result could be the worst of all worlds: The post-COVID-19 easing of border controls will produce a new outflow of migrants, with an increasingly defiant Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico reluctant to invest his nation's resources to prevent them from reaching the U.S.

Broke and economically devastated Northern Triangle governments, beset by the threat of U.S. sanctions, and seeing little prospect for U.S. aid, they will be tempted to turn to PRC loans and projects, providing easy money for elites to pay off their supporters and line their own pockets. It is vital for U.S. Republicans and Democrats to work together on a new engagement that holds Northern Triangle governments to account, but that is both generous and respectful of their conduct of security and internal affairs until they clearly betray that trust.

Dr. Ellis is Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views expressed herein are strictly his own. His work focuses on security and defense issues, including transnational organized crime, populism and the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. Dr. Ellis has published over 270 works, including four books and has presented his work in 27 countries. He has testified on multiple occasions regarding Latin America and the Caribbean before the U.S. Congress and his work regularly appears in the media in both the U.S. and the region. Through his work, Dr. Ellis calls attention to the strategic importance of Latin America and the Caribbean for the United States through bonds of geography, commerce and family and how the prosperity and security of the U.S. are tied to that of its partners in the region. [Read Evan Ellis' Reports — More Here.](#)

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