



# Remilitarization in Central America: A Comparative and Regional Analysis

For the Rockefeller Brothers Fund  
By IBI Consultants

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## Executive Summary

This report is an anthology of studies examining the remilitarization processes in the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) undertaken by leading academic researchers in each country with the support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. In these countries, the United States is and has historically been the dominant external actor. As a comparative case we examine Nicaragua, more closely aligned with Russia. In every country the military had either governed directly or through civilian proxies for most of the previous 150 years.

In the 1990s, the negotiations that ended the region's three civil wars brought the first steps toward real democratic reforms, allowing Central America to pivot away from the civil wars, revolutionary struggles, and bloody proxy battles of the Cold War. Each country turned to building new, fragile liberal democratic institutions. Comprehensive structural, constitutional and doctrinal reforms to the military as an institution were rightly understood to be foundational for building more inclusive, equitable societies with functioning institutions governed by the rule of law and subject to democratic norms.

Today, the once-hopeful foundation is eroding, fueling rising authoritarianism and parallel crisis of legitimacy, rising human rights abuses, massive corruption, deinstitutionalization, and waves of migration to the United States and elsewhere to escape the new, destructive return to the past. It increasingly drives scarce resources to militaries that have no credible external threat to combat.

The stakes are now very high: Whether democratic forces can sustainably reclaim lost ground against the military and authoritarian forces seeking to return to the past, or whether the past 25 years of fragile democratic progress is a reversible historic anomaly that can be washed away.

Despite these stakes, U.S. policymakers and other regional stakeholders barely reference remilitarization as a root cause of the region's crisis. The Biden administration has unveiled three major strategies that could and should address the phenomenon yet none even mentioned the return of the militaries to prominent roles in internal security, economic development, and political interference as fostering authoritarianism.

In every country, the current situation culminated in watershed events that consolidated the remilitarization paradigm. At each rupture point, the military and the elites strengthened their alliance through each side's willingness to protect the other and reknit the old model. In each case the military reaped enormous economic benefits, in increased budgets and access to profits from key civilian sectors of the economy.

There is no question that the Northern Triangle faced enormous security challenges throughout the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The mass deportation in the 1990s of Central Americans who served U.S. prison sentences to their home countries was a key factor. As described in the studies, the post-war governments immediately defaulted to empowering the militaries to address these challenges, rather than addressing the root causes of the violence through the lens of incomplete reforms, stark lack of political will, mounting corruption and the under-resourcing of key non-military actors such as civilian police, prison reform, judicial reform, and anti-corruption institutions.

In each case the military was called back to internal security roles despite the new reforms. Initially, military intervention was at least nominally under the command of civilian police officers. Over time, the military – often with the encouragement and funding from the United States to support counter-narcotics missions – became dominant.

The reliance on the military rather than addressing underlying socio-economic problems has led to a policy driven by the understanding that the solutions to the growing social problems and high crime rates are a problem of territorial occupation by state forces, leading to more violence and minimizing the potential impact of non-violent policy initiatives.

In El Salvador we see the military playing a key and unconstitutional role in the mass arrests of 53,000 alleged gang members carried out during the ongoing State of Exception invoked by President Nayib Bukele in March 2022. In a time of deep economic depression and Covid pandemic collapse the military is seeing historic increases in its budget and personnel while the now-servile judicial system arbitrarily closes cases of historic human rights abuses that implicate the military.

In Guatemala the military's increased role and influence disproportionately impacts indigenous communities and municipalities who live near foreign operated commercial mines benefitting the political elite, as is exemplified in the State of Siege levied on El Estor, Izabal. It also impacts communities living in areas with a significant drug trafficking presence.

In Honduras, the increased reliance on the military to respond to public security challenges disproportionately impacts communities in Gracias a Dios, Olancho, and along the Caribbean Sea, where drug trafficking thrives in combination with the high concentration of land ownership. Indigenous communities and environmental activists face significant threats as they advocate for hard-won land rights against the desires of the oligarchic group there. The military's systemic violence against women and targeted harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals, is visible there.

In Nicaragua, the regime's chief ally, Russia, has fully embraced the authoritarian practices of the Ortega family and provided both weapons and intelligence equipment to keep the regime in power through the use of force. The armed forces are a key part of the widespread repression while carrying out predatory economic extraction in the mining, timber and fishing industries as the price for loyalty to the regime.

As the researchers show in these studies, the region is close to a tipping point beyond which recovering even the fragile and flawed democratic processes will take decades and enormous resources to achieve. This would not only be a tragedy for the region, which is still recovering from the conflicts that tore its societies apart, but also for U.S. strategic interests and the stability of the Western Hemisphere.

When the tide of turning back military influence was on the rise, it grew to engulf most of the hemisphere. The reverse is also true. As Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala return to the structures of the past, the lessons will be learned, posing a looming tragedy that must be addressed at all levels, whether locally, nationally, and beyond.

## Introduction and Framework of Discussion

Three decades ago, Central America embarked on a historic pivot away from the civil wars, revolutionary struggles, and bloody proxy battles of the Cold War. Each country turned instead to building new and fragile liberal democratic governance systems. The hope was that the years of war and more than a century where economic elites exercised political dominance through military governments and repression would yield to more open, inclusive, stable and participatory systems. The historic new paths were supposed to usher in hope and the opportunity for equitable economic growth. In the countries we examine in this report – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua – the military had either governed directly or through civilian proxies for most of the previous 150 years.

The armed forces were able to maintain their hold on power for decades through a symbiotic relationship with the small, economically powerful groups whose interests the military protected. These two blocs conflated their joint interests with the country's national interest, ignoring the greater good of most of the population. This governance model created a tenuous stability through repression and extreme economic disparity that ultimately erupted into the region's bloody civil wars in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, the negotiations that ended the region's three civil wars brought the first steps toward real democratic reforms. Most importantly, many reforms were specifically written to curb the military's role in each country, dramatically slashing their budgets, size, economic prerogatives, and political influence. Comprehensive structural, constitutional and doctrinal reforms to the military as an institution were rightly understood to be foundational for building more inclusive, equitable societies with functioning institutions governed by the rule of law and subject to democratic norms.

Today, the once-hopeful foundation is rapidly eroding across the political spectrum, from self-declared socialism in Nicaragua to the right-wing government in Guatemala to the ideologically agnostic populism in El Salvador. This erosion is fueling rising authoritarianism and parallel crisis of legitimacy, rising human rights abuses, massive corruption, deinstitutionalization, and waves of migration to the United States and elsewhere to escape the new, destructive return to the past. It increasingly drives the allocation of scarce resources to militaries that face no credible external threat to defend against.

The stakes now are enormously high. In the balance is whether democratic forces can reclaim lost ground against the military and authoritarian forces seeking to return to the past, or whether the past 25 years of fragile democratic progress, born of devastating civil wars, are shown to be a reversible historic anomaly that can be washed away.

Despite these stakes, U.S. policymakers and other regional stakeholders barely reference remilitarization as a root cause of the region's destabilization. The commonly identified drivers of violence, economic inequality, social exclusion, lack of opportunity, and insecurity are valid. But a key common element paralyzing meaningful progress and choking off democratic institutions is the military's return to its alliance with historic elites and their political allies. This deeply rooted alliance rightly recognizes that real democratic institutions working together to govern in the public interest are an existential threat to elites and their allies' historic privilege and near monopoly on the country's resources.

## Methodology and Purpose of Analysis

This report is an anthology of research studies written by leading academic researchers in each country for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, examining the remilitarization processes in the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), where the United States is and has historically been the dominant external actor. We also examine Nicaragua, more closely aligned with Russia.

The purpose is to provide an analysis of the remilitarization in Central America from a Central American perspective, using a range of viewpoints on the different contexts faced by each country and diverse sectors of civil society, supplemented by an overview of common themes and U.S. policy in the region. Each chapter presents a detailed country report with analysis by expert in-country researchers, data, and perspectives by individuals who have worked in or monitored regional security trends for decades.

The RBF support also provided a key regional resource – an opportunity to create a community of researchers to learn from each other and safely discuss the common themes and unique developments of each country. This is vital at a time when academic freedom is being sharply curtailed and individuals carrying out the research are themselves at risk of imprisonment and censure. Because this, our lead researchers in El Salvador and Nicaragua are not named as authors despite their outstanding work.

As a comparative case study to the three long-time allies of the United States in the Northern Triangle, the report looks at the remilitarization in Nicaragua to assess a process where the United States is far less involved. The Reagan administration funded the Contra insurgency, and the United States had a robust presence in the first post-war decade, but has had little influence for the past 15 years. During the armed conflict there, the Soviet Union and Cuba played significant roles in supporting the revolutionary Sandinista Front government. The regime's current alliance with Russia plays a significant role in supporting the consolidation of the most authoritarian regime in the region and empowering its military to repress any dissent and jail hundreds of opposition leaders and activists.

Regional themes and the U.S. policy response to those themes, which we discuss here, are illustrative of important commonalities that cut across the country studies in this anthology. While there are clearly many unique differences in how this process manifests in each country, there are also clear patterns and common playbooks being used that show that there is a larger pattern a democratic regression underway.

For example, as these studies document, in each country significant parts of the military budget are now withheld from the public. Officials do this by classifying it as secret even though by law it should not be; simply not reporting it, though financial reporting is required by law; or omitting significant revenue streams that end up in the military coffers after being transferred through other government institutions. Even with these enormous data gaps, the formal military budgets across the region are increasing rapidly despite there being no external threat to national sovereignty.

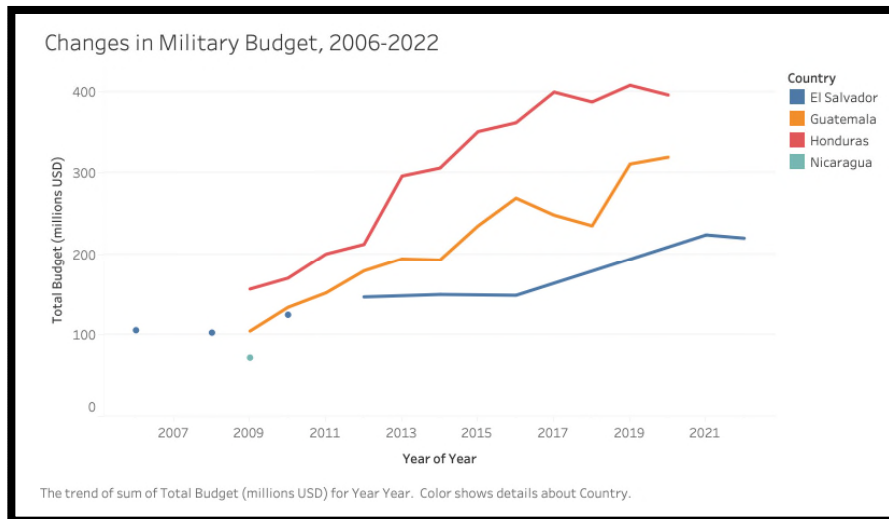


Figure 1: Officially reported military budgets year to year. Official reports often omit significant revenue streams (Compiled by IBI Consultants)

For those individuals and institutions involved in policy analysis, diplomacy, foreign aid, or regional coordination, a broader understanding of the of common themes in the context of the history of the region may be useful. Analysis of common trends can help decision-makers understand which forces are greater than any specific institution or country and may require more extensive coordination involving international regulatory bodies as well as local or national civil society groups.

In every case the current situation represents a cumulative process. Initial warning flags were downplayed, and illegal actions by the military rationalized or ignored, leading emboldened actors to take specific, identifiable events that mark a consolidation of the remilitarization paradigm. At each rupture point, the alliance between the military and the economic/political elites is strengthened through each side's willingness to protect the other and recover the old governance model.

The absence of such cross-cutting analysis and comparative study is evident in the current state of U.S. policy toward the region. The Biden administration has unveiled three strategies that could and should address the remilitarization as a key factor driving the regional crisis. Yet none of the major policy initiatives even mentioned the return of the militaries to prominent roles in internal security, economic development, and political interference as a root cause of the new authoritarian mode that is becoming embedded in the region. In addition to formal strategy statements, the Engel List, mandated by Congress to sanction corrupt and anti-democratic actors, barely touches the military leadership.

## U.S. Policy on Corruption and Militarization in Central America

The United States played a very large role in arming, training and funding multiple groups during the armed conflicts of the 1980s. With the end of the Cold War, the United States, under multiple administrations, then became the leading external actor funding often-flawed efforts to reform the militaries and develop democratic institutions to sustain the fragile progress that was made in the 1990s. U.S. regional influence has waned dramatically in recent years and current policy has not

managed to understand and confront the growing militarization and authoritarianism coherently and effectively.

A key example of this lies in the Engel List designations of corrupt and anti-democratic actors in Central America first released by the U.S. State Department in July 2021 and updated in July 2022. The list, formally known as the State Department's *Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report* was created to name, shame and revoke the visas of leaders of in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua who have been credibly accused of corruption and undermining democracy in the region. It thus provides an important perspective regarding the U.S.'s awareness of corruption in the region, a focus that seems to center on political administrations, the judiciary, and congress.

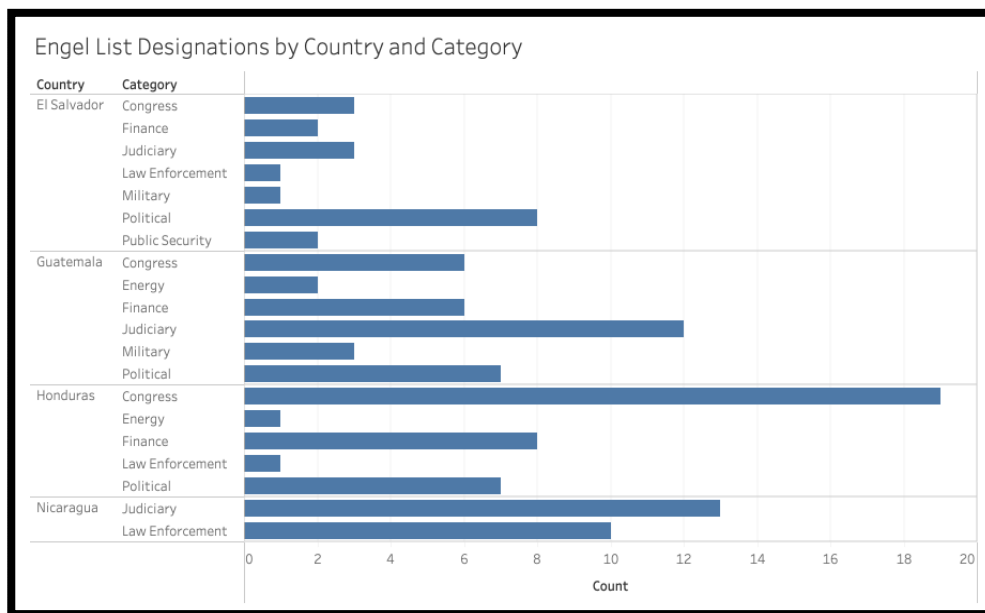


Figure 2: Engel List Designations, Central America

The military does not emerge here as a priority for the U.S. and partner stakeholders. A total of 115 individuals were named on the list's multiple iterations and only four have direct ties to the military. These four individuals are designated for abuses further in the past. Two other designated individuals have ties to 'public security,' a category which generally references military and/or police affiliation.



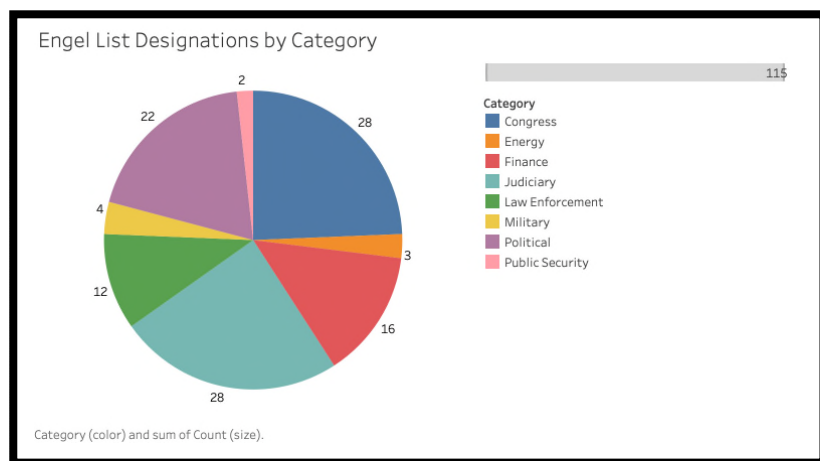


Figure 3: Engel List Designations by category of official

One of the authors correctly argues that in many ways the term *remilitarization* is misleading because it implies a true *demilitarization* as a point of departure for discussion. In reality, each country discussed underwent different degrees of demilitarization – meaning the removal of the military as a political actor and economic actor, and instead aligned for the defense of the nation from external actors, and at the service of the nation.

This goal was never fully achieved, but as the authors of the country reports on El Salvador and Nicaragua note, both countries made significant strides toward that goal. Most of those gains have now been erased. In both countries the militaries retained significant influence as parallel power centers under civilian rule through an integrated system of intelligence collection, internal security contacts, and political allies.

The Biden administration correctly assessed corruption as a “core national security interest” in its December 2021 *United States Strategy on Countering Corruption* (The White House 2021), noting that

In today’s globalized world, corrupt actors bribe across borders, harness the international financial system to stash illicit wealth abroad, and abuse democratic institutions to advance anti-democratic means ... Corruption threatens United States national security, economic equity, global anti-poverty and development efforts, and democracy itself.

While this strategy addressed many issues in Central America, the corrupt alliances between the militaries and their economic and political allies, and the enormous drain of scarce national resources this engenders, were not mentioned, as shown with the Engel Lists. This absence was particularly glaring given the drug trafficking charges and extradition order brought against Juan Orlando Hernández, the long-time president of Honduras and U.S. ally, whose well-documented alliance with the military was crucial to his maintaining his grip on power.

The *United States Strategy on Countering Corruption* followed the July 2021 release of the *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America*, led by Vice President Kamala Harris (National Security Council 2021), designed to address the drivers of migration. The strategy stated that “our strategy is far-reaching – and focuses on our partnerships with other governments, international institutions, businesses, foundations and civil society.”

The “desired end state” of the strategy is “a democratic, prosperous and safe Central America, where people advance economically, live, work, and learn in safety and dignity, contribute to and benefit from the democratic process, have confidence in public institutions, and enjoy opportunities to create futures for themselves and their families at home.”

None of these goals is achievable under authoritarian governments supported by militaries operating far outside the bounds of the norms of democratic governance. Yet notably absent again from the list of actors or drivers, is the military.

The only mention of the armed forces was the promise of the Biden administration to “work with governments so civilian law enforcement has the resources and capacity to assume full responsibility for civilian security, enabling the drawdown of military from policing roles.” (National Security Council 2021). That is an unrealistic expectation given the significant shift in resources to the military across the region in recent years.

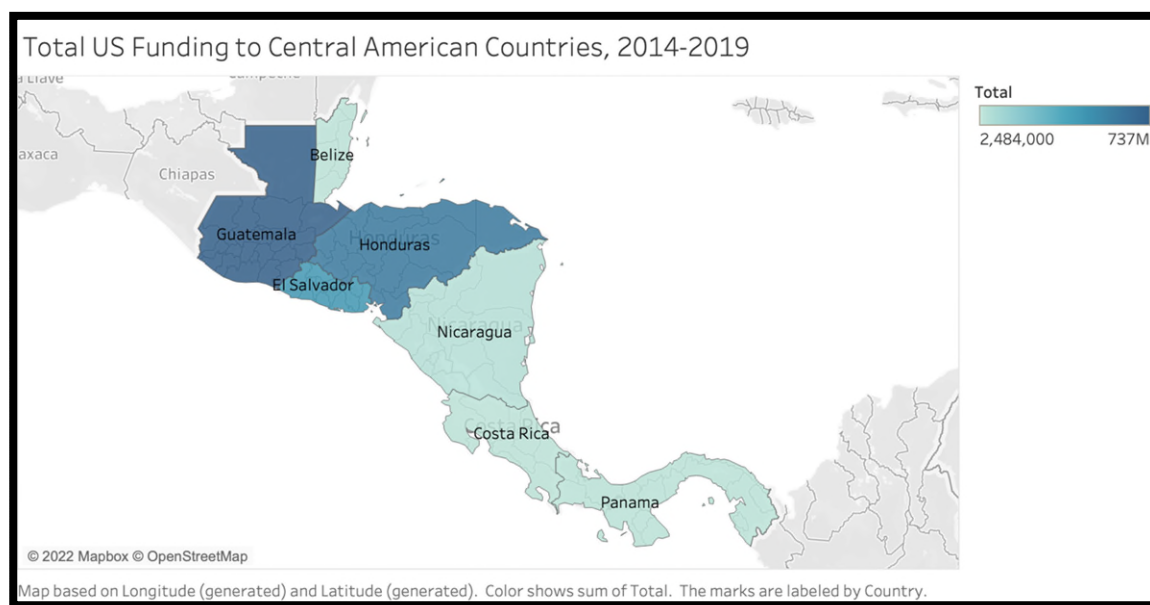


Figure 4: U.S. aid figures based on WOLA data.

In October 2022 the Biden Administration unveiled its new National Security Strategy, outlining U.S. security priorities and strategic interests. The document states that “no region impacts the United States more directly than the Western Hemisphere,” and promises to “assist partners facing security threats” from gangs and transnational criminal organizations by collaborating in assisting “civilian police and strengthen justice systems in the Americas, and expanding information sharing with our partners.” (National Security Strategy 2022). Again, there is not a single mention of the remilitarization wave that is key to undermining the key stated goal of sharing security and economic benefits based on the region’s “democratic stability and institutions.”

## Militaries and Civilian Oversight

There is no question that the Northern Triangle faced enormous security challenges throughout the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The mass deportation of gang members and hardened criminals who served prison sentences in the United States to their home countries in Central America in the mid-1990s – just as each country was emerging from more than a decade of civil strife – was a key factor. None of the countries had functioning independent judicial systems. Police forces were new, weak, and untested. (Arana 2005; Ribando Seelke 2016).

The challenges posed by the gangs, along with the emergence of the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras and Guatemala as key nodes in regional cocaine trafficking structures and the accompanying violence, were largely viewed as unmanageable by the newly created democratic institutions. (Farah and Babineau, 2018).

As described in the studies, rather than addressing the root causes of the violence as viewed through the lens of incomplete reforms, stark lack of political will, mounting corruption and the under-resourcing of key non-military actors (civilian police, prison reform, judicial reform, anti-corruption institutions), the post-war governments immediately defaulted to empowering the militaries again.

In each case the military was called back to internal security roles despite the new reforms, initially for short periods of time (30 days to 90 days) and at least nominally under the command of civilian police officers. Over time these lines blurred into erasure and the military – often with the encouragement and funding from the United States under the authorities to support counter-narcotics missions – became dominant. As described below, in each case there were significant precipitating events that led to consolidation of the militaries' expanding roles.

In order to make the resurgence of the military more difficult to reverse, in each country the expanding roles of the armed forces are being codified into law, even when doing so violates the Constitution. This process is enabled by the increasing support of militaries for co-opted judicial structures that now respond directly to presidential directives rather than independent judicial rulings. The shifting of loyalties from fidelity to the constitution and institutions to personal loyalties is reflected in the obsequious obedience to and quasi deification of the president and the economic elites transmitted repeatedly through public statements and social media by military leaders.

Currently the militaries in all four countries are reclaiming primacy in internal security matters while again carving out economic and political spheres of dominance, allying with political and economic elites in a tacit pact to mutually protect each other's interests. This is a return to the old governance model that guarantees impunity for the governing structure. The ultimate desired end state is not simply militarization for the sake of militarization, but social control tied to political and economic control and the use of force to return to the historic model rather than allow real change.

The remilitarization process required governments to continually cede civilian prerogatives to the military. In each country, the military now reaches beyond its explicit constitutional mandates to direct involvement not only in matters of internal security, but into civilian agencies and the judicial system. This cross-sector involvement sometimes takes the form of involvement in lucrative contracts, or placing key staff members who are loyal to the military and its interests in positions of influence to seek profitable opportunities, or threats and violence.

Reaching into other sectors often pays literal dividends for military leadership. For example, in El Salvador, by law, government agencies that request military protection or support for specific

programs or projects must then pay the military out of their own budgets, greatly inflating the real military budgets in ways that are not captured by public finance documents.

Militaries are now involved in economic sectors well beyond their constitutional purview. In Honduras, the military is involved in large-scale agriculture, pharmaceuticals, land management, and the Department of the Interior. In El Salvador the military now reaches into healthcare and vaccines, education, food distribution and the school system to deliver books and computers. In Guatemala, troops are frequently deployed to resolve disputes connected to mining, land ownership, and civil unrest, often acting against local communities. In Nicaragua the military is involved in mining, timber extraction, banking and other primary government functions. This is particularly concerning given that these countries all have modest GDPs and limited capacity to increase social spending. When they do spend on these programs, the military gets a cut.

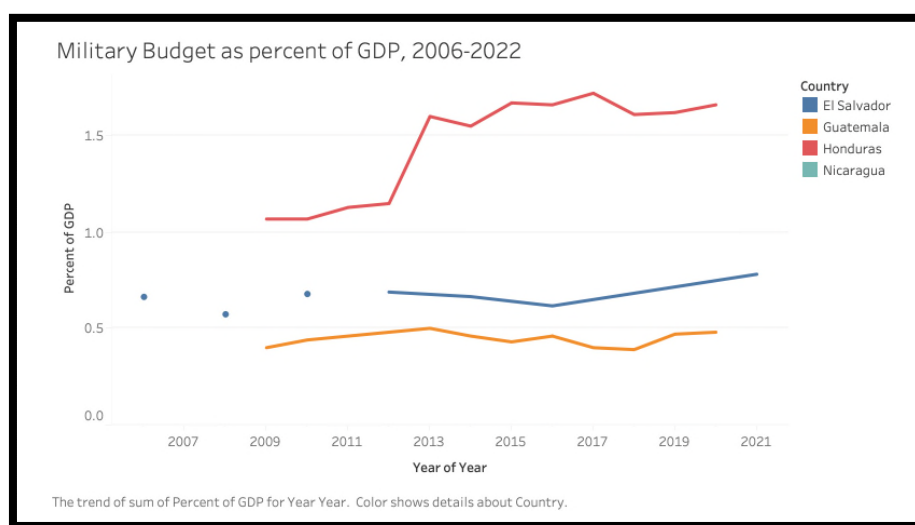


Figure 5: Publicly reported military budgets as percent of GDP (compiled by IBI Consultants)

While some of the actors in this alliance are new, with some traditional elites now relegated to lesser roles, the new generation has not replaced the model that allowed their predecessors to reap enormous benefits while most of the countries' citizens remain trapped in endemic poverty, cycles of violence and migration, and political silence. While the faces of the governments are civilian (often surrounded by the military), the military is again emerging as the guarantor of stability built on the use of force, necessitating the authoritarianism now blossoming across the region.

One of the results of the remilitarization is the growing trend to withholding what by law should be public information. This includes military budgets, legislative actions, and an accounting of how the allocated money was spent. Reliable data in these areas has almost entirely disappeared across the region, where almost all budgetary matters are now categorized as "classified," meaning they can be kept secret for up to seven years. This leaves enormous gaps in the ability to quantify and measure, beyond the anecdotal and fragmentary information.

At the same time, monitoring U.S. aid flows to the region in support of military and police activities has also become much less accessible and less clearly delineated in public reporting. Formerly clear line items and accounting of appropriations have become blurrier, less disaggregated and, while available to Congress, are often not posted to public sites. The net result is less oversight and

accountability of U.S. funding even as the region's militaries grow more powerful. The most recent figures collected by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), which has monitored the aid flow over three decades, only go through 2019 (see chart below, based on WOLA figures).

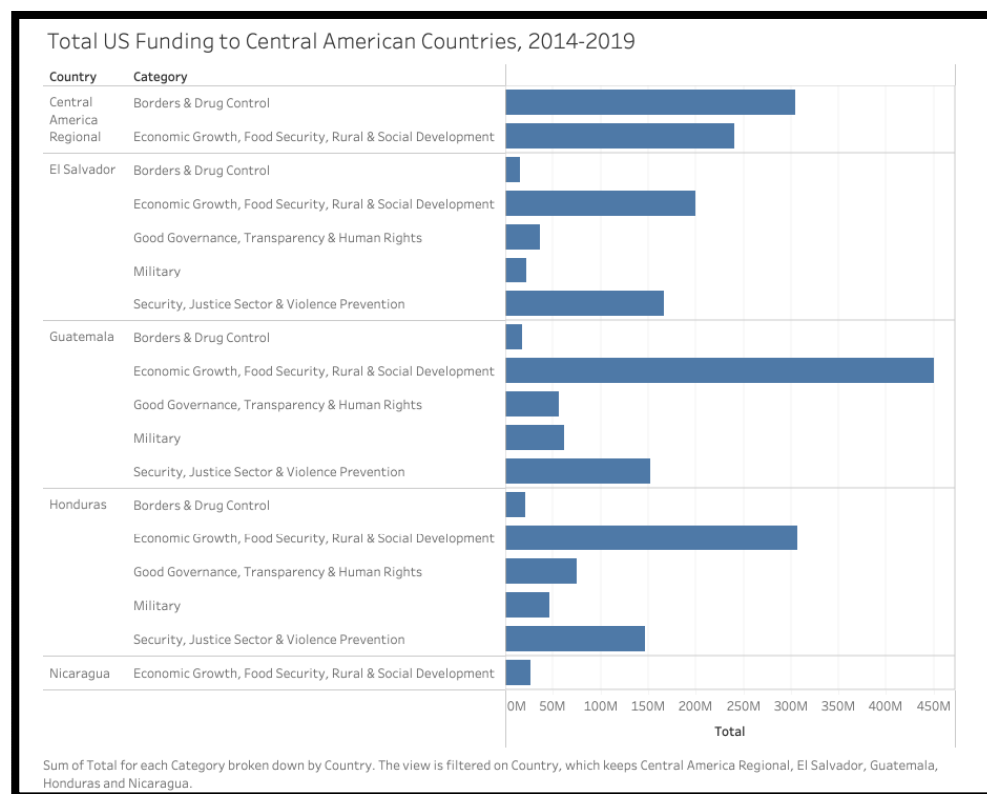


Figure 6: U.S. funding for Central America, based on WOLA data

## History, Regional Context and U.S. Involvement

The historic exclusionary and repressive model of the region's first 150 years of independence from Spain was disrupted by armed insurrection and civil wars during the 1980s. The core objective of the three negotiated peace agreements that ended hostilities in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala was to create more inclusive power structures with formal, functioning democratic institutions. These new power structures would hope, at least on paper, to render the historic model obsolete and empower the creation of new societies where violent revolution would not be viewed as a necessary and perhaps sole possible remedy for addressing deeply rooted social issues.

Fundamental to this task was removing the military – the final arbiter of real power – from national political and economic power, while severely curtailing the institution's ability to carry out internal security operations. The long dominant doctrine of establishing the military as a bulwark against internal enemies based on anti-Communist doctrine was supplanted, at least in theory, by the creation of civilian police forces to carry out internal security and intelligence functions for the state. In both El Salvador and Guatemala, a key factor in the peace processes for each country following their civil wars involved developing a civilian police force tasked with managing internal security threats, national intelligence structures, and border security, which would radically redefine the military's mission statement. The emerging reinterpretation of the military's mission in an explicit

return to defending against internal enemies, steps away from constitutionally defined democratic standards, representing a breach of the public trust and a regression from democratic norms.

The military's primary mission, according to the new constitutions in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, was to defend against external enemies. In rare moments of unrest posing an existential threat to the state, the constitutions left open the possibility that the military could play a supporting role in maintaining internal order for a limited and specified time, in support of civilian agencies.

Yet most of the laws passed since these reforms do little to reinforce these missions or other democratic restraints. Instead, the new laws governing the militaries are extremely generic, leaving loopholes and vague language that allows the military and its political allies to define the parameters of the interventions, now occurring at an ever quicker pace. Other times, the laws and decrees codify extensive military involvement in different sectors of government, particularly in Honduras and El Salvador. One word frequently used by all authors to describe the legal framework's impact on militarization in the region is *protagonismo*, or the law's ability to reshape the context to establish the military as the authorized 'protagonist' in a range of different contexts.

The return to the old model is almost fully consolidated in Nicaragua, while the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala are moving rapidly to cement this historic regression in democratic governance. In Honduras, under the new, self-proclaimed reformist government of Xiomara Castro, the consolidation hangs in the balance, and her choices will determine in part if and how the process will go. Early signs are not encouraging.

In each country, the current situation is not the result of a single decision or a sudden shift in the governance model. Rather, it represents the culmination of more than a decade of small steps that have led to the tipping point the region now faces. In each case, the authors identify at least one significant moment of fracture in the move toward real reform and the empowerment of the military that is now accelerating. The cases are detailed in respective chapters, but a brief recap illustrates the fractures that occurred without consequence.

In El Salvador, the military's return to multiple internal security roles was, ironically, part of a series of policies undertaken by the first government of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the region's most effective insurgent force that had fought the military to a virtual draw over 12 years. Facing a crisis of gang-related violence and new transnational criminal networks, the government of President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) supported the unconstitutional naming of a retired military officer as head of internal security and other military in senior civilian positions and embraced the use of the military in the failed "iron fist" policy of combatting the gangs.

President Nayib Bukele took the process even further, issuing orders that the military obeyed to send heavily armed troops to occupy the National Legislative Assembly on February 9, 2020, because the legislature did not pass a loan request that he wanted to increase security spending – directly benefitting the military. He and the military suffered few negative repercussions for this action. Indeed, Bukele praised the military and has worked tirelessly since to increase their budget, size, and power. This process culminated in the arrest, with the support of the military, of some 53,000 people since March 2022 under a "state of exception" that suspends many constitutional rights. Those arrested as alleged gang members are identified as enemies of the state and terrorists, reinforcing the justification for the military's involvement. While designed to be a short-term

measure lasting 30 days, the state of exception has been renewed with virtually no dissent every month since it was enacted.

In Guatemala, after years of attacks against the U.N.-mandated International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), President Jimmy Morales's government shut down the Commission in September 2019. Morales deployed the military, and its U.S.-supplied armored vehicles, to threaten the CICIG's mission as the Commission moved closer to investigating the president's family members and other sensitive cases. The end of the CICIG led to the rapid reemergence of overt military influence and the dismantling of the independent judiciary centered on the office of the attorney general.

In Honduras, the 2009 military coup that removed Mel Zelaya as president ushered in the era of dominance of Juan Orlando Hernández, who came from a family of military elites and had several family members in the armed forces. First as president of the Congress then as a two-term president, Hernández empowered the military to become part of a functioning criminal enterprise deeply enmeshed in the hemispheric drug trade.

For much of his time in power (2014-2022) Hernández was a staunch U.S. ally. Multiple U.S. administrations provided his government with hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid despite widespread, credible reports that he and the military leadership were involved in cocaine trafficking. In April 2022, just weeks after leaving office, he was extradited to the United States where he is facing charges of having “participated in a corrupt and violent drug-trafficking conspiracy to facilitate the importation of hundreds of thousands of kilograms of cocaine to the United States.” (Department of Justice 2022).

When Daniel Ortega returned to power in Nicaragua in 2007 after 17 years in the opposition, he moved steadily to reassert military dominance. A series of fraudulent elections gave him and his vice president and wife Rosario Murillo control of all three branches of government. Ortega then moved aggressively to use the military to control internal dissent, most visibly during the anti-government protests that erupted in April 2018. Some 330 protesters were killed by security forces – including the military, police and military-backed civilian militias – when Ortega moved to quell the unrest. (Robles, 2018). Since then, with military support, Ortega has moved aggressively to jail all political opponents, shut down all independent media, and stifle civil society not aligned with his regime.

## Remilitarization and Links to Corruption

There are multiple underlying drivers of the reemergence of the military in the region that all the countries have in common. The result has been that remilitarization and the ongoing violence has provided an enormous, self-reinforcing series of actions and reactions that greatly benefits both the political/economic elites and the military through a series of corruption networks.

As Sarah Chayes has noted specifically about Honduras but applicable to each country in this study,

It is no longer possible to think of corruption as just the iniquitous doings of individuals, be they street-level bribe payers, government officials, or business executives...corruption is the operating system of sophisticated networks that link together public and private sectors and out-and-out criminals—including killers—and whose main objective is maximizing

returns for network members. Corruption is built into the functioning of such countries' institutions. And, like the criminal organizations that are threaded through their fabrics, the networks cross international boundaries. Exchanging favors and establishing beachheads with partners and service-providers around the globe, they might best be considered transnational kleptocratic networks. (Chayes, 2017).

These factors include:

- The failure of the political elites in the post-war to address issues of endemic corruption while failing to fully execute the intended reforms of the military. This left both the traditional and emerging elite with the option of pulling the military into protecting their narrow political and economic interests;
- The lack of clarity in the laws in each country that make utilizing the military ambiguous and contradictory, often creating overlapping intelligence structures and joint command structures that the military took advantage of while marginalizing new and inexperienced police forces;
- Failure to enforce, from the beginning of the post-war era, the constitutionally mandated limits on the roles the military could legally have in public order and internal security, setting broad, early precedents for ignoring the rules.
- The deliberate use of legally approved “temporary measures” to be taken in exceptional circumstances as permanent policies that become embedded in the system. This includes the constant “state of emergency” and “state of exception” decrees that are renewed on a regular basis without debate or explanation;
- The emergence of new violent actors such as the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) transnational gang and drug trafficking structures that presented significant challenges to new and undertrained police forces;
- The Pavlovian response to call in the military when violence increases, thus empowering the institution to engage in internal security regardless of constitutional prohibitions or limitations. Increased violence now almost inevitably leads to increased military budgets which translates into increased military power.

When violence increases, as it did in the Northern Triangle with the rise of gangs and drug trafficking groups, the immediate response was to call in the military rather than to address underlying socio-economic problems to provide long-term solutions. The reliance on the military rather than addressing underlying socio-economic problems has led to a policy driven by the understanding that the solutions to the growing social problems and high crime rates are a problem of territorial occupation by state forces, leading to more violence and minimizing the potential impact of non-violent policy initiatives.

In the deliberate absence of data and the withholding of information, the primary reference point has become homicide rates, among the highest in the world but down sharply from five years ago. This is an imperfect metric at best, given that in all of the countries studied in this report the governments deliberately removed data and repressed analysis that would challenge the effectiveness of using the military to reduce violence.





Figure 7: Symbiotic relationship of military and elites in Central America

As the UNODC noted, cocaine trafficking in Central America does not kill people, but rather the fighting over the territories that are needed as drug routes causes violence. (UNODC, 2012). Thus, the drop in homicides is more often an indicator of territorial consolidation by a criminal group or gang, leading to a diminished need to inflict ongoing violence, rather than addressing the real drivers of violence.

In each country, the military is increasingly enmeshed in transnational organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, enhancing the need for territorial control by the armed forces. Indeed, this is the underlying justification and implementation for the Bukele administration's "Territorial Control Plan," the joint task forces set up with U.S. support in Honduras and Guatemala and extensive military deployments in Honduras.

There is another benefit to singling out the military as an enforcement mechanism. For each new obligation levied upon the military, it needs more resources and new guarantees of impunity for carrying out the new tasks. Many of these tasks are blatantly unconstitutional, requiring manipulation of the judicial system. There are numerous opportunities for corruption between the purchase of new equipment, increased payroll, and funding surges facilitated by the legislators and government agencies charged with funding and purchasing the equipment. These purchases often use U.S. funds or source equipment from U.S. providers.

As the operating webs of sophisticated networks linked together, as described by Chayes, it became more expedient for all sides to abandon a search for real solutions that are complex, costly and long-term, and turn instead to advancing their own self-interest by keeping the system running.

All these trends are enabled by the current pattern of U.S. regional involvement, in which the U.S. continues to demand military control of drug trafficking and illegal migration flows without equally insisting on civilian control of the military or strengthened law enforcement and judicial institutions.

Remilitarization's impacts go far beyond just the most the most visible populations, to disproportionately impact marginalized indigenous communities, members of the LGBTQ+ communities and those living in vulnerable rural and urban communities.

In El Salvador, increased militarization impacts individuals detained by police and the armed forces, youth, and in some cases entire towns. El Salvador's registry of complaints alleging human rights violations perpetrated by the Armed Forces recorded a steady increase of complaints from 2009-2016, the most recent year for which data is available. Extralegal killings, disproportionate law enforcement homicides, and by the police have also increased in frequency. The use of the military to enforce COVID-19 lockdown by occupying towns and imposing curfews, against the advice of epidemiologists, led to mistreatment, extorsions, physical injuries, and threats under the pandemic emergency.

In Guatemala, the military's increased role and influence disproportionately impacts indigenous communities and municipalities who live near commercial mines, as is exemplified in the State of Siege levied on El Estor, Izabal. It also impacts communities living in areas with a significant drug trafficking presence, and populations such as migrant caravans, in both instances by assuming criminal charges apply to citizens who find themselves in contexts with limited state presence. Many individuals in migrant caravans intend to seek asylum outside of their countries of origin, indicating overlapping and intersecting vulnerabilities leaving them at even higher risk.

In Honduras, the increased reliance on the military and military tactics to respond to public security challenges disproportionately impacts communities in Gracias a Dios, Olancho, and along the Caribbean Sea. Indigenous communities and environmental activists face significant threats as they advocate for hard-won land rights against the desires of the oligarchic group of powerful families. Systemic problems in society, such as violence against women, targeted harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals, and *machista* behavior, also manifest in the military and other security forces' harassment of these communities.

As the researchers show in these studies beginning with El Salvador, then moving on to Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, the region is close to a tipping point beyond which recovering even the fragile and flawed democratic processes will take decades and enormous resources to achieve. This would not only be a tragedy for the region, which is still recovering from the conflicts that tore its societies apart in the wars, repression and exclusion, but also for U.S. strategic interests and the stability of the Western Hemisphere. As we have seen with the phenomena of radical populism of the left and right, the resurgence of authoritarianism and the rising tide of hemispheric (rather than just Central American) migration, what happens in one part of the hemisphere has a direct impact on the other parts.

When the tide of turning back military influence and building civilian institutions was on the rise, it grew to engulf most of the hemisphere. The reverse is also true. As Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala show the viability of returning to the structures of the past, the lessons will be learned and copied on a broad scale. It is a looming tragedy that must be addressed at all levels, whether locally, nationally, and beyond.

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