

A genealogy of El Salvador-US Economic Cooperation: Implications for Security

From the ‘Alliance for Progress’ to the ‘Alliance for Prosperity’

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Abstract

The text presents a genealogy of the US-El Salvador economic and security relations from the Alliance for Progress to the Alliance for Prosperity, in order to trace back the linkages and recurrent patterns of the aid going from Washington to San Salvador. The research contends that the resort to the liberal peace model in El Salvador after the civil war (1982-1992) and currently in a context of exacerbated violence related to the fight between and against gangs, has always been required by the US and international financial institutions to provide El Salvador with economic assistance and investments, while these aid programs have prioritized the US hemispheric security interests. In turn, and consequently, the cooperation has greatly benefitted the elites of the Central American countries and has not sufficiently addressed the causes originating the violence, sometimes even exacerbating them.

Introduction

On December 2015, the US Congress approved an aid package of \$750 million for the financial year (FY) 2016 to help the countries of the Northern Triangle – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – to conduct a series of economic and security reforms, with the final goal of counteracting the upsurge of migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, arriving to the Southern border of the US.² The governments of the three Northern countries and the Inter-

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² “U.S. authorities encountered more than 52,000 unaccompanied minors from the region at the U.S. border in FY2014, a more than 1,200% increase compared to FY2011. U.S. apprehensions of

American Development Bank (IDB) developed a plan of reforms, known as Alliance for Prosperity (2015), aiming at improving the competitiveness of the productive sector of the Central American economies, attract foreign investment, develop their human capital, strengthen their institutions and governance, mainly the security and justice systems (IDB, 2014). The strategy rationale is based on the nexus between development and security (IDB, 2014; Biden, 2015). This paper aims at exploring genealogically that this link is not new, but it has been present in the US-El Salvador relations since the beginning of the Cold War. The research contends that the resort to the neoliberal peace in El Salvador after the civil war (1982-1992) and currently in a context of exacerbated violence related to the fight between and against gangs, has always been required by the US to provide El Salvador with economic assistance and investments, and, in turn, and consequently, has benefitted the elites of the Central American country.

From the Alliance for Progress to the Civil War

The political economy of El Salvador has been linked to the expansion of the wealth of a small oligarchy, popularly known as the Fourteen Families, since the times of the independence in 1821 (Amstrong and Schenk, 1982). The economic policies favored an export-led model of coffee and sugar that benefitted a few landowners and dispossessed peasants of their communal lands, labor rights, and capacity to organize among themselves (Guillermo Ramos et al., 2015). In order to keep order and contain resistance, the state, through authoritarian regimes, continuously resorted to the armed forces to repress any popular movement and defend the elite's interests (Juan Cruz, 2003). In the countryside, the repressive enforcement of order was led by the landowners, who acting as caudillos with their own armed men, exerted patronage schemes over the lower classes (Cruz, 2016). During the 20th century, the major civil resistance's repression took place in 1932, when the government killed thousands of peasants and indigenous in order to repress their rebellion against the government (Guillermo Ramos et al., 2015). From that massacre in 1932, to the decade of 1970, the life of peasants did not improve and any attempt of land reform by the government was rejected by the elites of the country.

In 1961 the US launched the Alliance for Progress, an economic assistance program to boost the economic growth of Latin America, in light of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and due to the fear that the Marxist guerrillas could expand throughout the region. The assumption was that the economic assistance would improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor neighboring populations and therefore, it would dissipate the emergence of insurgencies in its backyard. In El Salvador, in 1960s there were no guerrillas but the Salvadoran governments were very receptive of the aid coming from Washington DC, especially the oligarchic elites who benefitted from the US business' investment in the country and the establishment of multinationals through local alliances (Amstrong and Shenk, 1982). The US also promoted a Common Market among the Central American countries in order to overcome the limitations of the internal markets during the implementation of import-substituting industrializations policies. However, the agriculture still remained the major cornerstone of El Salvador's economy and, despite the improvement in the efficiency of the production through mechanization, the lack of a land reform and the low-

unaccompanied minors from the northern triangle declined by 45% in FY2015", but they increased again in the five first months of 2016 (Meyer (coord.), 2016: 1)

labor intensity technology imported from the US contributed to the uneasiness of the peasants (Amstrong and Shenk, 1982). Along with the poor economic conditions, the political corruption, electoral frauds, and the repression of any kind of peasant organization contributed to the formation of five different political-military guerrilla groups that came together into a single one, the Farbundo Martí National Liberation Front (*Frente Farbundo Martí de Liberación Nacional*, FMNL).³ The war between the FMNL and the state's military forces started in 1980 and resulted in the death of 75,000 people and more than a million displaced. The war ended due to the internal stalemate between the armed parties and also to the international conditions, mainly the end of the Cold War and the unfavorable international public opinion to the continuation of support to the proxy allies. During the previous decade, the US military aid to El Salvador had amounted to 6 billion dollars (Mo Hume, 2008), and included technical training of soldiers in the terrain, despite that the US was informed of the human rights violations committed by the army. The United Nations, at the request of both parties, played an important role in broking the Peace Accords, which were signed in Mexico in 1992.

From the Peace Accords to the Alliance for Prosperity

The Peace Accords brought about a transition from “war to peace, from military to civilian rule, and from authoritarianism to democracy” (Cruz, 2016: 5). In the economic realm, guided by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the IDB, the government adopted hard structural adjustments and neoliberal policies that contributed to exacerbate the historical social conditions of inequality and exclusion. The reforms included privatizations of the pension systems, telecommunications, and electrical services; cuts on the public spending and subsidies; facilitation of foreign investment; and dollarization in 2001, to the benefit of the elites (Mo Hume, 2008; Rebando Seelke, 2013). As a result, El Salvador's economy experienced positive growth during the last years of the 1990s, but in turn the exclusion and inequality that pervaded the society until then deepened. According to the Congressional Research Service of the US, the growth was not enough to spill over the rest of the society.⁴

However, many critics of the neoliberal reforms have noted that the assumption of the spill-over effect over the lower classes of the society is misleading (Ahearne, 2009; Pugh, 2005, 2008; Selby, 2008; Richmond, 2008). Richmond criticizes the tendency of putting the blame on the countries as if the lack of positive results of the reforms was only due to the local cultures, defined as “subsistence-based, patronage-based, corrupt and nepotistic”; and he adds that the

3 The FMNL was composed of the “Communist Party (PCS), founded in 1930; the Popular Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación – FPL), which appeared in 1970; the People's Revolutionary Army (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo – ERP), created in 1971; the Armed Forces of National Resistance (Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional – RN), which arose in 1975; and the Central American Revolutionary Workers Party (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos – PRTC), established in 1976.” (Guillermo Ramos, 2015: 5)

4 “As expected, dollarization led to lower interest rates, low inflation, and easier access to capital markets, but it also took away the government's ability to use monetary and exchange rate adjustments to cushion the economy from external shocks. After posting strong growth rates in the 1990s, El Salvador's more moderate growth rates in the 2000s were not high enough to improve living standards among the Salvadoran people, approximately 47% of whom continued to live in poverty in 2010 (slightly lower than in 2001).” (Ribando Seelke, 2013: 11)

underlying intention is “to absolve international actors of welfare responsibility and to indicate that societies are incapable of developing without external direction” (2008: 290). To the critique of the neoliberal model, Richmond adds that the top-down institutionalism and neoliberalism marginalize the grassroots grievances, and he warns of the high probability of the institutions being coopted “by the very elites that conducted conflict in the first place” (Richmond, 2008: 294). In the same line, Pugh deconstructs the neoliberal model in order to criticize its false underlying assumptions: the clear omission of the structural violence embedded in the capitalist system that perpetuates poverty and inequality; the naturalization of the economy as a natural law, neglecting the presence of strong political interests behind; the mantra that neoliberalism brings more economic integration, while in reality it generates more dependency from the North; the objectification of the war-torn society as if it needed a ‘governance treatment’; and the reduction of the state’s budget spending, which results into poor and less public goods (Pugh, 2005).

In El Salvador, the meagre economic results of the neoliberalism’s treatment shock did not help to either reintegrate former *guerrilleros* or to offer labor opportunities to the young population of the country. The high levels of unemployment, the pervasive poverty and inequality, and the frustrated expectations of a better living after the war are some of the reasons that have been highlighted as the roots of the generalized violence. The upsurge of social and economic violence after the civil war keeps the country far from a peaceful living. El Salvador has remained as one of the most violent countries in the world for the last two decades. Violence is both rural and urban; at least half of it related to gangs’ rivalries and the fight between the state and the gangs.⁵ In addition to the economic causes, some authors emphasize the role of the state in the perpetuation of violence. Mo Hume argues that the way in which the government has reacted against crime, through *Mano Dura* (or Tight Fist) policies, serves “to reveal the fragility of the democratic project, exposing the underside of authoritarianism that remains key to Salvadoran political life in the transitional process from civil war to peace” (2007: 739). More recently, Cruz has also attributed great part of the responsibility to the government’s repressive policies and its reminiscences of the authoritarian past, which help to reproduce a climate of violence (Cruz, 2016).⁶

The rate of homicides, a year before the war ended, was 43 per 100,000 inhabitants (Cruz, 2003); between 2005 and 2011 the figure reached an average of 62 (Guillermo Ramos *et al.*, 2015: 14-15), and in 2015 it reached its peak of 103 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Gagne, 2016).⁷

⁵ The state has blamed the gangs of between 70-90% of the crimes, although it has not proved it. Other accounts looked also into the violence of the state and that of the death squads, which continue to operate clandestinely since the end of the civil war.

⁶ In Cruz words: “I argue that skyrocketing levels of criminal violence in post-transition societies are best understood by looking at the history of state institutions of violence. These go beyond the military and police to private entrepreneurs of violence who, in tandem with state institutions, have reproduced criminal violence after peace accords, just as they did before them. These hybrid institutions of violence, especially in the law-enforcement realm, were shaped by pacts and deals made during the rocky transition processes and the reversals that followed. In northern Central America, peace transitions failed to impede the survival of old-regime groups who retained their ability to out-manuever new accountability measures imported by peace keepers.” (2016: 24).

⁷ A total of 6,670 people died violently in 2015, up from 3,492 the previous year (Gagne, 2016).

The wave of violence in El Salvador has coincided with a more prominent wave of migration to the US. Only in 2014, the US authorities apprehended more than 60,000 minors fleeing both from violence and lack of economic opportunities (American Immigration Council).⁸ In light of the upsurge of unaccompanied children arriving to the Southern border of the US, the government in Washington claimed that this was an emergency situation, and asked the three Central American governments sending the larger number of migrants, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, to implement a series of economic and security reforms, in exchange of an increase of economic, technical and military aid. The Congress of the US approved an aid package of \$750 million⁹ for FY2016 to implement the resulting program, called “Alliance for Prosperity,”¹⁰ whose main pillars are: a. stimulate the productive sector to create economic opportunities; b. developing opportunities for the people; c. improving public safety and enhancing access to the legal system; and d. strengthening institutions to increase people’s trust in the state (IDB, 2014).¹¹ Despite the new focus on prevention, reform of the justice system, attention to human rights, and reduction of poverty, the bulk of the reforms are an extension of the neoliberal recipes of Washington financial institutions.

The nexus security-development is very clear in the Alliance for Prosperity, as it was in the Alliance for Progress of the 1960s. Now poverty and its association with violence are again at center stage, bringing about the stigmatization of the lower classes and the justification of the deepening of the neoliberal reforms (Young, 2015). A look into the specific measures included in the Alliance for Prosperity shows that the program has an emphasis on improving the conditions for foreign investment and regional integration, therefore benefitting the US multinationals and the Salvadoran economic elites. It includes guidelines such as “attracting private investment, pushing for large-scale infrastructure, modernization projects, reducing energy costs, as well as promoting strategic sectors such as textile, light manufacturing, tourism, and agro-industries” (García, 2016). The focus on the traditional export-oriented sectors will not likely help to change the productive matrix of the Central American country, dependent on a few items that are

8 The fact that many migrants are asking for refugee status in Mexico and not always continuing to the US contributes to the idea that those children are indeed refugees, fleeing from violence in their countries of origin, and not just economic migrants.

9 The initial request was of \$1 billion USD, and finally Congress approved three quarters of the amount requested, which represents a dramatic increase compared to assistance in the previous years: “In Fiscal Year 2015, the U.S. Congress allocated \$560 million USD, while in 2014 it only allotted \$305 million USD.” (García, 2016).

10 “The U.S. split the \$750 million USD budget for the Northern Triangle into the following categories: \$299 million USD for development assistance; more than \$200 million USD for security; \$184 million USD for economic prosperity programs; \$26 million USD towards military initiatives; and \$4 million USD to global health, military training, and other regional prosperity programs.” (García, 2016)

11 The specific measures are: i. Promoting strategic sectors and attracting investment; ii. Reducing energy costs and ensuring reliability of electricity supply; iii. Modernizing and expanding infrastructure and logistical corridors; iv. Coordinating border management v. Encouraging international trade; vi. Tightening links between labor supply and demand from businesses; vii. Building human capital; viii. Boosting programs to prevent violence; xi. Strengthening institutions responsible for public safety; x. Modernizing the justice system; xi. Ensuring the State’s financial capacity; and xii. Increasing transparency (IDB, 2014).

exported just to a few countries¹² (The Dialogue, 2016). In brief, the Alliance for Prosperity follows the same logic of other ongoing US aid programs, such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Partnership for Growth, which has not brought about a radical change in terms of reducing poverty and inequality, tackling corruption, and strengthening institutions; rather they have mainly benefitted the US business interests and the Salvadoran economic elites (Hidalgo, 2015)¹³.

Human Rights organizations are also warning of the perils that the military aid may imply: around 46% of the total Alliance for Prosperity funding will be allocated to CARSI, the Central American Region Security Initiative (\$348.5 million USD).¹⁴ CARSI is a “package of counternarcotic and anticrime assistance that provides equipment, training, and technical assistance to build the capacity of institutions to counter criminal threats” (Ribando Seelke, 2013). Thus, the US military continues to represent a big boost for the military strategies and hard security policies implemented in El Salvador, by both the ARENA governments until 2009 and from then on by the FMNL administrations. The current government of Sánchez Cerén has tried to widen the security approach of the country by approving a New Security Strategy that includes measures for the prevention of crime and the rehabilitation of gang members (Martínez, 2015). However, concomitantly the government has resorted to a military strategy, deploying more than 7,000 soldiers (Reisenfeld, 2016); giving green light to policemen to shoot criminals whenever necessary (Gagne, 2015), and hardening the prison conditions to control gangs activities led by the incarcerated population (Lohmuller, 2016). As a result, the gangs have reacted to the repressive measures with more violence plus a violent campaign targeting policemen, resulting in a spiral of violence in 2015 and the first months of 2016. In addition, the Salvadoran anti-gang battalions, which count with the support of the US, have been “linked to deaths squads and enforced disappearances of alleged gang members” (Kinosian, 2016).

In light of the human rights abuses, the corruption, and the lack of transparency in the Northern Triangle, the US Congress has imposed conditions to free 75% of the money of the Alliance for Prosperity. Accordingly, the governments of the three countries will have to report their progress in areas such as the control of migration and human trafficking, the tackling of corruption, and the decrease of poverty before September 30 this year (García, 2016). This conditionality has been welcomed as a positive note by the Human Rights community; however, the parameters established to measure the progress made by the government reflect, to a certain extent, those of

¹² According to the economic report by The Dialogue, “an estimated 40% of the value of exports is generated by only 10 firms that trade in only a handful of products”.

¹³ El Salvador receives economic and military aid through other programs: the Partnership for Growth Initiative, to boost competitiveness and reduce insecurity; the Millennium Challenge Corporation, to develop its northern border region through a productivity, human capital and connectivity project; the Crossroads Funds, based on grants for cross-border infrastructure projects within Central America aimed at boosting regional integration and competitiveness; and the Central American Citizen Security Partnership, to combat drug trafficking, gangs, and organized crime in the sub-region. (Ribando Seelke, 2013)

¹⁴ “CARSI derives from the Merida Initiative, which was initially designed to help local governments to combat drug tracking in Mexico and Central America by working on institution building, rule of law activities, and maritime security among other initiatives.” (García, 2016)

the neoliberal peace: good governance, respect of human rights, and the strengthening of institutions as necessary preconditions for the success of the neoliberal reforms. Therefore, the efficacy of the neoliberal reforms is not put into question; once more, the relative “success” of the Alliance will depend on the capacity of local governments to implement it.

Conclusions

The above brief historical account from the 1960s, when the Alliance of Progress was launched, to the recent approval of the Alliance for Prosperity in 2015, shows that the interests of the economic elite of El Salvador have prevailed throughout the major economic reforms and agreements signed by the country. Likewise, the security dimension has always been linked to the discourse of development: both stability and order are considered fundamental to implement the neoliberal reforms and this has led to the implementation of repressive policies against any subjects offering resistance, whether these were peasants in the 1960s or gangs in the last two decades. The US and the economic financial institutions of Washington DC have also played a determinant role in the spread of the development-security nexus, as well as neoliberal recipes before the civil war, during the war, and in the post-conflict period. The recently approved Alliance for Prosperity, developed along with the Inter-American Development Bank, is another brick in the wall of the neoliberal policies and the securitization of aid. It is too soon to assess if the reforms foreseen in the program will bring the desired effects and contribute to reduce poverty and migration to the US; yet, in light of the results of the previous economic and military measures, no dramatic change is expected.

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