



Geopolitics of the Central America and USA: An Economic Perspective

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Abstract

The geopolitics of the United States and Central America have been intricately linked for centuries, driven by historical, economic, and strategic factors. Central America, consisting of seven countries, has long been considered the United States' "backyard," with the U.S. exerting substantial influence in the region. Historically, this influence has often been characterized by interventions, both overt and covert, in the internal affairs of Central American nations, which has left a legacy of political instability and regional tensions. Economically, Central America is a vital trade partner for the United States. The region's geographic proximity has made it a valuable destination for U.S. exports and a source of agricultural products and manufactured goods. Trade agreements like CAFTA-DR have further solidified this economic relationship, benefiting both sides. However, the region also faces challenges such as income inequality, poverty, and crime, which can have a direct impact on the United States, particularly concerning immigration and security concerns. While the cultures of the Central America and America, in many cases are diametric in relation to each other, the geographical proximity of the two has forged a relationship that can best be described in terms of hegemonic strategy. More importantly, for policymakers and scholars, to understand and to influence the future liaison between the US and Central America, they must reach across time and space into the past to learn the lessons of previous events. This study examines the US in Central America in the 20th century to determine possible future U.S. actions in the region.

Keywords: United State, Central America, Latin America, Geopolitics, Economy

1. Introduction

Geopolitics, the study of the political, economic, and strategic interactions between nations, holds profound importance in shaping the global landscape. It influences how countries navigate complex international relations, make decisions about foreign policy, and determine their alliances and adversaries. Geopolitical factors drive the allocation of resources, control of critical territories, and the pursuit of national interests, often affecting the distribution of power and the balance of international influence. Geopolitics underpins major international events, from conflicts and diplomacy to trade agreements and alliances, and it plays a pivotal role in addressing global challenges, such as climate change, security threats, and the distribution of wealth and resources. Understanding and analyzing geopolitics is essential for policymakers, diplomats, scholars, and the public, as it provides insights into the forces that shape the world's political and economic order, helping to anticipate and navigate the complexities of an interconnected and ever-changing international arena.

Geopolitics between the United States and Central America holds substantial importance due to a convergence of factors that impact both regions and have wider global implications. Central America's geographical proximity to the United States has historically made it a focal point of U.S. foreign policy, with the region serving as an essential component of the United States' security, trade, and immigration strategies. The movement of people from Central America to the U.S., driven by economic challenges and violence, remains a significant geopolitical concern that influences U.S. domestic politics and foreign policy decisions.

Economically, Central America is a crucial trading partner for the United States. Trade agreements like CAFTA-DR have facilitated this economic relationship, benefiting both sides and contributing to regional stability and development. Additionally, Central America's role as a transit point for drug trafficking and organized crime has security implications for the U.S., leading to increased security and law enforcement cooperation in the region. Furthermore, U.S. is committed to promoting democratic governance, addressing corruption, and fostering political stability in Central America. This focus on good governance has implications for the region's political landscape and U.S. foreign policy goals.

In a broader context, geopolitics of the USA-Central America relationship is relevant to discussions about immigration, trade, security, and democracy promotion on the global stage. As such, understanding and managing this relationship effectively is not only critical for the well-being of both regions but also for the overall stability and prosperity of the Western Hemisphere.

U.S. foreign policy towards Central America countries has been characterized by a combination of economic, security, and humanitarian priorities. Historically, the United States has played a significant role in the region due to its geographic proximity and interests. Key elements of U.S. foreign policy in Central America have included addressing migration challenges, supporting economic development, and promoting regional security and stability. This has involved efforts to reduce poverty and violence, enhance governance, and combat drug trafficking and organized crime. The U.S. has also engaged in trade agreements, such as CAFTA-DR, to boost economic ties and promote prosperity. However, U.S. policy towards Central America has faced challenges, including concerns about the effectiveness of aid programs, political instability in some countries, and managing immigration flows. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of addressing the root causes of migration and promoting good governance to achieve lasting stability in the region.

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U.S. foreign policy in Central America continues to evolve to adapt to changing regional dynamics and address both regional and global challenges.

During the 1980s, the United States government approved more than \$321 million to overthrow the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua (Sanford, 1989). In El Salvador, Washington also became the principal financier and strategist for the Salvadoran government in trying to prevent the political left from having any significant role in the nation's political system. This venture was deemed so important by the United States that it occurred at a time when over 50,000 noncombatant civilians lost their lives at the hands of the Salvadoran military.

Even today, many years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some scholars generally continue to believe that this was a war of ideology, both in terms of threatening the United States, and, in terms of anti-America motivation, and this compelled U.S. foreign action during the 1980s. Moreover, as nearly all U.S. foreign activity involving national security was publicly justified for the sake of containing not only Soviet communism, but any strain of communism in any region of the international system, such actions still seem sound. Given the enormous preoccupation with communism by American policymakers and the public during the Cold War, the anticommunist orientation of U.S. policy in Central America should account for much of what occurred there in the 1980s, but not thereafter (Scholvin, 2013).

The Central American economy faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The region's heavy reliance on tourism, remittances, and export-oriented industries exposed it to economic vulnerabilities. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and reduced global demand led to a contraction in key sectors, causing widespread job losses and increased poverty rates. Governments implemented various measures to mitigate the impact, including fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programs. However, limited healthcare infrastructure and resources strained the response to the public health crisis.

Moreover, these interventions in Central America have been pursued by a variety of differing U.S. political administrations throughout this century. Consequently, scholars concerned with Central America or interested in U.S. foreign policy must address the obvious questions: What accounts for U.S. action? What are the influences and determinants that affect United States policy in Central America? What has influenced American policymakers to do what they do? And why is it, that despite major changes in the policymaking environment of the United States, whether in terms of the international or domestic political climate, U.S. policy toward Central America has persistently taken on coercive characteristics? The study discusses the United States' most recent use of force in Central America during the post-Cold War period: the invasion of Panama in 1989. Within each case study, each of the different policymaking environments, both international and domestic, is examined briefly.



Figure: <https://www.mapsofworld.com/usa/usa-maps/united-states-and-latin-america-maps.html>

2. Review of Literature

Delgado & Scheider, (2022) discusses the economic relationship between the United States and Central America is of paramount importance to both regions. Central America, comprising countries like Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, serves as a significant trading partner for the United States. The region exports a wide range of

goods, including agricultural products, textiles, and machinery, to the U.S. market, contributing to economic growth and job creation. Simultaneously, the United States provides vital remittances, investment, and development aid to Central American nations. However, the region also faces challenges, such as income inequality, poverty, and issues related to security and migration, which can have a direct impact on the U.S. economy, especially as instability in Central America can lead to increased immigration flows to the United States, highlighting the intricate economic interdependence between the two regions.

Castellanos et.al, (2022) points out that Mexico and South America's imports have provided significant benefits to Central America in terms of trade and economic opportunities. Central American countries, including Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, have leveraged their geographical proximity to the United States and Mexico as a gateway to access the larger markets of North and South America. This has facilitated the export of various goods, including agricultural products, textiles, and manufactured items, promoting economic growth and job creation in Central America. Additionally, these trade relationships have attracted foreign investment, further boosting the region's economic development. The integration of Central America into these broader trade networks has offered a platform for economic diversification and improved standards of living, emphasizing the pivotal role of trade in driving the region's economic advancement.

United State is Central America's largest trading partner, and the Central American countries, particularly Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, export a wide range of products to the U.S., including agricultural goods, textiles, and machinery. This trade relationship has fostered economic growth, job creation, and investment in Central America, strengthening its position as a key player in the global supply chain. The United States, in turn, benefits from access to these markets and low-cost manufacturing, while also using Central American countries as a base for the production and assembly of goods that are re-exported globally. Trade agreements, such as CAFTA-DR have further facilitated this economic interdependence, promoting regional stability and prosperity.

In the past, various competing approaches have been developed for explaining U.S. foreign policy in Central America. Much of the relevant literature treats U.S. policy toward the region in the same vein that it discusses U.S. foreign policy in general (Mercille, 2008). Furthermore, in terms of explaining United States foreign policy, some scholars highlight the international determinants of policy outputs. At the macro-level, for example, realist theory points to the international system and the nature of the arrangement among actors as the most critical variables affecting policymaking. Latin American specialist Robert Pastor's book, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (1986) highlights the importance of two approaches that fall under the international approach: the security perspective and the neo-dependency perspective (Daalder, 2003).

The security perspective looks at Central America, as most U.S. policymakers have historically viewed it, in the context of global security concerns. This image posits that U.S. policy is motivated by a "strategic imperative," in which the national security of the United States is defined in terms of not only the character of the other republics in the Western Hemisphere, but also in terms of major sources of insecurity that emanate from outside the hemisphere. In addition, this concept identifies the nature of such threats to be military and non-economic in nature. Thus, U.S. foreign policy "reflects a rational decision to prevent hostile groups from coming to power" (Pastor, 1988). The security perspective also represents the orthodox interpretation of international determinants upon policymaking. And, Cannon's article, "A Latin Axis could Take Central America, Reagan Says," captures the best example of this point of view in a quote from former President Reagan when he declared in the early 1980s that "the national security of all the Americas (was) at stake in Central America" (Lawrence, 2001). Daalder (2003) stated that 9/11 incident nor provided loss to USA in kind of economics, American foreign policy also changed towards the age of geopolitics in the international politics. United State of America has evolved their think tanks and policy makers for to recognize the basic and fundamental change in global politics to use economic, politics and unrivaled military power to fashion and global environment favorable its values and interest. In 20th century, the geopolitics of America and its foreign policy quietly changed. Successive presidents deeply working to make America most powerful in kind of geography and they tried to settle their territory or boundary disputes with neighbors. We can say the Americans major objective is that to achieve foreign policy goals in which major goal is geopolitics and its territorial position. USA deeply evolved regional politics and its policy makers regularly working to mitigate the conflict of geopolitics and to enhance trade and import export with neighbor countries.

Pastor's perspectives reflect different concepts, both, in essence, agree that the nature of the causes is external. Each perspective points to the international environment for explaining what has determined U.S. foreign policy. Similarly, Morse and Chen (2014) apply interdependence theory to foreign policymaking and contend that it is increasingly difficult for countries to control their own destinies because of their effects on one another. Moreover, the American public's anticommunist beliefs account for justification of U.S. coercion during the Cold War. David (1972), perhaps best describes this classic orthodox interpretation of domestic determinants on policymaking. More importantly, David and other scholars maintain the importance of focusing the level of analysis on the decision-making actors, who through their beliefs, values and unique perspectives, influence U.S. policy.

Latin America



Figure: <https://www.mapsfordesign.com/product/latin-america-regional-powerpoint-map-countries-names/>



Source: <https://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/camerica.htm>

Ralph (1991) finds society to be an important determinant upon policy output. However, he maintains that the political structures of advanced capitalist societies also foster an environment for the concentration of private economic power, which, in turn, has a profound impact on policymaking. Thus, he claims that the positions of power in the U.S. have been drawn most often from big business and ownership; the goals of the state are a direct reflection of the goals of the elites in society. As the case studies show, U.S. intervention in Central America can be traced, in some cases, to this concept. Thus, Ralph perhaps best represents the revisionist interpretation of domestic determinants upon policymaking, for in many ways he argues the domestic

side of the neo-dependency argument. Again, while each of the domestic perspectives differs in its approach, together they emphasize the internal determinants of U.S. foreign policy.

The drive behind U.S. intervention in Central America is the hegemonic strategy of the United States to exercise control in Central America is heightened by a perceived need to sustain hegemony over the region. This sphere is considered so vital among U.S. policymakers that any threat to the region is perceived as a threat to the United States. More specifically, there are essentially two main ideas that support this theory. The first is the idea that there exists a long-term underlying cause motivating U.S. policy, depending on the region of the world. For instance, Americans have formed an inchoate image of Central America as “the U.S. backyard” due to its geographical proximity since the early part of this.

3. Significance of the Research

USA-Central America relations encompass a broad spectrum of interconnected elements, including trade, economy, foreign policy, and the dynamics of border-sharing. Central America is a significant trade partner for the United States. Trade agreements such as Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) have facilitated the flow of goods and services, making Central America an integral part of U.S. trade networks. The region exports a wide range of products, including agricultural goods, textiles, and machinery, which contribute to economic growth and job creation. This economic partnership is vital for both sides, strengthening the U.S. supply chain while offering Central American countries access to a vast consumer market. Economic integration and cooperation have been central to the relationship, with the U.S. providing aid and investment to support economic development and stability in the region.

Border Sharing and Security: The geopolitical proximity and shared border with Mexico in the northern part of Central America have heightened the significance of border security. Issues such as illegal migration, drug trafficking, and transnational crime require close cooperation between the U.S. and Central American countries. Enhancing border security has been a mutual interest, with the U.S. providing support for border infrastructure and training for law enforcement. The complexities of border-sharing also underscore the importance of addressing root causes, such as poverty, violence, and instability, to reduce the drivers of migration and transnational crime.

4. Research Methodology

In this study qualitative research approach is adopted to find out research findings. Descriptive methodology is followed. Secondary data is collected through research articles, books, research papers, periodicals, magazine etc. News and expert opinion were considered as an important source of secondary data. After analysing secondary data findings were presented through descriptive tools, like bar charts. Data findings and conclusion was explained to address the research questions.

4.1. The Origin of a Policy of Control

From the beginning of the American republic, key U.S. policymakers have coveted Central America. As early as 1787, John Adams concluded that the young republic was “destined to extend its rule over the entire northern part of the hemisphere and anticipated such as a great point gained in favor of the rights of mankind” (Parenti, , 1971). Even Thomas Jefferson wrote that it was in the interest of the United States to have Spain to maintain its hold on Latin America “till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them piece by piece”. Furthermore, Jefferson saw the region as “essential to our tranquility and commerce . . . our strength will allow us to give law of our own hemisphere”. And President John Quincy Adams 1825-1829) would later write, “I consider the cause of that country (Latin America). While such statements are insightful by themselves, an examination of four key policies in early American history also finds their roots in such beliefs: The No-Transfer Policy 1811 (Belko, 2011), the Monroe Doctrine, the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” and the Roosevelt Corollary.

4.2. The No-Transfer Policy of 1811

The expansion of the United States in North America was a significant and complex historical process that occurred over several centuries. It involved the acquisition of new territories, colonization, and the displacement of indigenous peoples. The initial phase of U.S. expansion began with the arrival of European colonists in the early 17th century. The English, French, Dutch, and Spanish established colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America. The Thirteen Colonies, founded by the English, played a central role in the eventual formation of the United States. One of the most significant territorial acquisitions was the Louisiana Purchase. In 1803, the U.S. purchased a vast territory from France, doubling the size of the country. This acquisition extended the U.S. westward beyond the Mississippi River.

Moreover, during the 19th century, the U.S. expanded further west through a combination of treaties, purchases, and military conquests. The Oregon Trail and the California Gold Rush were pivotal in populating the western regions. The westward expansion led to the displacement and often forced removal of Native American tribes from their ancestral lands. This tragic process, often referred to as the Trail of Tears, had devastating consequences for indigenous communities. The Republic of Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845, leading to the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), which resulted in the acquisition of present-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, and other southwestern territories.

The Oregon Treaty with Great Britain resolved the Oregon boundary dispute and established the 49th parallel as the U.S.-Canadian border, securing the Oregon Territory. The U.S. acquired Alaska from Russia in 1867 through a purchase known as

"Seward's Folly." The region later proved to be rich in natural resources. The Gadsden Purchase secured a strip of land in what is now Arizona and New Mexico, primarily for the purpose of building a transcontinental railroad. However, the U.S. expansion in North America led to the country's growth in size and population, and it was a significant factor in shaping its history and society. However, it also resulted in conflicts, the displacement of indigenous peoples, and the transformation of the continent's cultural and geographic landscape.



Source: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/usa-territorial-expansion>

4.3. The Roosevelt Corollary 1904

To be sure, “Americans of Monroe’s day (and Americans ever since) treated the Monroe Doctrine, as an exhilarating example of a young republic’s magnanimous defense of weaker sister republics against Old World despotism”. Parenti (1967) endorsed by the turn of the century, such principles had been so internalized in U.S. foreign policymaking that it would be easy for a future President to invoke it in good faith as an instrument of protective imperialism. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, direct annexation of territories was no longer the most expedient way of enjoying “the fruits of empire” (Parenti, 1969).

Langley (1972) U.S. policymakers increasingly saw control of foreign territory and events as more desirable. In addition, the 1890s witnessed policymakers and politicians debating issues that centered on how and where the United States should extend its influence; not whether expansion should take place. For example, in response to a boundary dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana in 1895, Secretary of State Richard Olney justified the United States' active intrusion into the matter by claiming that the United States “is practically sovereign on this continent and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interpositions” (Crabb, 1984). No doubt, the statement reinforced at least one conclusion about the Monroe doctrine: the idea that the United States had the inherent right to envision control throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Following the announcement of what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the ensuing decades witnessed the growing dominance of U.S. commercial interests throughout Latin America along with increasing applications of military force. Indeed, by the early twentieth century the United States possessed the power to keep foreign countries out of the hemisphere in general and Central America in particular. More important, success in driving the Spanish out of Cuba in 1898 and the United States backed secession of Panama from Colombia firmly established the United States as the hegemonic military, political, and economic power in the region. In fact, some sixty U.S. interventions in Central America occurred in the first three decades of the twentieth century (Parenti, 1971, p. 17).

In short, the initial Latin American policy of the U.S. had been to ensure that the disruption of the Spanish empire did not allow a more powerful European country (the international explanation) to step into Spanish territories close to the United States in a way that threatened its own desire for continental expansion (the domestic explanation). To be sure, the opportunity to form a continental republic by expanding to the Pacific Ocean depended upon the fate of the Spanish borderlands of Florida and Texas. This inspired the Louisiana procurement. It provoked the Florida question. It produced the notable No-Transfer Resolution. It brought about the Monroe Doctrine. It ultimately produced the Roosevelt Corollary. Langley (1972) control as

represented by the hegemonic strategic vision became solidified early as an unquestioned assumption among U.S. policymakers.

In the final analysis, what are the policy implications of U.S. coercion in Central America? For one, such U.S. actions have produced military interventions and government interference unprecedented in any other region of the world. Indeed, the hegemonic strategy theory explains U.S. foreign policy toward Central America in terms of an assessment that seems consistent throughout American History.

5. Conclusion

In the geopolitics of USA and Central America relations, the economic, trade, political, and border-sharing aspects represent a complex interplay of mutual interests and challenges. The significance of this relationship cannot be overstated, given the geographical proximity of Central America to the United States and the historical ties that bind the two regions.

Economically, the trade relationship between the U.S. and Central America has underpinned economic growth and development in both regions. The trade agreements, such as CAFTA-DR, have facilitated the flow of goods, promoting regional stability and creating job opportunities. This economic partnership serves as a vital component of the global supply chain, benefiting both Central American countries and the U.S.

In the realm of politics, U.S. foreign policy towards Central America has evolved over time, reflecting the multifaceted challenges faced by the region. The U.S. has sought to address migration challenges, promote democratic governance, and enhance security and stability. This has involved diplomatic efforts, aid programs, and regional security initiatives aimed at combating drug trafficking and organized crime. The promotion of democracy, human rights, and good governance remains a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Border-sharing and security are pivotal aspects of this relationship, particularly in the northern part of Central America, where borders are shared with Mexico. Issues like illegal migration, drug trafficking, and transnational crime have necessitated close cooperation between the U.S. and Central American countries. Enhancing border security and addressing root causes are imperative to manage these challenges effectively.

In conclusion, the geopolitics of USA and Central America relations encompass a wide range of interrelated elements. This relationship is marked by shared economic interests, evolving foreign policy priorities, and the imperative of effective border management. The complex dynamics between the U.S. and Central America underscore the importance of ongoing cooperation and coordination to address common challenges and promote mutual prosperity and stability in the region.

While a variety of angles could be used to analyze and discuss these four examples of U.S. coercion in Central America, this study is most concerned with examining the underlying influences that have helped shape U.S. policy in the region. By the end of 1989, the Soviet threat was all but gone in the eyes of most U.S. policymakers considering the sweeping changes taking place within the USSR and Eastern Europe. Thus, given the worldwide decline of communism and the apparent end of the Cold War, one would have expected the substance of U.S. policy to change.

Private American business interests and domestic politics help account for and explain much of the U.S. policy in the four cases studied. In addition, the case in Panama suggested that the threat posed by drug trafficking was the first immediate cause in the post-Cold War period.

Admittedly, the case studies included in this article are examples of U.S. coercive actions, and do not include cases where Central America has simply received more passive U.S. assistance. However, the purpose of this research is to suggest a pattern that accounts for U.S. coercive intervention in Central America. As illustrated, eighteenth and nineteenth century U.S. expansionism spilled over into imperialism in the early decades of this century. In turn, this led to U.S. involvement in Latin America. Consequently, the United States has developed a metaphoric view of Latin America as “our backyard.” More importantly, this view is firmly etched in U.S. history, and it is a predominant American attitude today.

The image of Central America as part of the United States “backyard” carried tremendous implications in each of the four cases of intervention. Moreover, this idea had a direct impact on the making of U.S. foreign policy over time, as it has been traditional for Americans to talk in such a proprietary way about Central America even before the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. More recently, Reagan’s (1981-1989) use of the phrase “our backyard” further reflects this sense of power and position relations toward Central America. Thus, this study argues that such an image of the region has become the overwhelming underlying cause for the U.S. coercion in each of the different policymaking environments that were examined, thereby helping to explain why a policy of control continued despite major changes in both the external and internal U.S. policymaking environments.

In addition, the current investigation has attempted to demonstrate that while the immediate causes of coercion in Central America have changed over time, continuity exists as well, for the perceived need of American policymakers to maintain control of the region remains an underlying explanation in all cases. More importantly, this study argues that not only are standard theories of international relations useful approaches to understanding general U.S. foreign policy, but the hegemonic strategic approach is a more compelling theory for explaining U.S. Intervention in Central America. This view suggests that the underlying cause and the substance of the threat in each historical period are equally important for understanding U.S. policy toward the region. That is, the hegemonic strategy theory helps to account for underlying causes that explain the overall continuity in U.S. policy toward the region despite changes in administrations, time, and primary motivations. To be sure, the

political circumstances (both domestic and international) differed throughout this century, but they all invoked similar arguments and discussions that consistently affected relations with the countries of Central America. If Central America is envisioned by American policymakers as a “backyard,” U.S. foreign policy, based on controlling the character of the region, remains likely.

Although the corer intent of this present research has been to address the more underlying causes of United States policy toward Central America, the arguments developed here pose additional intellectual questions. For example, are there other case studies in Central America that could be examined? For that matter, are the findings in this research applicable only to Central America? What about the policy of the United States toward the Caribbean and the rest of Latin America? Indeed, what about the character of U.S. foreign policy toward the rest of the globe? Although the framework developed in this article may not provide a perfect fit for regions other than the U.S. and Central America, it certainly provides insight for analyzing similar patterns in the policymaking process of other nations with similar geopolitical relationships.

According to conventional wisdom, the principles upon which U.S. policy supposedly rests include individualism, democracy, and freedom none of which suggest control. Yet U.S. foreign policy has consistently demonstrated a need for control in Central America. While such coercive policies of the United States have taken different forms at different times, it nevertheless is a response that has become a historical fact. As U.S. policymakers historically have viewed Central America as the “backyard” of the United States, it may make more sense to think of U.S. policy output with such conditions in mind, for what has made coercive intervention in Central America possible has been the underlying assumption among policymakers that presumed U.S. hegemony in the region to be both necessary and proper.

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