

Washington seeks greater crackdown on the Central American working class

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US Homeland Security chief John Kelly outlined the Trump administration's policy towards Central America at the presentation of a report on this region published by the influential Washington think tank, the Atlantic Council. The strategies laid out in the report focus on deterring migration from the Northern Triangle—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—while tightening further the historical US military and economic stranglehold over the region.

The event took place as the US Congress approved the omnibus spending bill to fund the government until September, including massive increases for border security and the military, along with \$655 million in aid for Central America. Most of the latter will be channeled into the Obama-era Alliance for Prosperity of the Northern Triangle, an agreement greatly influenced by Kelly when he was commander of Southcom, which oversees US military operations in the Caribbean, South and Central America.

The Atlantic Council plan, the appointment of Kelly as head of the DHS, and the allocation of substantial funding—only slightly lower than last year's \$750 million—indicate that, by revamping the Obama alliance, the Trump administration aims at intensifying the crackdown on Central American workers as migrants as well as in their countries of origin, all under the banner of national security.

The Guatemalan and Honduran governments had previously officially acknowledged the aid, and this time the foreign ministry of the government of El Salvador, led by the country's former guerrilla movement, the FMLN, declared in obeisance, "these resources will help countries advance in generating opportunities for their citizens and disincentivizing irregular migration to the United States."

Kelly hailed the fact that immigration, mostly from those three countries, has fallen 70 percent since December and credited this to the intensified persecution of undocumented immigrants, his own "appeals to the churches, to the Evangelical movement, and politicians," and the aid of the Mexican government—"all great friends of mine," he said.

He demagogically insisted that he is "saving" migrants, in direct conflict with his depictions of migrants as

a deadly threat. He was asked at last week's presentation why he didn't stop a woman and child from Honduras from being deported as requested by a Pennsylvania senator. With absolute indifference, he responded, "We don't deport people, the law deports people," and branded as lies all claims by migrants to have a "credible fear" of being harmed or killed in Central America, in spite of the civil-war levels of violence there during the last few years.

His own efforts to militarize the border and expand the wall, on top of his calls to implement Trump's travel ban and "extreme vetting" against Muslims, will force migrants fleeing social devastation in the Northern Triangle, the Middle East or Northern Africa to take increasingly dangerous routes to seek refuge. Between 2000 and 2016, the US Customs and Border Patrol found the remains of 6,023 migrants crossing into the United States, a mere fraction of the actual toll, while many thousands more have died seeking to cross the Mediterranean into Europe.

The drug flow into the US continues to be the main driver of social crises in the Northern Triangle, Kelly noted. Thus, the alliance will focus on economic development and security, which will be addressed during a conference in Miami scheduled for mid-June, with representatives from the governments of the US, Mexico, Canada and Colombia joining those from Central America.

Kelly himself notes that any business endeavors or deals "to open their economies to more investment" will be aimed at "agricultural jobs, unskilled labor-type jobs... labor intensive". Moreover, he posed the need for pro-business "adjustments," meaning that the bulk of Alliance programs are to be paid for by the region's poor working class through ever-more-regressive taxes and massive cuts in health, education, pensions, and social programs.

The report calls for more taxes like the regressive telecommunications tax for security expenditures in El Salvador, whose government already declared itself in financial default last month. The IMF has pushed for a 16 percent added-value tax, which would increase the tax burden for households to 29.6 percent of their income, while

in practice companies pay only 5.2 percent of taxes on their profits, a representative figure for the region given widespread exemptions and evasion.

In economic and military matters, Kelly made clear, “securing of our southwest border begins 1,500 miles south. We have unbelievably good partners in that part of the world. The Colombians are absolutely the best friends and allies we have.”

Later in the event, a top former US diplomat and co-chair of the report, John Negroponte, elaborated on this, indicating that “the ideal vision for this part of the world is to have a North American economic platform that can compete with the rest of the world.” A former US ambassador to Honduras under Reagan (1981-85), when it was being used as a military base for the US-backed contras during the civil wars, Negroponte stressed that, in regard to the economies and national security, the key was “integration”. In other words, a greater presence of US capital and military force.

The report’s section on economic development itself refers back to the 1984 Kissinger Commission on Central America named by Reagan. Just as in those years, the references to “development” or transition to a “knowledge-based-economy” are all frauds designed to cover up for the main thrust towards the more brutal exploitation of the Central American working class and peasants.

Henry Kissinger wrote explicitly then about the US fear that in Central America: “... human need is tinder waiting to be ignited. And if it is, the conflagration could threaten the entire hemisphere.” Similarly, the Atlantic Council expresses concern about the region’s “volatility.” A Gallup poll commissioned for the report found that three-quarters of Northern Triangle residents believe that their country is on the wrong path; the same share of the population has no confidence in the state authorities; and more than half responded that they are worse off economically than one year ago.

The decades of imperialist exploitation, the US-led wars and attacks on democratic rights throughout the hemisphere to prop-up Washington’s client-regimes are the chief causes of the desperate social conditions leading so many to flee the Northern Triangle. Using comparable data, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America reports that the respective poverty rates for El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are 41.6 percent, 74.3 percent and 67.7 percent.

As a response to its deepening crisis, its drive to war, and the growth of social opposition among workers and youth domestically and internationally, the US ruling class is again seeking to tighten its grip over its “backyard.”

“The only functioning institutions that exist today are the militaries,” Kelly said in an October 2015 interview. “I can call a president and he will take my call faster than he’ll

take a call from just about anyone else... I once advised a president to step down,” he boasted, reflecting the gangsterism that characterizes the US control over the region’s ruling elites.

The Atlantic Council mentions that the worsening social conditions—with a quarter of youth neither studying nor working, six million people entering the job market in the next six years, and the repatriation of thousands of deportees by Trump—will lead to “a further downward spiral that will directly affect US interests.”

At last week’s presentation, when John Kelly said “International Defense Bank” instead of “International Development Bank”, it was more than a Freudian slip. In the Northern Triangle, the IDB, along with the World Bank IFC, in which the US is the largest shareholder, have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in energy projects in competition with Chinese firms and financed new special military forces that have been implicated in the killing of indigenous and environmental activists.

Moreover, the report’s suggestion of an IDB-managed “public-private supply chain security initiative that focuses on the physical safety of transported goods” is directed not only against gangs, but at securing US access to cheap labor across a more “integrated” region in preparation for war. As John Kelly said at George Washington University referring to protecting the southwest border: “Make no mistake, we are a nation under attack from people who hate us... failed states, cyber-terrorists, vicious smugglers, and sadistic radicals.”

While the vilification of immigrants within the US is aimed at attacking democratic rights against all workers in the country and laying the foundations for a police state, the US ruling class is seeking to build on its anti-immigrant campaign to escalate its military presence in the entire region, in preparation for social upheavals and confrontation with rival powers. For this purpose, it has called also on its Colombian and Mexican allies to train thousands of troops and police and help develop naval capacities in the Northern Triangle.

Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos has already signed military cooperation agreements with the Alliance for Prosperity nations, while Reuters reports that the Mexican foreign Minister declared recently, “The prosperity and security of Central America... represent a priority of Mexico’s foreign policy.”



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