

Conference on Central America outlines plans for militarization and escalating assault on immigrants

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The US and Mexican governments co-hosted a Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America at the end of last week in Miami in which the Trump administration laid out a regional agenda of escalating attacks against Central American migrants, while heavily militarizing the region in preparation for “global” challenges.

Leading the meeting was US Secretary of Homeland Security and former Southern Command (Southcom) chief John Kelly. Also participating were Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin and Vice President Mike Pence, along with officials from Mexico, the Central American nations, Colombia, Spain and the European Union.

Building upon the Obama-era Plan Alliance for Prosperity aimed at stopping the surge in migration from the socially-devastated Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)—Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras—the Trump administration has cast the migrant crisis as a question of “national security,” to be countered through the use of military force, on the one hand, and private capital investments, on the other.

However, the Trump administration’s offensive against immigrants, arresting 38 percent more in its first three months than the same period last year, is provoking serious concerns within the Central American ruling elites over the prospect of uncontrollable social unrest. A Gallup poll commissioned for a May report by the US think-tank Atlantic Council found that three-quarters of NTCA residents have no confidence in the authorities and more than half report being worse off economically than last year.

Since last month’s decision by Trump to revoke the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians living in the US, fears have mounted that by the end of this year US Homeland Security will announce similar revocations in relation to Central America and deport the 263,000 Salvadoran and 57,000 Honduran TPS recipients. US officials have made no effort to allay concerns among the

regional elites, instead exploiting them to further capitalism’s predatory aims.

The reckless and ruthless character of the Trump administration’s assault on migrant workers is underscored by such threats to deport tens of thousands to the poverty-stricken Northern Triangle, where 50,000 people have been murdered in civil-war-era levels of violence during the last three years. Moreover, according to a recent UN report, remittances comprise about 15 percent of the NTCA’s GDP and, on average, 60 percent of the income of recipient households.

Discussion of the desperate social conditions in these countries was virtually excluded from the summit, mentioned only in passing as a lure for investments. The TPS was only addressed in deferential private conversations with Pence, during which the Honduran President conceded that, in the end, “it’s a sovereign decision of the US.”

More generally, pledges for infrastructure spending and economic “reforms” by US and Central American officials centered on attracting private investments and facilitating the exploitation of cheap labor and natural resources. Indicative of this was the approach of El Salvador’s Vice-President Óscar Ortiz, of the former guerrilla movement turned bourgeois political party, the FMLN, which now heads a repressive and US-aligned government. Referring to migration on Thursday, he said: “There is no better antidote than generating jobs, which is only possible if the public and private sectors share a vision together.”

Amid the political warfare in Washington over foreign policy issues—in which both factions of the ruling elite look to the military for support—the military brass has gained predominance in formulating and executing policy. The “total authorization” Trump has granted to the generals within his cabinet, like Kelly himself, on the battlefields in the Middle East also applies to the Northern Triangle and Latin America more broadly.

It’s no accident that the Conference’s second session

Friday was held at the Southern Command headquarters in Miami. There, Kelly sought to draw parallels between the NTCA plan and Plan Colombia or the “Colombian miracle,” as he described it in his address. Signed into law in 2000, Plan Colombia sought to escalate US military presence in the country in order to wage a bloody war on the FARC guerrillas and on the poor peasantry.

The ultimate aim of Kelly and the US ruling elite more broadly is to tighten their grip over the US underbelly of Mexico, Central America and Colombia, and continue expanding its chokehold southward.

China continues to increase its economic influence in Latin America at the expense of the US. This was exemplified by the Panamanian government’s decision last week to break diplomatic relations with Taiwan and adhere to Beijing’s “One China” policy, explicitly invoking China’s large investments in the Canal and the Colon Free Zone.

At the same time, as imperialist tensions between the US and the European Union deepen, the European powers have sought to use Trump’s protectionist stance to expand their involvement in Latin America. Last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Argentina and Mexico, portraying Germany as a more “open and free” alternative to the US under Trump. In Mexico, Merkel said “walls” will solve no problems, according to *El País*, and concluded: “Only when great empires are able to come into agreement and have good relations with neighbors do they have success.”

On Thursday, June 8, Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales visited French President Emmanuel Macron, who gave indications that France will remove Guatemala from its “black list” of tax heavens as a means to attract greater investments and emphasized his “will to accompany Guatemala in its economic and political transformation.”

The US financial and corporate elites see these developments as challenges to its influence in what it regards as its own “backyard.” As elsewhere in the world, US imperialism seeks to counter the decline of its economic position through military means.

Plans are currently being carried out to militarize Mexico’s border with Guatemala as a means of stopping migrants and preparing for broader war. At a Central American Security Conference convened by Southcom in April, the Guatemalan defense secretary announced plans for a “new US Southcom military base in the department of Petén,” which borders Mexico, for joint air, sea, and land operations.

On Monday, the Mexican news magazine *Proceso* reported that a new Mexican army base is being built in Chicomuselo, close to the Guatemalan border. The area’s military commander signaled the base’s alignment with the

US anti-immigrant and military policies, declaring that its purpose is to “achieve safer, more respectable and prosperous borders for everyone and all who live or travel across the Mexican territory.”

While the plans for massive deportations and militarized borders are carried out, the workers, peasants and youth in Central America face conditions of widespread violence, unemployment and super-exploitation, while confronting the repressive military apparatuses and death-squads of the ruling elites that killed hundreds of thousands during the US-backed counterinsurgency wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

As the Central American governments impose regressive tax laws and austerity to attract investments, “human rights” groups and environmental NGOs are attempting to channel social opposition behind empty appeals to the State Department or the US-controlled “anti-impunity” advisory groups like CICIG in Guatemala and MACCIH in Honduras, organizations that serve as window-dressing for corrupt regimes and instruments of US coercion against the local political elites.

At the same time, middle-class political organizations are diverting the growing unrest behind the trade unions and bourgeois nationalist parties like the URNG and Convergencia in Guatemala, LIBRE in Honduras (the political arm of the Popular Resistance National Front), or the ruling FMLN in El Salvador. These forces have all but dropped even verbal opposition to the diktats of Washington and US finance capital, with which they are allied in a common offensive against workers through militarization and regressive “adjustments.”

The only way forward against the Trump administration’s assault on immigrants and the militarization of the region is to develop an independent political movement of the working class against US imperialism, war and inequality, uniting workers across Central America, Mexico, the United States, and internationally.



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