

# Washington presses Central America to militarize and turn away from China

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Last Thursday and Friday, the US Department of Homeland Security hosted the second security conference of the Alliance for Prosperity of the Central American Northern Triangle, which includes El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen and Vice-President Mike Pence were joined by the presidents of Honduras and Guatemala, the vice-president of El Salvador, the foreign secretary of Mexico and representatives of the incoming Mexican administration of president-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

While focusing on reviewing the ongoing build-up of the armed forces in the region, as well as efforts to counter immigration and drug trafficking, the US government used the occasion to warn against falling out of line with Washington's campaign to counter the growth of China's influence in the region.

"On behalf of our administration," Pence declared, "as you build commercial partnerships with other countries, including China, we urge you to focus on, and demand, transparency and look after your—and our—long-term interests."

After referring to economic challenges in Central America, he added: "Even as countries like China tries [sic] to expand their influence in the region, the best way to solve these problems, we believe, is to strengthen the bonds between the United States and the Northern Triangle and all the nations of our hemisphere to strengthen the economic ties between our nations."

This warning comes two weeks after Donald Trump's rant at the UN General Assembly, where he stressed US intentions to enforce the Monroe Doctrine of neo-colonial domination over the hemisphere and warned against "expansionist foreign powers."

Earlier last month, Washington also temporarily

recalled its top diplomatic personnel from El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Panama in protest over the recent decisions by the governments of these countries to break with Taiwan and establish relations with the Chinese government in Beijing. This dispute also led the Trump administration to cancel a summit with foreign ministers and security chiefs of the Alliance for Prosperity.

Last Friday, moreover, the Pentagon published a report on the status of industrial preparations for war in the United States, in which it interjects specifically that "Chinese investment in developing countries in exchange for an encumbrance on their natural resources and access to their markets, particularly in Africa and Latin America, adds an additional level of consideration for the scope of this threat to American economic and national security."

While the emphasis on preparing for major geopolitical conflicts and social upheavals is becoming increasingly apparent, the same efforts have been ongoing since the Obama administration created the Plan Alliance for Prosperity in November 2014. While established in immediate response to a surge in the arrival of unaccompanied minors escaping rampant violence and poverty in the Northern Triangle at the time, it was advanced as the first step in a drive to strengthen the US stranglehold over the hemisphere within the framework of "national security" and Obama's "pivot to Asia" aimed against Chinese influence.

Since then, billions of dollars from the treasuries of these impoverished Central American countries, which have been forced to pick up most of the bill, along with hundreds of millions of dollars from the US government and the Inter-American Development Bank, have been poured into building up the region's

armed forces, as well as significant infrastructure, transport and logistics developments primarily for trade northward, including the US-sponsored creation in 2016 of a Mexico-Central America Interconnection Commission.

So far, the economic effects of the Plan Alliance for Prosperity have not been different from the similar packages of US aid and infrastructure expansion in the early 2000s, which were sold as a means to create jobs for tens of thousands of youth being deported from the US by the Clinton and Bush administrations—many of them because of criminal records and activity in gangs in American inner cities. Most of the benefits from the improved logistics and presence of US corporations went to the local ruling elite and the professional middle class, while unemployment and poverty remained prevalent for the masses and laid the basis for the expansion of the same US gangs re-formed in Central America as the MS-13 and 18th Street *maras*.

At the same time, these projects have significantly reduced the costs of and streamlined regional trade, and effectively achieved a new level of integration of the supply chains across the continent, and therefore strengthened the objective international links of the working class.

On the other hand, this integration has also been expressed in new inter-army operations and command centers under the supervision of the Pentagon.

This is happening as countries rapidly expand their armed forces. The Mexican president elect announced this week that he intends to add 50,000 new soldiers to the army, a 27 percent increase. Also, since the beginning of the year, the US Embassy has been leading efforts in Guatemala to train and re-deploy the Guatemalan army toward the borders and seas as a “defense force” instead of focusing on police work, while adding 12,000 new police officers and special units.

In May 2017, the US think-tank Atlantic Council published a report laying out the framework for the Alliance for Prosperity under the Trump administration. It was co-chaired by the US war criminal and first Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte, and presented by then US Homeland Security and now White House Chief of Staff, John Kelly.

One of its emphases was a “public-private supply chain security initiative that focuses on the physical

safety of transported goods.” As the WSWs warned at the time, this was “directed not only against gangs, but at securing US access to cheap labor across a more ‘integrated’ region in preparation for war.”

While the recent Pentagon report on production centered on the “manufacturing and defense industrial base” within the United States, the military is ultimately calling to reformulate “resilient supply chains” that will undoubtedly be extended across North, Central and South America.

Undoubtedly, this was one of the considerations behind the unprecedented clause in the new US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), preventing its signatories from signing free trade agreements with “non-market economies,” referring to China.

The Alliance for Prosperity conference this week was chiefly aimed at communicating this order to the Northern Triangle governments. Although in a much broader vein, the US-Central America and the DR (Dominican Republic) Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) does include the provision in Article 21.2, that states: “no Party will be prevented from applying the measures it considers necessary to fulfill its obligations regarding the preservation or restoration of peace and international security, or to protect its essential interests in security matters.”

As in the US itself, the deployment of military and police forces against immigrants and refugees subject the most vulnerable layers to the initial brunt of repression, but the militarization at the US-Mexico border and the entire region southward is ultimately aimed at suppressing any social challenge by the entire working class to the drive to turn Latin America into a US battlefield and industrial platform to wage war against other “great powers.”



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