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Foreign Aid as a Mechanism of Neocolonialism? A Case Study on U.S. Development Aid to the Northern Triangle through the Alliance for Prosperity Plan

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FOREIGN AID AS A MECHANISM OF NEOCOLONIALISM?
A CASE STUDY ON U.S. DEVELOPMENT AID TO THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE
THROUGH THE ALLIANCE FOR PROSPERITY PLAN

by

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ABSTRACT

After the influx of Central American unaccompanied child migrants to the U.S. southern border in 2014, the Northern Triangle governments of, Honduras, and Guatemala, and El Salvador, partnered with the Obama administration to implement the Alliance for Prosperity plan, a development initiative introduced by Northern Triangle governments to stem irregular migration through promoting regional economic growth and security. To support the Plan, the U.S. financed \$1 billion in foreign aid assistance and programming. In reality, the Alliance for Prosperity plan was a continuation of the same neoliberal economic model in existence between the U.S. and Northern Triangle region for decades, which has been found to secure national security and business interests over that of inclusive growth among Central American societies. Considering President Biden's \$4 billion commitment to build on this model, the case study that follows seeks to explore through qualitative analysis the hypothesis that the previous Alliance for Prosperity plan was used to perpetuate neocolonial mechanisms of economic dependency, resource extraction, and territorial control, to undermine the Plan's objective to inspire inclusive growth among the Central American people. The findings reveal that the Plan perpetuates neocolonialism by consistently implementing policies that exacerbate local inequalities and neglecting to enforce measures of transparency and accountability. Maintaining the status quo affords the U.S. favorable economic and security interests while at the same time ensuring the dominance of a Central American elitist class. Both partners lack an incentive to change development approaches, serving as an explanation to why foreign aid to address the Central American migrant crisis has undermined its own efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Case

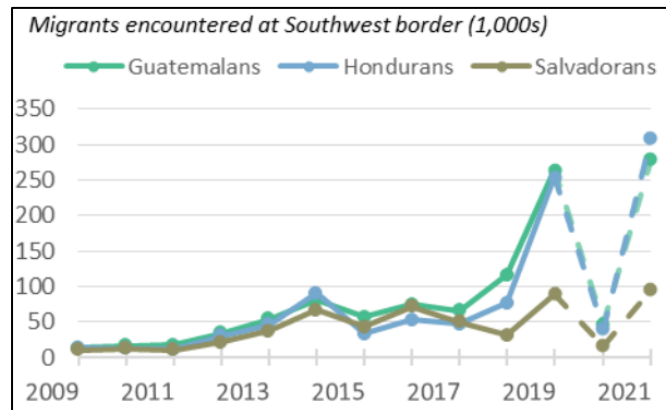
Central America has always been a vital region to U.S. national security, geopolitical, and economic interests. Given the United States' history of dominance in Latin America during the Cold War era, scholarship has focused on previous coups and interventions to demonstrate how the U.S. contributed to the violence and instability countries continue to face today (Alvarez, L. 2020) (Tokić, G. 2017) (Kingstone, P. 2011). Despite billions of dollars in foreign aid and decades of intervention since the Cold War, the 'Northern Triangle' countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, continue to reach unprecedented levels of poverty and crime, which often leads vulnerable groups to migrate to the U.S. southern boarder for protection and/or economic opportunity. Today, illegal migration to the southern border continues to be one of the most controversial issues in American politics, as previous foreign policy initiatives have failed to stop the flow of Central American migrants despite \$2.4 billion in financial assistance between the years of 2013 to 2018 for 370 development projects (GAO, 2019 p.1). These initiatives, under what was the new *U.S. Strategy for Central America*, began during Obama's presidency and lasted through the first year of the Trump administration. These efforts were initially motivated by the massive migratory influx of unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle in 2014. This border surge served as a call to action for both the United States and Central American governments to attack what was perceived as the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle region, namely a depressed economy, and implement policies from which all countries could mutually benefit.

In response, the governments of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador proposed their own initiative, the Alliance for Prosperity plan, in an attempt to work together with the United States to achieve their common goal of improving human displacement and the socioeconomic conditions of Central America. After a trip to the region in 2015, former Vice President Joe Biden was motivated to advocate for U.S. funding of the Alliance for Prosperity plan, deeming it a solution to three significant challenges to growth in the region: security, good governance, and the lack of international investment (Batz, G. 2019). While the plan emphasized increased regional border

security, foreign direct investment, and large-scale industrial projects as a means of promoting economic growth, it faced widespread criticism over its promotion of neoliberal policies, militarization tactics, and likelihood of propping up corrupt governments, which critics argued would only exacerbate migration. (Garcia, M. 2016) (Iesue, L. 2016) (Batz, G. 2019). Acknowledging the challenge of political corruption in the Northern Triangle, as well as the imperialist history of U.S. interventions in the region, many key foreign policy experts started to question the underlying interests driving the plan (Reynolds, L. 2015). Additionally, several journalists in between 2014 and 2016 began to warn the public, claiming the plan was a mechanism to secure business and political interests among the US and Northern Triangle elites under the guise of improving socioeconomic conditions to stem migration. In an effort to combat these criticisms and gain public support for the initiative, the U.S. government compared the Alliance for Prosperity's promise of success to that of the Clinton administration's Plan Colombia, a security initiative that intended to fight organized crime and curb drug trafficking. While Plan Colombia had been deemed a success in certain areas, Latin American analysts were quick to counter that it led to the "rapid dispossession of indigenous land by transnational companies," and furthered the country's militarization and human rights violations (Abbott, J. 2016). In response, at the time of congressional debate over the Alliance for Prosperity plan, the White House executed a massive public relations campaign to improve the image of Plan Colombia by primarily highlighting its successes (Abbott, J. 2016). Ultimately, the U.S. congress approved \$750 million in aid to support the Alliance for Prosperity plan.

Intended to achieve medium to long term improvements in economic performance, security, and governance in order to reduce illegal migration to the southern border, the Alliance for Prosperity plan ultimately led to increased border apprehensions. While progress has been reported in certain programmatic areas since the plan was initiated in 2016, it failed to reach its objective of attacking the root causes of migration, fueling scholars to argue that the initiative, similar to previous interventions, prioritized securing U.S. interests over improving the livelihoods of the 'people' (Batz, G. 2019).

Figure 1. U.S. Border Patrol Apprehensions and Expulsions of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran Nationals at the Southwest Border: FY2011-FY2021



Source: U.S. Border Patrol data

Looking at Figure 1, migration to the United States from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador skyrocketed in 2019, and has only dipped in response to border closings during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ernst, J. et al. 2020). Due to the fact that the expenditure of foreign aid and programming in this region has continued to exacerbate levels of migration, there is a pressing need for new scholarship to investigate the specific implications of U.S. leadership in the Northern Triangle and analyze why certain policies continue to be implemented despite negative results. Considering that current U.S. President Joe Biden has outlined a \$4 billion commitment to build on the Alliance for Prosperity model, there is an imminent calling by researchers, policymakers, and human rights organizations to critically assess the political, social, and economic implications of this development model and seek to understand the intentions behind U.S. policy prescriptions in relation to its long-term effects on the Northern Triangle’s institutional fragility. As public discourse and the media demand solutions to the border crisis, additional literature on the implications of foreign aid will bring about greater transparency and promote more effective solutions to the causes driving migration from the region.

1.2. Objective of the Study

While previous studies have identified negative results of economic and security reforms through the Alliance for Prosperity plan in Central America to deter migration, they fail to explain why these failed policies continue to be implemented in the region. Paradoxically, the United States

and the Northern Triangle governments promoted this model of development ostensibly to deter migration, however, this model ended up fueling displacement year after year. While we know that the Alliance for Prosperity plan's policy reforms ultimately benefited sector elites and foreign investors at the expense of those who are influenced to migrate, this case study seeks to identify the process behind this phenomenon by analyzing whether the Alliance for Prosperity plan serves as a mechanism of neocolonialism.

Neocolonialism, coined after World War II, refers to the continuation of colonial-like exploitation of developing countries by developed countries through indirect ways, such as control through international capitalism rather than previous use of direct rule (Halperin, S. 2020). By using the theory of neocolonialism to explain its strategy, this thesis will serve to explain whether this plan was crafted as a means of facilitating indirect exploitation and control for the benefit of both U.S. and Northern Triangle elites. Through this analysis, the research will seek to uncover whether the U.S. intervention to solve the migrant crisis was in fact used as a deliberate opportunity to dominate the regions' political and economic institutions. The analysis will demonstrate how the U.S. and the Northern Triangle Governments would benefit from a neocolonial relationship through the uses of international capitalism and institutional corruption, displacing the issue of forced migration. These key elements will be discussed to understand how U.S. hegemony intersects with the issues and solutions to development challenges in the Northern Triangle.

The overall purpose of identifying and examining the process behind the Alliance for Prosperity plan is to bring about greater clarity as to why the United States and Central American leaders continue to promote policies that have been found to contradict their goal of mitigating migration through improving socio-economic conditions. To evaluate whether the Alliance for Prosperity serves as a neocolonialist project, the concepts of dependency and extractivism will be operationalized to explore instances of discrete exploitation, power, and control by a superpower, inevitably producing a relationship of reliance and compliance. The thesis herein will offer a brief theoretical background of neocolonialism and how it can be facilitated through Western development aid and programming. Subsequently, the research design and qualitative methodology will be specified before the analysis of the Alliance for Prosperity plan. Overall, the

interpretation of the data will seek to answer: Did foreign aid through the Alliance for Prosperity plan serve as a mechanism for neocolonialism?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Literature Review of Neocolonialism

This section will briefly review neocolonialism as the ideological extension of colonialism within a new time-period and of a new form of physical or institutional control over a region (Lumumba-Kasongo, T. 2011). Therefore, in practice, the global or regional hegemon influences the economic or political values of a region to serve its own political and economic ends (Harvey, D. 2003). This differs from historical colonial rule in that the control is less of a territorial presence and more discretely hidden in the investments of international capitalism, resource extraction, and conditional foreign aid. Since the colonial era, Western political and economic dominance quickly shifted into the global fight for sovereignty and equality. An instrumental tool for the West to achieve this was granting foreign aid to advance social development, infrastructure, good governance, and economic growth among low-income states. While notable improvements have certainly been made, scholarship on why sustainable growth through development aid and programming in the 21st century is seldom achieved is generally framed into three arguments: (1) its reflection of Western neoliberal values and ideologies rather than focusing on the specific needs of developing economies, (Sagoe, C. 2012) (2) the lack of inclusive institutions to sustainably inspire economic growth after aid runs out (Acemoglu, D., Robinson, J. 2012) and (3) the inability to hold both development agencies and receiving governments accountable for failed efforts (Easterly, W. 2006). Without accountability measures, many foreign aid projects inherently benefit the donor country due to the conditions attached to the aid provided. These conditions can become neocolonial when they are used to serve the hegemon's political and economic ends at the expense of driving local and global inequality (Sagoe, C. 2012).

First applied to relations between Europe and Africa, the neocolonial framework was understood as a way for former colonial powers to stifle the growth of developing countries in order to extract cheap resources. Kwame Nkrumah, who served as Ghana's first president, was one of the first to

theorize neocolonialism regarding contemporary development aid and the economic exploitation of African countries in his 1965 book *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (Nnamdi, U. 2016). According to Nkrumah, the primary goal of neocolonialism is “economic domination at the satisfaction of a few” (Nkrumah, K. 1965). He contends that the quest for Western states is not actually to improve social aspects, but to advance their economic interests and influence in competition with other imperialist powers (Nnamdi, U. 2016).

This framework is often compared to the relations between the U.S. and Latin American countries during the Cold War. Under the Truman Doctrine of 1947, the U.S. offered large sums of foreign aid to governments under the guise of protecting them from communism, however, as U.S. influence in the region grew, its interference in political institutions helped to violently install regimes that were willing to act against their own countries interests and benefit transnational corporations instead (Halperin, S. 2020). Then again in 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy proposed a development program with 22 Latin American countries called the Alliance for Progress. Kennedy’s objective was to maintain democracy and improve economic and social development through guaranteeing \$20 billion in foreign aid over the span of a decade (Ernst, J., et al. 2020). Between the years of 1963 and 1973, U.S. profits from the program generally exceeded new investment, due to the influence of American business lobbyists on the Alliance charter. For instance, U.S. industries lobbied Congress to amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to “ensure that U.S. aid could not assist any enterprise that could compete with U.S. business, unless the country concerned agrees to limit the export of the product to the U.S. to 20 percent of the output,” (Cox, R. 1994 p.83-85). Furthermore, when industries lobbied to limit all purchases of aid machinery and vehicles in the United States, a study in 1967 showed the 90 percent of all the aid commodity expenditures went to U.S. corporations (Cox, R. 1994 p.83-85). Leading up to its termination in 1973, the Alliance for Progress was widely viewed as a failure to improve economic and social development in Latin America.

The examples of both Latin America and Africa are used to illustrate the ways in which superpowers initiate neocolonial projects that produce structures of local inequality in order to benefit from their resources and further economic interests. But are non-western political actors purely passive in this neocolonial relationship? Scholars such as Jean-François Bayart, in his

article, *Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion* (2000), asserts the possibility that Africa might have played an active role in its dependency status, noting “the leading actors in sub-Saharan societies have tended to compensate for their difficulties in the autonomization of their power and in intensifying the exploitation of their dependents,” (Bayart, JF. 2000., p.218). In other words, leaders can benefit from the impoverishment of their citizens because a neocolonial relationship will keep foreign aid flowing in to provide the social spending that keeps them in power. Bayart’s work has shifted the critical view of neocolonialism from purely a one-sided phenomenon to that of a reciprocal process of securing power for both the developed and underdeveloped administrations. Robinson’s *Why Nations Fail* (2012), effectively builds on these arguments by using the example of colonial Latin America’s extractive economic institutions, of which political and economic power was concentrated in the hands of elites with few constraints and opposition (Acemoglu, D., Robinson, J. 2012, p.95). Consequentially, these elites have the power to structure economic institutions that work to extract resources from the society, thus reinforcing their wealth and power. Their work guides us to understand that extractive political elites might not implement policies to promote economic development in their societies because they simply lack an incentive to do so. Using this perspective, extractive governments serve to reinforce neocolonial projects in that they support policies that fail benefit their societies. Therefore, foreign aid assistance is directed towards elite members of society, who use it for the purpose of their own political benefit. With this in mind, extractive governments are not passive in the practice of neocolonialism due to their ability to exploit foreign aid assistance and contribute to structures of local inequality within their societies to meet their own political and economic ends.

2.2. Neocolonialism and Accountability Measures

While most Western democratic states fit more of an inclusive than extractive model, Western-funded international financial institutions are also criticized for granting conditional loans to developing nations on the grounds that they take certain actions that benefit Western states (Halperin, S. 2020). Scholars such as Duncan Green have gone further to expose the unwillingness of Western institutions to consider whether these interventions are more harmful than helpful to developing economies. For instance, the World Bank’s *Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative* (SAPRI) in 2002 served to bring about comprehensive analysis and discussion

of neoliberal economic development reforms between host governments and thousands of NGOs. When its report revealed the disappointing results of the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), the initiative to discuss the outcomes of the economic reforms was terminated altogether (Green, D. 2003). While this example clearly demonstrates a level of deception, often times, foreign aid organizations and institutions enact policies despite conflicting evidence simply because their own analysis can fall victim to confirmation bias (Easterly, W. 2007).

Hence, the critical foundation of successful development aid rests in not only the monitoring and evaluation of programs but also the accountability of institutions to address its failures. Similarly, William Easterly's, *The White Man's Burden* (2006), also speaks to the issue of accountability by comparing the psychology of development aid to that of capitalism. He explains that in capitalism, sellers are motivated by making profits and are punished for disappointing results, allowing them to continuously develop modes of improving growth. Development agencies on the other hand, are not as motivated to meet their goals because nothing will happen if they don't (Easterly, W. 2007). Easterly's work is convincing in that development agencies may lack an incentive to succeed due to a lack of accountability, however, when their failures can directly benefit Western political and economic institutions, it is worth considering whether hidden motives are at play. Easterly himself questions Western intentions by highlighting the quick global transition from colonialism to foreign aid. Is the mission for global equality a way for the West to secure its own cultural, economic, and political interests? This reluctance among foreign aid institutions to acknowledge its failures and alter its approach to better reach their goals has inspired many academics to make a connection between the theory of neocolonialism and Western projects to improve socioeconomic conditions in developing areas.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

When considering the case of U.S. development aid in Central America over the previous few decades, its political and economic institutions have failed to acknowledge the criticism and contestation of neoliberal development plans in the Northern Triangle and have continued to implement similar models under the guise of improving economic conditions and stemming migration. Since the Alliance for Prosperity plan was first drafted by the political leaders of

Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and was later approved and funded by the Obama administration (Reynolds, L. 2015), it is critical to also consider the role that Central American political elites play in their request for financial assistance and their solutions to development issues. Keeping Bayart's work in mind, it is reasonable to examine whether a neocolonial relationship between the Northern Triangle and the United States is one of a reciprocal process of collective elitist interests. In employing neocolonialism to explain the strategy behind the Alliance for Prosperity development plan, this case study will explore the hegemonic role of the United States as well as the self-interest of the Northern Triangle governments in order to expose the underlying motivators driving the plan. Furthermore, the analysis will operationalize the concepts of dependency and extractivism to explore whether the Alliance for Prosperity serves as a mechanism for perpetrating neocolonialism.

Originating in Latin America, the concept of dependency is seen as a fundamental explanatory concept of the condition of underdevelopment (Dos Santos, T. 1968). Contemporary theorists have conceptualized dependency in many ways. This study will employ the definition from Brazilian social scientist, Theotônio Dos Santos; "Dependence is a conditioning situation in which the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others," of which, "causes these countries to be both backward and exploited," (Dos Santos, T. 1973). The crux of the issue for dependency theorists rests in how the condition of underdeveloped countries accompanies the expansion of industrialized capitalist societies (Namkoong, Y. 1999). Dos Santos' conceptualization is most applicable to this case study in that it omits the precondition that developing economies are purely subjected by this process. He asserts that there are both internal and external factors that build dependency, "the process of capital accumulation of the dependent countries is conditioned by their insertion in the world economy while at the same time being determined by their own internal laws of development," (Dos Santos, T. 1991). This insertion into the world economy, such as trade liberalization, is argued to be a largely disadvantaged system for developing countries because they are forced to compete in the same market as advanced economies despite the clearly unequal exchange of goods. Therefore, dependency in regard to this study will refer to the Northern Triangle's adoption of economic policies that support ruling elites at the expense of elevating marginal classes, leaving them consistently dependent on foreign aid

assistance. Dependency will be evaluated both in terms of the United States hegemonic role, as well as the internal factors influencing Northern Triangle elites.

As for extractivism, its practice was forged in the “exploitation of the raw materials essential for the industrial development and prosperity of the global North,” (Acosta, A. 2013). The Inter-American Development Bank in its several studies and annual reports have indicated that the richer a country is in natural resources, the more likely they are to be poor (Acosta, A. 2013). This paradox is explained through the extractive practices of the West in order to keep up with high consumption levels and capitalist interests. This issue is often reinforced by the lack of sustainability or regard for environmental degradation during extraction (Acosta, A. 2013). In practice, most of what is produced by extractive industries is directly exported, excluding the local population from its benefits. Furthermore, the extractive companies engaging in these projects are almost always foreign owned, generating income from the exploitation of foreign resources (Acosta, A. 2013). For this case study, the analysis will explore the infrastructure projects funded by the United States to gauge the implications of these projects on the local population. In addition, the exploitive relationship between foreign businesses and Central American workers will be qualified as a form of resource extraction due to the unequal ratio of company success to employee conditions. For instance, as a means of attracting foreign investment in developing areas, governments often ensure economic incentives that are favorable to foreign companies at the expense of stripping workers of their labor rights and keeping their salaries low (Easterly, W. (2007). This unequal exchange relationship is a major contributor to poor socioeconomic conditions in the global South.

As a result of both dependency and extractivism, developing nations have historically struggled to achieve inclusive economic growth. While foreign aid assistance to Central America has not shown significant progress despite billions in investments, this analysis will explore whether the strategy behind the Alliance for Prosperity is grounded upon the neocolonial practices of dependency and extractivism, offering an explanation as to why U.S. intervention has not led to decreased levels of migration.

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

As mentioned in previous studies, the Alliance for Prosperity plan did not lead to a significant change in economic growth or stemming migration. It is also known that the initiative has in some cases exacerbated human rights abuses and inequalities due to its support of neoliberal policies and militarization tactics that have previously failed in the region. Therefore, this case study will seek to analyze the strategy behind the Alliance for Prosperity plan by evaluating its use of the neocolonial mechanisms of dependency and extractivism. The objective of this case study is to determine whether the Alliance for Prosperity acts as a mechanism for perpetuating neocolonialism. To empirically evaluate this hypothesis, qualitative analysis is most suitable to descriptively analyze conceptual findings that are non-quantifiable. The independent variable in this case study is the strategy behind the Alliance for Prosperity plan, while the dependent variable is the negative outcome of increased migration. Therefore, qualitative analysis will be utilized to investigate whether the neocolonial mechanisms of dependency and extractivism help to produce this outcome.

A case study is appropriate for this research in that it grants the opportunity to craft an in-depth, multifaceted understanding of a particular phenomenon regarding its complexity within a real-world context. The analysis of U.S. hegemony was chosen for this case study due to its controversial history of intervention in South America, of which revealed its hidden agenda of protecting national interests at the cost of grave human rights abuses (Harvey, D. 2003). The specific case of U.S. development aid to the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador was chosen not only because they have been subjected to colonialist and U.S. imperialist practices in the past, but that they continue to struggle despite countless attempts of Western intervention and development programming. The most current development initiative, the Alliance for Prosperity plan, will be examined due to the extensive speculation among scholars and the public that it would exacerbate conditions in the region. Reminiscent of the Alliance for Progress plan during the Kennedy administration, the Alliance for Prosperity plan differs in that it was crafted by the recipient countries themselves. Nevertheless, their proposal promotes the same

neoliberal economic model that failed to improve development conditions. Therefore, a case study approach will serve to achieve a broader understanding of both the internal and external factors influencing the design of foreign aid assistance and programming in the region. Typically, scholarship on neocolonialism focuses on the superpower as the facilitator of forming a neocolonial relationship with a developing nation, however, by looking at the motivations and involvement of all regional governments, this study will have internal validity and lack confirmation bias.

3.2. Method of Data Analysis

To examine whether the Alliance for Prosperity between the United States and Northern Triangle governments facilitates the neocolonial mechanisms of dependency and extractivism, qualitative analysis of policy documents will be useful for gathering evidence to explain the perspectives and objectives of all governments involved in the strategy and implementation of the plan. Qualitative analysis will add value to this study because its theory testing abilities will be used to explain the outcome of failed development aid, an issue that goes beyond the context of the United States and the Northern Triangle. Nevertheless, for this case, we know that A (foreign aid through the Alliance for Prosperity) led to B (limited improvements in development or migration), however the underlying process explaining why increased aid does not always lead to inclusive growth will be evaluated using the theory of neocolonialism. The hypothesized causal mechanism that will explain this outcome is the perpetuation of dependency and extractivism by elites of both the United States and Northern Triangle administrations.

The data that this case study will draw from to examine this hypothesis will be (1) the initial proposal of the *Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map*, drafted by the elected officials of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, (2) the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America*, of which discusses U.S. priorities (3) U.S. congressional data on the national budget and progress reports, (4) USAID assessments of Northern Triangle development challenges, (5) transcripts from regional conferences in 2014 and 2018 to discuss strategy, priorities, and progress, and (6) formal complaints from civil society organizations. To better understand the perspectives from both sides of the development initiative, the analysis will

distinctly conceptualize the policy decisions and motivations of all political actors with regard to their operationalization of dependency and extractivism to achieve their goals. As previously mentioned in the literature review, extractive governments are not purely passive in neocolonial relationships. Therefore, it is equally essential to break down the intentions and actions of the Northern Triangle governments to further determine if they are extractive in nature and ultimately understand the role that they play in the Alliance for Prosperity plan. Accordingly, the analysis will comprise two sections, (1) the external use of neocolonial mechanisms by the United States administration, as well as (2) the internal use by the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Consequentially, the interpretation of the analysis will serve to bring together both the external and internal factors demonstrating whether the Alliance for Prosperity plan facilitates a neocolonial project within the region. To evaluate this, the subsequent sections will examine both dependency and extractivism as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of neocolonialism.

ANALYSIS

4.1. The United States

While the Alliance for Prosperity plan was created by the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the region largely depends on the United States to lead development programming, provide policy expertise, and contribute financially to achieve mutual interests. As the regional hegemon, the United States' foreign policy strategy seeks to promote policies that protect its citizens and increase domestic economic opportunity. Despite the utopian objective of mutual prosperity with Central American governments, these policy goals are not mutually reinforcing. As dependency theory and extractivism suggests, the successes of advanced industrial countries coincide with the subordination of weaker states. Therefore, the largest indicator of neocolonialism rests in the ability of a superpower to maintain economic or territorial control or influence over a weaker state. The theory of dependency is based on the assumption that these weaker states have no other choice but to accept conditional foreign aid from the West because they lack the funds to develop their own economic institutions (Namkoong, Y. 1999). This allows Western states to advance their own economic or political interests by demanding certain reforms in order to continue the flow of funding.

4.1.1. Dependency through Conditional Aid

According to the US congressional budget, 75% of its foreign assistance to the Alliance for Prosperity plan is conditional, with 50% certifying that the Northern Triangle governments are supporting reforms and programs that will promote economic growth in the region as well as combatting institutional corruption, crime, and human rights abuses (Ernst, J. et al 2020). The remaining 25% of the aid is conditional upon the three governments taking effective steps to deter migration from Central America to the United States (Ernst, J. et al 2020). The economic reforms that were conditioned on the foreign aid directly aligned with neoliberal restructuring of markets and infrastructure projects to facilitate better trade in the region as well as prioritizing attracting foreign investment (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014. p.13-15). While the American economy inherently benefits from open markets and more opportunities to trade as well as granting multinational corporations a larger pool of cheap labor, these projects had previously been found to do little for poverty among Central Americans (Tokić, G. 2017 p.144). Specifically, neoliberal reforms in the region have reinforced ruling elites at the expense of marginal classes, not only broadening the wealth gap but blatantly neglecting the targeted population of labor-induced migrants (Goodfriend, H. 2017).

In understanding this policy decision, it is critical to analyze the role the financial sector plays in policymaking. According to the *U.S. Strategy for Central America*, the document specifies that the U.S. would convene a major conference to identify how the main constraints to development in Central America should be addressed, noting that the conference would serve to “bring together the key actors who will act in support of Central America and help prepare a plan of action,” (p.3). Taking place in November of 2014 at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the attendees mostly consisted of U.S. investors and neglected the inclusion of civil society organizations. At the conference, Vice President Joe Biden, in his speech to promote the Alliance for Prosperity plan, affirmed that there were “important people here,” with “none more important than those in the private sector,” (Beeton, D. 2014). It is also worth noting that the moderator of the event, Jodi Bond, served as a leader of one of the most influential business lobbies in Washington, (Beeton, D. 2014). Therefore, solutions to the development challenges in the Northern Triangle were prepared with private sector elites, neglecting consultation or inclusion of the local population. In

response, 75 civil-society organizations in 2015 drafted a joint letter to the presidents of Central America, the United States, and Mexico to share their concerns over the plan's lack of transparency, noting that it was developed "behind closed doors," (Reynolds, L. 2015). The letter stressed how the plan largely reflected previously failed neoliberal models which have been confirmed to benefit Central American elites and multinational corporations at the expense of increasing violence and structural inequality on the local level (Brito, L., Mejía, A., Bendezú R. 2021) (Alvarez, L. 2020) (Tokić, G. 2017). None of governments, however, addressed these concerns or expanded the involvement of civil society organizations in the plan's design.

As for the 25% of aid allocated towards migration and security efforts, the United States promoted the militarization of internal borders within Central America as a means to disincentivize migrants from journeying north. The consequences of this policy had transformed these internal borders into warzones, exacerbating state violence and human rights abuses (Iesue, L. 2016). This issue was also addressed in the letter from the 75 civil society organizations warning policy makers of the probable destruction caused by the Alliance for Prosperity plan. The letter details that the policy "risks violating the human right to free transit and the rights of refugees fleeing violence," (p.1). U.S. control only grew in the region, however, as Mexico and Nicaragua were both added to the plan in late 2015, each receiving \$120 million in U.S. aid to secure their borders. With this in mind, it is evident that the U.S. strategy to specifically combat migration and security ultimately militarized each border leading up to the United States to stop the flow of migrants rather than their perceived goal of attacking the root causes of migration. This territorial control through indirect means serves a national security initiative rather than a humanitarian or development effort. While this policy benefited the United States, in that it shifted violence from the U.S.-Mexico border downwards to Central America, significant increase of policing and militarization in already violent border-crossing areas created more opportunities for human rights abuses and made the migration journey increasingly more dangerous (Goodfriend, H. 2017). Noting that this plan was drafted after a migratory crisis concerning the displacement of unaccompanied minors, the policy prescription of militarizing regional borders is all the more inappropriate for the context. In addition, the ignorance of conditions driving migration serves to explain why border apprehensions continued to skyrocket in 2019.

Apart from conditional aid, the Northern Triangle's dependence on U.S. aid also stems from the lack of accountability and transparency among political actors and contractors to effectively monitor and evaluate the plan's outcomes to improve its efficiency and sustainability. Since its implementation, a reoccurring concern within the plan involved the accuracy and integrity of its' progress reports. Despite billions in foreign aid and programming, little was known about improvements in the areas of prosperity, governance, and security, which the Department of State (State) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) were responsible for evaluating (Ernst, J., et al p.81). Due to these inconsistencies, the U.S. Government Accountability Office conducted an independent study to evaluate the overall impact of U.S. intervention in the region. A notable finding from the study indicates that U.S. agencies were not only unwilling to report negative results from the foreign aid programming but that they expressed overly optimistic assessments of their outcomes (Ernst, J. et al. 2020, p.11). These findings were also confirmed by another report conducted by the Wilson's Center's Latin American Program. Despite the effort to expose these weaknesses and generate more transparency, the State Department and USAID did not support the GAO's findings because they opposed its methodology and inclusion of aid programs from the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of Agriculture in its analysis, programs in which they had little influence over (Ernst, J., et al p.81).

The reluctance to provide accurate results of programmatic priorities greatly limits the transparency of American intervention and the reliability of its intentions. By withholding critical findings of failed development efforts, the U.S. perpetuates dependency by not adapting their approach to better reach its perceived goals. This explains why studies on development challenges in the Northern Triangle region are the same today as they were decades ago. Additionally, the report found that many programs did not prioritize the inclusion of local communities or civil society organizations. While it is generally accepted that natives obtain key cultural knowledge on the local conditions of the targeted population, denying their inclusion limits the adaptability of programs to better meet local needs as well as its sustainability after the intervention is completed.

4.1.2. Exploitation of Labor Conditions

An opportunity for the United States to profit from the Northern Triangle region lies in the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and the expansion of extractive industries. Regional economic integration initiatives, like that of free trade agreements are fundamental to the neoliberal model, in that they can better facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI). US congressional research, however, indicates that CAFTA ultimately led to significant adjustment costs in its agriculture sector due to the increased competition from the U.S. agriculture industry (Tokić, G. 2017, p.143). This issue is common for trade agreements that are made between low-income and high-income countries. Furthermore, in its investigation on the impact of U.S. trade policies on workers, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), found repeated violations of workers' rights in Honduras, leading the organization to file a formal complaint with the United States government in 2012 in an effort to urge policy changes in the CAFTA (AFL-CIO, 2014). The U.S. had not only neglected the complaint, despite its legal obligation to address it within 6 months, but also had worked to expand on CAFTA's influence through the Alliance for Prosperity plan without regard to its likelihood of exploiting Central American workers.

The Honduran manufacturing industry represents a clear example of the region's unequal exchange relationship to the United States. Making up 70% of Honduras's foreign direct investment in 2015, the U.S. concentrated its investments in the manufacturing (maquiladora) sector and in wholesale trade. As stated in the *Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map*, industries such as the Honduran maquiladoras offers incentives such as tax exemptions, duty-free imports of raw materials and machinery, and the ability to repatriate profits (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014 p.11). A study later found that this strategy inherently focused on attracting foreign investment rather than supporting small business (Tokić, G. 2017, p.140). Counter evidence indicates that the maquiladora industry has in fact contributed to growth for Northern Triangle economies, however, that growth is untouched by the working class, who experience extremely low wages, poor health and safety standards, and inadequate labor and environmental protections (Beeton, D. 2014). These key findings contribute to the hypothesis that the U.S. chose to support policies that directly contradict economic inclusion because it benefited

from the Northern Triangle's dependence on its investments and maintaining the region as a source of exploitation for multinational corporations.

4.1.3. Extractive Energy Industries

A continued objective of U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle was to enhance energy security and advance regional energy integration. In doing so, largescale industrial investments and hydroelectric projects were prescribed as a solution to economic growth due to the challenge of high electricity costs throughout the region. These energy projects have become a highly controversial issue among human rights organizations as well as a source of violent social unrest within local communities. Several reports of institutional corruption among foreign corporations as well as the widespread persecution of land defenders has deemed extractive industries a source of displacement among indigenous peoples for decades (Batz, G. 2021). Furthermore, the United States government was conscious of these local realities, as USAID, the leading contractor for international development assistance for the Alliance for Prosperity plan, indicated in their reports of the Northern Triangle in 2015. For instance, in USAID's *Guatemala Conflict Vulnerability Assessment*, it notes that investments in hydroelectric projects, mining, and the energy sector generate little employment, provide unequal benefits, and spurs community tensions due to the State's support of the private sector over the consultation of local communities (USAID., 2015 p.27). At the time of the study, USAID acknowledged that 64 hydroelectric projects in Guatemala alone, were currently in the process of construction throughout the country. USAID clearly stressed the implications of U.S. investment in these projects, revealing, "As millions of US dollars have been invested in energy in the past decade, conflicts around hydroelectricity have increased significantly, particularly over the last five years," as well as conveying the lived experiences of affected populations, reporting that "in communities where households still have no electricity, people find it difficult to understand how energy can be generated within their community while families remain condemned to living in darkness," (USAID., 2015 p.28). These findings highlight that energy investments by foreign corporations fail to inclusively benefit local populations, all the while provoking community violence and displacement. Due to the lack of consultation with indigenous populations, the dispossession of their lands forces communities to take legal action

against the state. While some win, others are persecuted or killed by the Guatemala state and the military.

This issue is rampant across the Northern Triangle region due to their untapped wealth of natural resources. A report by Global Witness (2015) found that in 2014 alone, 116 environmental activists in Honduras were murdered for their efforts to stop the implementation of hydropower, mining, and agri-business projects. The most notable murder was that of Honduran activist and winner of the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, Berta Cáceres in 2016. Leading the campaign to stop the construction of the Agua Zarca hydro-dam on the Gualcarque River, a project that threatened a vital water source for hundreds of indigenous peoples, Cáceres was threatened, harassed, and eventually arranged by the president of the hydroelectric dam company, David Castillo, to be shot dead in her home (Batz, G. 2021). When reports indicated that U.S.-trained Honduran military personnel were responsible for carrying out these orders, the United States government's financing of Honduran armed forces persisted. These targeted assassinations of land and environmental defenders continued throughout the implementation of the Alliance for Prosperity plan, stifling the rights of affected populations, and continuing a legacy of displacement. Although the implications of these extractive industries on indigenous communities were made public and assessed by USAID themselves, the United States government continued to expand its investments of the energy sector in order to generate income through exporting natural resources that were largely untouched by local communities.

4.2. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador

In their blueprint to accelerate development and deter displacement, *Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map*, the leaders of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador list the main drivers of migration from the region as: lack of job opportunities, violence, and family reunification in the U.S, stressing the lack of job opportunities as the largest motivator of migration (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014 p.2). Their plan to attack these root causes prioritizes attracting private investment, creating large-scale infrastructure projects, increasing human capital, improving public safety, and strengthening institutions (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014 p.10).

4.2.1 Neglecting Inclusivity

The Northern Triangle leaders claim that a major challenge to growth lies in the unequal wealth distribution in their societies, noting that “20% of the wealthiest segment of the population accounts for more than half of the overall national income,” (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014 p.3). They emphasize their commitment to this issue by repeatedly incorporating the rhetoric of ‘inclusive growth.’ While they detail the lack of well-paying jobs and low-skilled workforce as causes of the unequal wealth distribution, they fail to address how they will improve this issue. Instead, they prescribe increasing private investment and strategically promoting certain sectors such as agro-industry and tourism to stimulate growth. When one considers that these industries largely encompass a low-skilled workforce and produce salaries under \$250 dollars a month, it is clear that creating more jobs in this sector only reinforces impoverishment (Lefebvre, M. 2016). By comparison, migrants working abroad sent back to their home countries about \$6.6 billion in remittances (Lefebvre, M. 2016). Considering that the Alliance for Prosperity is engineered to expand jobs in low-wage sectors, the incentive to migrate for economic opportunity is all the more strengthened.

Their proposal also lists the lack of tax revenue to invest in public services as an obstacle to development. Despite these challenges, they later assert that in order to attract investment in the most underdeveloped areas, they will not only “grant preferential treatment,” or incentives, to foreign companies, but also use the State’s public funding to provide the required infrastructure (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014 p.11). In other words, this strategy prioritizes allocating public spending on infrastructure to benefit foreign investors and sector elites rather than policies to improve the conditions of its workers. The Northern Triangle proposal fails to mention the decades of exploitation of workers and resources by foreign corporations. It does, however, list the policy goal of “improving labor market conditions,” which ultimately benefits employers by increasing the productivity of employees. For example, they emphasize “strengthening the links between the productive sector and training programs to allow for more effective inclusion of people in the workplace,” (Pérez Molina, O., et al. 2014 p.14). In other words, the allocation of public funds was focused on improving the skills of workers in order to increase profit. While an emphasis on education will certainly provide more job opportunities, neither the Northern Triangle proposal

nor the U.S. strategy sheds light on improving the conditions of workers. Promoting meaningful reforms such as creating labor unions, promoting higher wages or benefits, or increasing their bargaining power would drastically improve social equality, however, allowing foreign businesses to continue to profit from cheap labor continues to take priority.

4.2.2. Institutional Corruption

The Northern Triangle countries have suffered a long history of weak institutions and widespread corruption within society. At the time of the Alliance for Prosperity in 2014, the region's leaders responsible for its design included Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina, Salvadorian President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, and Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. These administrations ultimately failed to fulfill their pledge of transparency mentioned in the Alliance for Prosperity proposal. Together, the leaders allege, "in order for the efforts envisioned in the plan to continue over time, it will be necessary to strengthen public finances. But this will not happen if we do not generate greater trust in the State among citizens," (APP, 2014 p.19). Noting that this proposal was composed behind closed doors and without consultation of civil society organizations or migration experts, they failed to inspire trust or transparency before the plan was even approved for funding. While they list objectives for facilitating transparency, they lack a comprehensive plan to implement or assess these measures. As a solution, the U.S. tried to ensure the transparency and accountability of Central American leaders through conditional aid measures, such as suspending aid for the initiative if the Secretary of State did not certify that progress was being made in reducing migration, poverty, violence, and corruption, (Batz, G. 2019). The problem, however, is that the United States government lacked an incentive to reduce corruption since it benefitted politically and economically from the status quo. Moreover, the lack of commitment from the Northern Triangle governments to address corruption and transparency issues is evident in the structure of the proposal itself. Policymakers have accused the Presidents of the Alliance for Prosperity's resemblance to preexisting plans and budgets, speculating that its structure was neither new nor of significant effort in crafting. Their lack of commitment to uphold their own proposed initiatives thus reinforces this notion, as corruption continued to plague Northern Triangle institutions throughout the plan's implementation in 2015-2019.

Starting with Molina, the Guatemalan President since 2011 was forced to resign in 2015 shortly after the Alliance for Prosperity plan was initiated and was later prosecuted alongside his Vice President for “corruption, illicit association and bribery linked to a multimillion-dollar customs scam,” (Lakhani, N. 2015). Brought down by the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), a key measure the United States used to monitor institutional corruption in the region, the case was seen as a large success for anti-corruption measures for the country. His 2016 successor, President Jimmy Morales, however, quickly shut down hope for improved government transparency. After the CICIG opened an investigation on Morales in 2017, he began to wage a war on the anti-corruption commission, declaring that he would not renew the mandate of CICIG, of which \$7.5 million of the Alliance for Prosperity’s budget was allocated (Batz, G. 2019).

As the United States transitioned into a new administration, President Donald Trump continued to support the Alliance for Prosperity, however, slightly reducing U.S. aid as well as calling for stricter regional border enforcement and the construction of a wall between the U.S. and Mexico (Batz, G. 2019). To discuss these new priorities, the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador convened on October 12th, 2018, at a conference co-hosted by the United States and Mexico. According to U.S. embassy records, the conference served to review the initiative’s progress and discuss regional commitments moving forward. Despite the ongoing controversy surrounding the corruption investigation of Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales, the United States Vice President Mike Pence did not question Morales on his battle with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) or discuss any measures for improving institutional corruption or transparency. Instead, the U.S. encouraged the Northern Triangle governments to explore ways to further integrate energy markets, improve trade facilitation, and promote better border management (US Embassy, 2018). The following year, the CICIG shut down its operations after 12 years of investigating high ranking officials, leaving Morales, and other political and economic elites untouched (Abbott, J. 2019).

Corruption in El Salvador was also a key obstacle to development. During the implementation of the Alliance for Prosperity plan, the Salvadorian attorney general at the time, Douglas Melendez, led notable improvements in anti-corruption measures during his 2016-2019 term, putting one

former president in prison and investigating the activities of numerous other political leaders (Murray, C., & Renteria, N. 2018). At his time of reelection in late 2018, however, Melendez experienced powerful opposition from political elites, facing threats of death and imprisonment. Not surprisingly, congress did not confirm his reelection for another three-year term, signifying that the current administration under President Salvador Sanchez Cerén felt threatened by the attorney general's imminent investigation. As of 2021, El Salvador has ordered the arrest of Cerén and 9 of his top officials during his administration in an ongoing corruption investigation of money laundering (Person, & Renteria, N. 2021). Therefore, the administration was actively involved in institutional corruption throughout U.S. funding of the Alliance for Prosperity. This behavior only continued with Cerén's successor, Nayib Bukele in 2019, as he refused to comply with the International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador, ending his country's cooperation with the U.S.-backed initiative, which was investigating his administration.

As for Honduras, President Juan Orlando Hernández was alleged to be actively involved with a narco trafficking operation led by his brother, with evidence of its funds supplying Hernández's presidential campaign (Anderson, J. L. 2021). Despite this evidence, the Trump administration continued relations with Hernández due to his support and compliance with Trump's aggressive measures to curb migration. These measures included Hernández agreeing to sign a "safe third country" agreement, meaning that Honduran migrants that arrived at the U.S. southern border would be sent right back to Honduras to file their claims there (Anderson, J. L. 2021). Despite one of the highest murder and femicide rates in the world, as well as rampant impoverishment, the policy deemed Honduras a safe third country for migrants seeking protection or economic survival. In response to Hernandez's compliance, the United States strongly supported his victory in the 2017 election, which produced several claims of election fraud and violent public protests that resulted in 22 civilian deaths. Similarly, when prosecutors publicly ousted Hernández's brother in 2019, the U.S. Embassy tweeted out praise for its "strong relationship" with Honduras (Anderson, J. L. 2021). Despite Hernández's connection to organized crime groups, his corruption abuses were overlooked as long as he supported the U.S. political and economic agenda within the Alliance for Prosperity plan.

4.3. Interpretation of the Data

The data supports the conclusion that the Alliance for Prosperity plan implemented policy reforms to meet elitist political and economic ends and did little to reduce local inequality. Before implementation, political leaders were informed of the probable human rights violations of neoliberal reforms and militarization tactics, yet they refused to alter the plan's approach or address countless warnings from civil society organizations and migration analysts. The U.S. government's facilitation of Northern Triangle dependency is clear when one considers (1) its unwillingness to report negative results from foreign aid programming; (2) its awareness of the link between energy industries and the displacement of indigenous peoples; and (3) its allowance of the exploitation of labor conditions by multinational corporations. Additionally, through militarization tactics, the United States financed the territorial control of regional borders in order to meet national security interests, thereby contributing to increased violence and human rights abuses. Perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the failure of the plan was that government transparency and accountability among Northern Triangle leaders was overlooked as long as they complied with the United States' foreign policy agenda. This mutual relationship was favorable to Northern Triangle elites because the neoliberal restructuring of markets expanded the wealth gap in their favor, allowing them to remain in positions of authority and extract resources from their dependent societies.

CONCLUSIONS

The United States and the Northern Triangle governments used dependency and extractivism as mechanisms of neocolonialism, which undermined the plan's objective to stem migration and inspire inclusive growth among the Central American people. The Alliance for Prosperity ultimately did not target the population incentivized to migrate due to its top-down neoliberal approach that only produced positive results for sector elites. Consistent with its hegemonic role, the United States used conditional aid as a tool for perpetrating neocolonialism in that it secured favorable economic and security interests to the detriment of the region's sustainable economic growth. This analysis also finds that the underlying motivator driving U.S. support for the Alliance for Prosperity are maximizing profit-margins enough to facilitate sustained extraction while

making the migration journey to the U.S. increasingly dangerous. Considering its refusal to acknowledge or condemn rampant institutional corruption, it is evident that the United States benefits from the status quo. Therefore, the United States has maintained this same approach to foreign aid in the region for decades.

As for the political leaders of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the data supports that they embraced a neocolonial relationship with the United States to reinforce their power and exploitation of their countries' marginalized classes. Considering that economic and political elites in Central America benefit from the investments of foreign economies, they lack an incentive to promote policies that would accelerate inclusive growth. Northern Triangle governments are not incentivized to follow anti-corruption measures because they know that their compliance with U.S. demands is enough to keep U.S. policymakers silent. These findings indicate that migrant crisis was used as an opportunity for the Northern Triangle elites to secure political and economic domination through a mutually beneficial development plan with the United States. As a hegemonic state, the U.S. worked to reinforce this neocolonial relationship by prioritizing its national security and business interests over that of inclusive growth. To conclude, the United States and the Northern Triangles perpetuated neocolonialism through the Alliance for Prosperity plan under the guise of improving socioeconomic development and stemming migration by consistently implementing policies that sustained local inequalities and increased the likelihood of future migration.

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