

# How US Policy in Honduras Set the Stage for Today's Mass Migration

U.S. policy in Honduras, particularly during the Obama administration, is directly responsible for part of the immigration crisis now gripping the U.S., argues Joseph Nevins.

By Joseph Nevins



Central American migrants – particularly unaccompanied minors – are again crossing the U.S.-Mexico boundary in large numbers.

Under the Obama administration In 2014, more than 68,000 unaccompanied Central American children were apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico boundary. There were more than 60,000 in 2016.

The mainstream narrative often reduces the causes of migration to factors unfolding in migrants' home countries. In reality, migration is often a manifestation of a profoundly unequal and exploitative relationship between migrant-sending countries and countries of destination. Understanding this is vital to making immigration policy more effective and ethical.

Through my research on immigration and border policing, I have learned a lot about these dynamics. One example involves relations between Honduras and the United States.

## U.S. Roots of Honduran Emigration

I first visited Honduras in 1987 to do research. As I walked around the city of Comayagua, many thought that I, a white male with short hair in his early 20's, was a U.S. soldier. This was because hundreds of U.S. soldiers were stationed at the nearby Palmerola Air Base at the time. Until shortly before my arrival, many of them would frequent Comayagua, particularly its "red zone" of female sex workers.

U.S. military presence in Honduras and the roots of Honduran migration to the United States are closely linked. It began in the late 1890s, when U.S.-based banana companies first became active there. As historian Walter LaFeber writes in "Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America," American companies "built railroads, established their own banking systems, and bribed government officials at a dizzying pace." As a result, the

Caribbean coast “became a foreign-controlled enclave that systematically swung the whole of Honduras into a one-crop economy whose wealth was carried off to New Orleans, New York, and later Boston.”

By 1914, U.S. banana interests owned almost 1 million acres of Honduras’ best land. These holdings grew through the 1920s to such an extent that, as LaFeber asserts, Honduran peasants “had no hope of access to their nation’s good soil.” Over a few decades, U.S. capital also came to dominate the country’s banking and mining sectors, a process facilitated by the weak state of Honduras’ domestic business sector. This was coupled with direct U.S. political and military interventions to protect U.S. interests in 1907 and 1911.

Such developments made Honduras’ ruling class dependent on Washington for support. A central component of this ruling class was and remains the Honduran military. By the mid-1960s it had become, in LaFeber’s words, the country’s “most developed political institution,” – one that Washington played a key role in shaping.

### **The Reagan Era**

This was especially the case during the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. At that time, U.S. political and military policy was so influential that many referred to the Central American country as the “U.S.S. Honduras” and the Pentagon Republic.

As part of its effort to overthrow the Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua and “roll back” the region’s leftist movements, the Reagan administration “temporarily” stationed several hundred U.S. soldiers in Honduras. Moreover, it trained and sustained Nicaragua’s “contra” rebels on Honduran soil, while greatly increasing military aid and arm sales to the country.

The Reagan years also saw the construction of numerous joint Honduran-U.S. military bases and installations. Such moves greatly strengthened the militarization of Honduran society. In turn, political repression rose. There was a dramatic increase in the number of political assassinations, “disappearances” and illegal detentions.

The Reagan administration also played a big role in restructuring the Honduran economy. It did so by strongly pushing for internal economic reforms, with a focus on exporting manufactured goods. It also helped deregulate and destabilize the global coffee trade, upon which Honduras heavily depended. These changes made Honduras more amenable to the interests of global capital. They disrupted traditional forms of agriculture and undermined an already weak social safety

net.

These decades of U.S. involvement in Honduras set the stage for Honduran emigration to the United States, which began to markedly increase in the 1990s.

In the post-Reagan era, Honduras remained a country scarred by a heavy-handed military, significant human rights abuses and pervasive poverty. Still, liberalizing tendencies of successive governments and grassroots pressure provided openings for democratic forces.

They contributed, for example, to the election of Manuel Zelaya, a liberal reformist, as president in 2006. He led on progressive measures such as raising the minimum wage. He also tried to organize a plebiscite to allow for a constituent assembly to replace the country's constitution, which had been written during a military government. However, these efforts incurred the ire of the country's oligarchy, leading to his overthrow by the military in June 2009.

### **Post-coup Honduras**

The 2009 coup, more than any other development, explains the increase in Honduran migration across the southern U.S. border in the last few years. The Obama administration played an important role in these developments. Although it officially decried Zelaya's ouster, it equivocated on whether or not it constituted a coup, which would have required the U.S. to stop sending most aid to the country.

Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in particular, sent conflicting messages, and worked to ensure that Zelaya did not return to power. This was contrary to the wishes of the Organization of American States, the leading hemispheric political forum composed of the 35 member-countries of the Americas, including the Caribbean. Several months after the coup, Clinton supported a highly questionable election aimed at legitimating the post-coup government.

Strong military ties between the U.S. and Honduras persist: several hundred U.S. troops are stationed at Soto Cano Air Base (formerly Palmerola) in the name of fighting the drug war and providing humanitarian aid.

Since the coup, writes historian Dana Frank, "a series of corrupt administrations has unleashed open criminal control of Honduras, from top to bottom of the government."

Organized crime, drug traffickers and the country's police heavily overlap. Impunity reigns in a country with frequent politically-motivated killings. It is the world's most dangerous country for environmental activists, according to Global Witness, an international nongovernmental organization.

Although its once sky-high murder rate has declined, the continuing exodus of many youth demonstrates that violent gangs still plague urban neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, post-coup governments have intensified an increasingly unregulated, “free market” form of capitalism that makes life unworkable for many. Government spending on health and education, for example, has declined in Honduras. Meanwhile, the country’s poverty rate has risen markedly. These contribute to the growing pressures that push many people to migrate, raising ethical questions about the responsibility of the United States toward those now fleeing from the ravages U.S. policy has helped to produce.

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## An Elite Coalition Emerges Against a Trump-Kim Agreement

Media coverage of the Trump-Kim summit has highlighted a political reaction that threatens to torpedo any possible U.S-North Korean agreement on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, says Gareth Porter.

**By Gareth Porter**

*Special to Consortium News*



An implicit coalition of corporate media, Democratic partisans and others loyal to the national security state are actively hostile to any agreement that would endanger the continuation of the 70-year-old Cold War between the United States and North Korea.

The hostility toward Donald Trump on the part of both corporate media (except for Fox News) and the Democratic Party establishment is obviously a factor in the negative response to the summit. Trump’s dysfunctional persona, extremist domestic strategy and attacks on the press had already created a hyper-adversarial political atmosphere that surrounds everything Trump says or does.

But media coverage of the Singapore summit shows that something much bigger and more sinister is now in play: a consensus among foreign policy and national

security elites and their media allies that Trump's pursuit of an agreement with Kim on denuclearization threatens to undo seventy years of U.S. military dominance in Northeast Asia.

Those elites are determined to resist the political-diplomatic thrust of the Trump administration in negotiating with Kim and have already begun to sound the alarm about the danger Trump poses to the U.S. power position. Not surprisingly Democrats in Congress are already aligning themselves with the national security elite on the issue.

The real concern of the opposition to Trump's diplomacy, therefore, is no longer that he cannot succeed in getting an agreement with Kim on denuclearization but that he will succeed.

The elite media-security framing of the Trump-Kim summit in the initial week was to cast it as having failed to obtain anything concrete from Kim Jong-un, while giving up immensely valuable concessions to Kim. Almost without exception the line from journalists, pundits and national security elite alike compared the joint statement to the texts of previous agreements with North Korea and found that it was completely lacking in detail.

### **Ignoring Kim's Concessions**

Thus *The Washington Post* quoted a tweet by Richard Haas, chairman of the über-establishment Council on Foreign Relations, that the summit "changed nothing" but "makes it harder to keep sanctions in place, further reducing pressure on North Korea to reduce (much less give up) its nuclear weapons and missiles."

*The New York Times* cited the criticism of former CIA official Bruce Klingner, now at the Heritage Foundation, that the joint statement failed to commit North Korea to do as much as promised in agreements negotiated in 1994 and 2005. And CNN reported that the Joint Declaration "did not appear to make any significant progress" in committing the North Koreans to complete denuclearization, citing the use of the word "reaffirmed" in the document, which it opined "highlighted the lack of fresh commitments."

Those criticisms of the joint statement conveniently ignored the fact that Kim had already made the most significant concession he could have made in advance of detailed negotiations between the two states when he committed North Korea to ending the testing of both nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in April following meetings with then CIA Director Mike Pompeo earlier in the month. That commitment by Kim meant that North Korea was entering negotiations with the United States before it had achieved a credible threat to hit the United States with an ICBM armed with a nuclear weapon.

The fact that no mention of Kim's centrally important concession can be found in any of the reports or commentaries on the summit underlines the scarcely hidden agenda at play. Mentioning that fact would have pointed to understandings that Pompeo had already reached with Kim and his envoy to Washington before the summit and were not reflected in the brief text. Pompeo actually confirmed this in remarks made in Detroit on June 18, which only Bloomberg news reported.

Furthermore, the trashing of the summit also employed the politically motivated trick of deliberately ignoring the vast difference between a joint statement of the first ever meeting between the two heads of state and past agreements on denuclearization reached after weeks or months of intensive negotiations.

What really alarmed and even outraged the media and their elite national security allies, however, was that Trump not only announced that he would suspend U.S.-South Korean joint exercises or "war games" as long as the North Koreans were negotiating in good faith on denuclearization, but even called the exercises "very provocative."

One journalist and commentator after another, including CNN and the *Times*' Nicholas Kristof, denounced that description as "adopting" his adversary's "rhetoric" about the exercises. In a podcast with former National Security Council spokesperson Tommy Vietor, former NSC official Kelley Magsamen, now at the Democratic Party's Center for American Progress, rather than acknowledging that a vital principle of diplomacy is to put oneself in the position of one's opponent, charged that Trump had "internalized the language of our adversaries."

The media and critics deploring Trump's willingness to suspend the joint U.S.-South Korean war games have portrayed it as a betrayal of the security alliance with South Korea. But that claim merely dismisses the desires of South Korean President Moon and betrays ignorance of the history of U.S.-South Korean war games.

### **Been Called 'Provocative' Before**

When Trump called the drills "provocative," he was merely expressing the same view that some U.S. officials adopted as long ago as the mid-1980s. These officials also called the exercises "provocative," according to a State Department official interviewed by historian Leon Sigal for his authoritative account of U.S. nuclear diplomacy with North Korea.

Donald Gregg, the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea from 1989 to 1993, observed in an interview with Sigal that the North Koreans mobilized their forces at great expense every time the drills, called "Team Spirit," were held in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who was an Army general and chief of U.S. military intelligence in Korea in the early 1990s, later confirmed to Sigal that the North Koreans would “go nuts” during the annual Team Spirit exercises. Part of the reason for that extreme North Korean anxiety about the drills was that the United States routinely flew nuclear capable B-52s over South Korea as part of the exercises – a practice resumed in recent years after a long hiatus and no doubt reviving the trauma of the U.S. devastation of North Korea from 1950-53.

Ambassador Gregg had supported the idea of suspending the annual Team Spirit exercise in 1992 as part of a proposed effort to get North Korea to change its mind about wanting nuclear weapons. Furthermore the South Korean government itself formally announced in January 1992 that the Team Spirit exercises were being suspended in light of “progress” on North-South nuclear issues. Furthermore, the Clinton administration cancelled Team Spirit drills each year from 1994 to 1996 in an effort to demonstrate the U.S. seriousness in pursuing an agreement with North Korea for an end to its production of plutonium for nuclear weapons.

The provocative character of the joint U.S.-South Korean military drills became even more pronounced after North Korea began testing nuclear weapons and then intercontinental ballistic missiles. In 2015, the U.S. and South Korea adopted a new war plan codenamed OPLAN 5015, which calls for surgical strikes on North Korea’s nuclear and missiles sites and command-and-control facilities, as well as “decapitation” raids targeting senior North Korean leaders, according to the South Korean Yonhap News Agency.

Although the U.S. Command in South Korea has always insisted that all joint exercises are defensive in nature, press reports said that the war plan, which could only be based on a first strike strategy, would be the basis of the publicly announced Ulchi Freedom Guardian war games scheduled for August 2017.

What the national security elite and their media allies are really upset about is the real possibility that Trump will succeed in negotiating a denuclearization deal with North Korea that includes a formal end to the Korean War. That could complicate the Pentagon’s continuing strengthening of the U.S. military posture vis a vis China.

Fareed Zakaria, CNN’s establishment foreign policy pundit, recalled the Pentagon’s aim during the Clinton administration to maintain at least 100,000 U.S. troops in Northeast Asia, and worried that, if the U.S. military alliance with South Korea is deemphasized, the U.S. would “fall below that threshold.”

Ian Bremmer, the CBS News national security pundit, explained that Trump’s

willingness to suspend military exercises means that “the United States is probably going to be a much more marginal player at the end of the day in this region.”

Magsamen suggested a similar concern about Trump weakening the alliance with South Korea in an interview with Vietor, commenting that “a lot of us...see the North Korean challenge in a broader context vis a vis our adversaries, like China and Russia.”

These are early indications of a showdown between Trump and the elite alliance arrayed against him. Senate Democrats can be expected to push back against any agreement that portends possible withdrawal from South Korea, as indicated by the bill proposed by Senators Chris Murphy and Tammy Duckworth to forbid troops withdrawal without Pentagon approval.

If his opponents are dissatisfied with the agreement Trump negotiates, the Senate probably wouldn't ratify a treaty to end the Korean War that Pyongyang would certainly demand. The most promising diplomatic development in East Asia in seven decades could thus be nullified by the shared interests of the loose coalition in preserving a status quo of tension and possible war.

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