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The United States in Central America in the Twenty-First Century: Cursed by the Asymmetry of Power?

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Abstract: This article examines US engagement with El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua during the twenty-first century through the lens of Womack's asymmetry theory, arguing that the US's interactions with these weaker neighbors reveal the limitations of its power. By integrating the role of internal actors within weaker states, this study extends Womack's theory, offering new insights into how asymmetrical power dynamics constrain both dominant and subordinate states. The article demonstrates how these dynamics result in inconsistent US policies characterized by cycles of neglect and crisis-driven interventions. This inconsistency, combined with stereotyped perceptions of regional actors, has ultimately empowered Central American elites while marginalizing other potential agents of change, raising important considerations for future US foreign policy and its practical implications in the region.

Resumen: Este artículo estudia la relación de EE. UU. con El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras y Nicaragua durante el siglo XXI a través de la lente de la teoría de la asimetría de Womack y argumenta que las interacciones de EE. UU. con estos vecinos más débiles revelan las limitaciones de su poder. Este artículo integra el papel de los actores internos dentro de los Estados más débiles y, con ello, amplía la teoría de Womack y ofrece nuevas perspectivas sobre cómo la dinámica de poder asimétrica limita tanto a los Estados dominantes como a los Estados subordinados. El artículo demuestra cómo estas dinámicas derivan en políticas estadounidenses inconsistentes y que están caracterizadas por ciclos de negligencia e intervenciones impulsadas por las crisis. Esta inconsistencia, combinada con percepciones estereotipadas por parte de los actores regionales, ha terminado empoderando a las élites centroamericanas mientras que margina a otros agentes potenciales de cambio. Esto plantea consideraciones importantes con respecto a la futura política exterior de EE. UU. y a sus implicaciones prácticas en la región.

Résumé: Cet article examine les relations américaines avec El Salvador, le Guatemala, le Honduras et le Nicaragua au 21e siècle en adoptant l'angle de la théorie de l'asymétrie de Brantly Womack. Il soutient que les interactions des États-Unis avec ces voisins plus faibles révèlent les limites du pouvoir américain. En intégrant le rôle des acteurs internes au sein des États plus faibles, cette étude prolonge la théorie de Brantly Womack, et propose un nouvel éclairage sur la façon dont les dynamiques de pouvoir asymétriques contraignent à la fois les États dominants et subordonnés. L'article démontre que ces dynamiques débouchent sur une incohérence des politiques américaines caractérisée par des cycles de négligence et d'interventions motivées par une crise. Cette incohérence, à laquelle

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s'ajoutent des perceptions stéréotypées d'acteurs régionaux, a fini par autonomiser les élites d'Amérique centrale, tout en marginalisant d'autres acteurs potentiels du changement. Sont ainsi apparues d'importantes considérations quant à l'avenir de la politique étrangère américaine et ses implications pratiques dans la région.

Keywords: Practice, Foreign Policy, Central America, Asymmetry, US

Palabras clave: Práctica, Política exterior, Centroamérica, Asimetría, EE. UU

Mots clés: Pratique, Politique étrangère, Amérique centrale, Asymétrie, États-Unis

Introduction

US attention to Central America (CA) has fluctuated, shifting from a Cold War priority to relative neglect after the 1990s. However, concerns over migration and democratic backsliding (Stuenkel 2023) have again placed CA at the center of US foreign policy. Often seen as the quintessential US backyard (LeoGrande 2007; Buxton 2011; Cortés Ramos and Fernández Alvarado 2021), CA's renewed prominence reflects debates on US regional influence and both perceptions and discussions of its declining global power. These perceptions deepened as CA leaders openly opposed US policies, exemplified by the refusal of Honduran, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan presidents to attend the 2022 Summit of the Americas (Neuman 2022). Former State Department official Tom Shannon pointed to Nicaragua's Ortega as a symbol of perceived US weakness (Kitroeff 2021). More broadly, various US stakeholders have warned of declining US influence in Latin America, citing the rise of extra-regional actors (Berg 2022; MacCammon 2022; McKinley 2023).

This article does not claim that US influence in CA has vanished. While regional leaders challenge US policies, they still negotiate with or circumvent its requirements. US ambassadors continue exerting public (Ávila and Aguilar 2023) and private (Hondudiario 2022) pressure on local governments, achieving certain policy goals. However, the perception of US failure stems from its inability to secure key strategic objectives despite sustained engagement. This includes Biden's failure to rein in Nayib Bukele, to prevent Honduras from strengthening ties with China, and to manage tensions with Guatemala's traditional elites. More broadly, no US administration in the twenty-first century has realized Obama's vision of "an economically integrated, fully democratic Central America with accountable institutions, economic opportunities, and citizen security" (White House 2014). These persistent challenges raise broader questions: How does a global superpower navigate relationships with dependent neighbors? And are its strategies in asymmetrical power dynamics effective or counterproductive?

This article employs Brantly Womack's asymmetry theory to analyze US–CA relations (focusing on El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) from 2000 to 2022. It argues that while asymmetry imposes clear constraints on weaker states, it also shapes the strategic choices and limitations of the United States, sometimes hindering its ability to achieve its regional goals. Rather than simply restricting one side, these dynamics create shifting opportunities and constraints for different actors within both the United States and CA.

These countries are chosen as they have been the primary focus of US policy since the 2014 migration crisis. Their recurring centrality in US engagement, particularly regarding migration, security cooperation, and governance interventions,

distinguishes them from other CA states. While Nicaragua is included due to its growing tensions with the United States, Costa Rica and Panama—despite their regional significance—have not faced comparable levels of direct US pressure or intervention during the analysis period.

This article makes two contributions. First, while previous studies on asymmetry in international relations often focus on weaker states (Schneider 2011; Escudé 2012; Long 2017a,b, 2022; Heng 2020; Aguas and Pampinella 2022), this article builds on Womack's theory by examining how these dynamics also constrain the actions of the more powerful state—the United States. Second, it introduces a new dimension by including the role of internal groups within weaker states in shaping these interactions. This article moves beyond approaches that primarily examine political elites or treat states as unitary actors. Instead, it contributes to the broader literature on how interactions between domestic and international actors shape bilateral, regional, and global dynamics (Solingen 1998; Abdelal and Kirshner 1999).

The article has three parts. The first applies asymmetry theory to show that power imbalances constrain both weaker and stronger states. The second outlines its application. The final section examines US policy toward four CA states, illustrating how engagement patterns shape opportunities for CA stakeholders. It highlights how US foreign policy—marked by inconsistency and crisis-driven focus—empowers CA elites while limiting agents of change, making the former more resistant to both US and domestic pressures.

Asymmetric Relationships: From Crisis to Oblivion

This section argues that power asymmetry, rather than state size, most impacts a state's behavior and policy outcomes. I first outline how capabilities shape state behavior, then introduce Womack's asymmetry theory to explain the constraints even powerful states encounter.

Why Size Matters and How

Scholars have long examined how power disparities shape a state's behavior and ability to achieve policy goals, particularly in the so-called "hypo-powers" (Long 2017)—states constrained by their size, capabilities, or peripheral status in global politics. Challenging the core (neo)realist claim that IR is inherently anarchic, these scholars argue that most states operate within structures that acknowledge the dominance of global powers. For instance, "peripheral realism" (Escudé 2012) suggests that weaker states either comply with or resist dominant powers, while "small states studies" explore how such states navigate power imbalances to advance their interests (Long 2017a,b, 2022; Heng 2020). However, both perspectives traditionally focus on how power asymmetries restrict weaker states, overlooking their effects on stronger actors.

However, as Sullivan (2007) demonstrates, even in asymmetrical wars, global power's dominance can create challenges that contribute to its failure. Long (2017a, 2) similarly argues that a state's size matters less than the nature of its relationships. Rather than categorizing states as small or large, it is more useful to analyze the dynamics of symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships (Long 2017a, 2). This shift in perspective is crucial because, unlike "smallness," asymmetry shapes the behavior of both dominant and weaker actors.

Asymmetry and IR

I base my argument on Womack's theory of asymmetry. Drawing from his analysis of Sino-Vietnamese relations, Womack (2001, 2010, 2015) argues that disparities in capabilities result in distinct behavior patterns for each counterpart in the

relationship. Specifically, Womack asserts that asymmetry has unique effects not only on weaker states (denoted as "Bs") but also on their powerful counterparts (referred to as "As").

Womack argues that power asymmetry leads to distinct behaviors in dominant (A) and weaker (B) states, with A exerting more influence and B adapting to constraints. The difference in power leads to distinct behavioral patterns, marking A and B as fundamentally different actors in their interactions.

Womack (2015, 46–50; 55–6) outlines the behaviors typical of powerful states in asymmetric relationships. In routine situations, the *powerful state* often remains indifferent to B, relying on stereotypes rather than B's actual behavior. Its attention is limited unless a crisis affects internal policies or involves major external powers. In such cases, A focuses intensely on select issues, amplifying some while ignoring others. A may overreact, seeking quick fixes, sometimes resorting to coercion. Its dominance can also foster arrogance and complacency, leading to unilateral actions, overcommitment, and insensitivity to consequences.

Meanwhile, *hypo-powers* behave differently, focusing on identifying risks and managing vulnerabilities. The powerful state's actions are a constant concern, prompting them to seek opportunities within the asymmetric relationship to enhance security, economic growth, or diplomacy. With limited capabilities and exposure to threats, weaker states prioritize risk management and adapt to challenges from stronger states, lacking the means to counter them directly.

In asymmetrical relationships, the powerful actor shifts between indifference and proactive, sometimes coercive, responses during crises. The weaker state, despite limitations, remains adaptable and exploits these inconsistencies. However, greater capabilities or attention do not guarantee better mutual understanding. The powerful actor often relies on stereotypes and downplays risks, while the weaker state exaggerates threats and assumes intent where none exists. This dynamic makes both prone to miscalculations.

Womack characterizes these behavioral tendencies (*oblivion-crisis-intimidation* versus *over-focus-compliance/resistance*) as "natural" in asymmetrical relationships (2015, 55). He notes that dominant powers risk becoming overly aggressive and insensitive, akin to a bully, while weaker states may act as whining and unreliable partners, undermining the relationship's potential benefits (2015, 56). Womack suggests that poorly managed asymmetrical relationships can lead to conflict, whereas effectively managed ones can result in stability and mutual benefits.

At the same time, Womack does not provide a detailed description of the "mutually beneficial" relationships he mentions, nor does he explain how one actor's behavior influences policies on the ground and, therefore, the responses of the other. For example, how does overfocus on one policy area in the A's approach affect the B's response and create opportunities or limitations for its action?

Similarly, while Womack acknowledges the role of various stakeholders—such as governmental agencies, political elites, interest groups, the military, media, and the general population—in shaping and implementing policies (Womack 2015, 48–50)—he most often treats states as unitary actors. When we refer to US policy toward CA or, for example, Honduras, what exactly are we discussing? Are we talking about the presidential strategies toward the Honduran government, or are we considering the broader US economic policy involving numerous actors interacting with a wide range of political and economic entities in the country and the broader CA?

I argue that to understand the effects of asymmetry truly, or in the words of Womack, to understand "how size matters" (2001, 125), we need (i) a greater systematization of the relational dynamics and (ii) a more thorough look at who is engaging with whom and in what manner. This article aims to contribute to the studies of asymmetry by providing both.

How Do We Operationalize Asymmetric Interactions?

This section links the behavioral patterns of powerful states to their policy impact, focusing on A's tendencies: neglect, heightened crisis attention, intimidation during severe threats, and reliance on stereotypes. First, I define these behaviors and B's possible responses using Womack's framework. Then, I outline how this article examines these tendencies in US engagement and CA reactions.

Theoretical Considerations

In this section, I build on Womack's work to analyze asymmetrical interactions by detailing A's actions, B's potential responses, and incorporating internal groups. Historical examples show that US interventions have differently impacted ruling elites and opposition groups due to political polarization and conflict in CA. During the Cold War, the United States focus on combating Communism strengthened governments in El Salvador and Honduras, often sidelining democratic opposition, while in Guatemala, US intervention led to the overthrow of a democratic government and empowered military groups. Thus, my analysis focuses on ruling elites and opposition within B. However, relevant actors may vary by country.

To begin with, for Womack, "oblivion" implies not an outright disregard for the weaker state but a shift in focus by the more powerful state to other priorities, leading to less political engagement and visibility for the smaller state. Periods of oblivion are marked by a noticeable reduction in the weaker party's presence in high-level political discourse and activities, such as fewer visits, meetings, and joint public appearances, and diminished funding.

Womack notes that when the more powerful actor neglects high-level attention, it often leads to increased activity among lower-level bureaucrats and interest groups, resulting in inconsistent policies due to their differing priorities. The impact of this "oblivion" varies depending on the weaker state's internal politics. B's government and local elites may act more independently, indirectly challenging A's priorities. Conversely, previously suppressed opposition forces may grow stronger and challenge the ruling elites. The differing relationships between B's elites and opposition groups with A can either enhance or undermine A's policy effectiveness.

A "crisis approach" occurs when a powerful actor suddenly sees a weaker entity as a threat or source of instability. Womack identifies two key triggers: the involvement of an external power or developments within the weaker party that could affect the stronger one's internal affairs. When these conditions are met, the weaker state rapidly gains prominence on the agenda of top policymakers, often accompanied by a securitizing narrative that frames the state's issues as threats. This heightened focus typically leads to increased funding for targeted programs and the launch of new policies or strategies, especially following periods of neglect.

During moments of crisis, the policy approach toward the less powerful state tends to be more coordinated and consistent, primarily because the highest level of policymakers manages it. This focus, however, often narrows, centering on what are perceived to be the causes of the crisis. Womack metaphorically suggests that the attention of the A operates like a flashlight in the dark, highlighting only those aspects it deems relevant based on its understanding of the issue at hand. Due to the high cost of A's attention, there is a strong inclination to resolve the issue swiftly.

This sharp shift and narrowing of A's focus create opportunities for groups in B that position themselves as problem solvers, whether governing elites or opposition forces. If a specific group is blamed (e.g., the government for migration or drug trafficking or the opposition for political instability), it must either comply quickly or denounce interference in its sovereignty. Given A's influence, various interest groups in B are likely to leverage its involvement to advance their political objectives.

"Intimidation" is a crisis-driven policy strategy where high-level policymakers from the dominant state make assertive demands on their weaker counterparts, often backed by threats of reduced funding or direct intervention. This tactic aligns with the broader crisis response but specifically targets certain groups within the weaker state. These groups can either vocalize resistance to the intervention, challenge the pressure, or comply, positioning themselves as cooperative partners. The heightened stakes also increase the relevance of the dominant state in the weaker state's internal political battles.

"Stereotyping" is more an approach toward a weaker partner than a distinct strategy. It involves continuously using tropes or labels established during previous interactions to describe ongoing interactions with a smaller partner. Womack identifies a paradox at the heart of this tendency. Despite the powerful counterpart possessing significantly more resources and the capacity to employ numerous experts on the weaker state, the relatively minor importance of B on the agenda of A means that these experts are seldom consulted to inform policy. Instead, preexisting notions about B often guide A's approach.

Stereotyping shapes decisions both during neglect and crises. In periods of neglect, it stems from a lack of strategic focus, leading to reliance on outdated or simplistic views. While crises could prompt reassessment, urgency often reinforces stereotypes, prioritizing quick solutions over thorough analysis. Historically favored allies benefit regardless of current actions, while perceived adversaries face suspicion. In both cases, stereotyping strengthens the influence of actors with established ties or those who can leverage past associations.

To summarize, this section argues that in cases of strong power asymmetry, the powerful counterpart tends to make inconsistent policy choices as its attention shifts between neglect and crisis-driven or intimidating approaches, with stereotyping significantly influencing perceptions of different actors in B. In other words, in strongly asymmetrical relationships, there is no "business as usual" model of engagement. A either "has no business" with B, or its business becomes urgent. This lack of consistency creates varying opportunities and constraints for different groups within B. Table 1 summarizes these strategies and their potential impact on A's policies toward B.

Methodological Considerations

To identify patterns in US–CA relations shaped by asymmetrical power dynamics and their impact on interest groups, I analyze US–CA policy from the G.W. Bush presidency to Biden's first 2 years (2021–2022). Instead of full case studies, this study employs targeted observations to capture recurring engagement dynamics, balancing breadth over depth.

The empirical analysis follows a step-by-step approach. First, to determine when and why the United States prioritizes CA, I examine high-level strategic documents—such as National Security Strategies and regional strategies—alongside funding flows as indicators of policy commitment.

However, these documents and funding data do not fully capture shifts in US engagement, as policies often change without formal updates. To bridge this gap, I analyze "critical episodes"—key moments when the US executive intervened in CA through sanctions, diplomacy, or discursive shifts without altering strategic policies. These episodes represent broader engagement patterns, identified through a systematic review of secondary sources, executive communication, and official reactions.

The study relies on US official documents, academic literature, and policy analyses, supplemented by three interviews with US–CA policy experts. Conducted as a part of a broader research project in 2023, these interviews offer contextual

Table 1. Typical "A" behaviors and their impact on the policy

Strategy:	Stereotyping			
	Oblivion	Crisis approach	Intimidation	
How is it manifested?	Top-level policymakers do not pay attention to B, potentially cutting funds for the country. Moreover, it disappears from the strategic documents	Top-level policymakers publicly engage with the counterpart, include it in strategic documents, and change and/or propose a new/reformed policy toward it	Top-level policymakers publicly engage with their counterpart, demanding changes or adopting certain policies. The government's rhetoric becomes more aggressive, and cooperation is made conditional	Policies formulated based on previous experiences of cooperation; New problems analyzed through the lenses of historical experiences;
How does it affect the policies toward the weaker counterpart?	Increased influence of A's bureaucrats and different lobby groups due to the lack of overall strategic guidance. Increased inconsistency of different aspects of engagement	Increased consistency at a cost of narrowed focus due to securitization of the B-related agenda	Increased consistency at the cost of narrowed focus due to securitization of the B-related agenda. Public rewards and punishments	Policies favor those considered friends despite their actual behavior
Potential effect on different B's actors?	More liberty to all actors to pursue their agenda	Disempowering those perceived as a problem. Interest groups inside B use A's pressure to fight internal political battles	Disempowering those perceived as a problem. Interest groups inside B use A's pressure to fight internal political battles	Those considered friendly have better access and more positive treatment than those perceived as less so

Source: Author based on Womack (2015).

insights into policymaking and regional responses. While not core data, they serve as supporting evidence to complement document analysis and theory.

Asymmetry and US–CA Policy

When "A Is Being Too A": Neglect-Panic Cycle

This section shows that US actions follow patterns of asymmetrical behavior, with CA countries receiving top-level political attention only during perceived crises. It also analyzes how CA actors respond to US initiatives, arguing that this inconsistency benefits certain groups with US ties while disadvantaging others, ultimately hindering US goals.

Between Oblivion and Crisis

I am not the first to observe the cyclical nature of US regional engagement. In 1987, Lowenthal described US–Latin America policy as a "neglect-panic" cycle (Lowenthal 1987). Rojas and Solis (1993)noted a similar pattern of intervention

and oblivion in US–CA policy, while Pastor (2001) used "whirlpool" to describe its cyclical, destructive nature, asking, "Why has the world's most powerful nation been unable either to calm the whirlpool or to escape from it?" (18). I argue this cycle is not an anomaly but a consequence of US–CA power dynamics. As a global power, the United States prioritizes global challenges, focusing on CA only when crises demand urgent action.

Numerous significant global events competed for US attention alongside CA states during the twenty-first century. However, there were occasions when the highest political attention was directed toward them, usually in response to perceived external or internal threats. To observe these moments of heightened interest, I survey the political priorities, analyze funding flows, and document instances when the highest policymakers discursively and politically engage in CA affairs.

Political Priorities

CA countries have not regularly been prioritized in the highest-level US strategic documents, such as National Security Strategies (NSS). However, they have been mentioned several times, often as challenges or within broader US goals in Latin America.

The Bush Administration referenced CA in both the 2002 and 2005 NSS, specifically in the context of Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) and broader free trade initiatives (White House 2002, 18–9; White House 2006, 25). Although CA was absent from Obama's 2010 NSS, it was addressed in 2015 as "vulnerable" during the unaccompanied minor crisis (White House 2015, 27–8). Before this, the Obama Administration had introduced the CAN Strategy and requested a significant increase in foreign aid to support its implementation. Additionally, USAID adopted a Regional Development Cooperation Strategy for CA and Mexico (2015–2019), aligning with the presidential agenda.

In the 2017 NSS under Trump, the focus shifted from migration and poverty to transnational criminal organizations, with CA linked to Venezuela and Cuba, described as following "anachronistic leftist authoritarian" ideologies (White House 2017, 51). The Biden Administration included CA in the NSS with a more neutral tone, focusing on COVID-19 vaccination support (White House 2022, 40). Biden's first year also saw the adoption of the Collaborative Migration Management Strategy and the Strategy for Addressing Root Causes of Migration in CA.

In summary, the United States shifted from promoting free trade to addressing unwanted migration, implementing various policies toward CA throughout the twenty-first century. As shown in Table 2, these policies were largely driven by perceived threats—initially, the spread of Venezuelan influence and leftist ideas and, later, rising migration flows.

Funding

While being an imperfect indicator, the flow of foreign aid may serve as one of the indicators showing the level of interest in the smaller countries. For this, I focus on obligations—"binding agreements that will result in outlays, immediately or in the future."[1] Unlike disbursements, which also consider the absorption capacity of the partner country, obligations clearly state the intention—how much money the United States was willing to provide for various agendas.

The financial flows (see Figure 1) illustrate fluctuations in US attention. During the Cold War, the United States heavily invested in combating the perceived communist threat. After the dissolution of the USSR and the end of civil wars, US assistance declined. From 1993 to 2007, US aid to CA averaged 413 million USD

[1] https://www.foreignassistance.gov/about#tab-glossary.

Table 2. Strategic documents guiding the US–CA policy

Adminis-tration	The most important policy for CA	Background
G.W. Bush	CAFTA-DR	• Expansion of free trade and democracy • Stopping Socialism of the twenty-first century
B. Obama	Strategy for US engagement in CA	• Increased migration flow from NT countries
	The Alliance for Prosperity Plan	*Focus on governance, economic integration, and economic opportunities for migration zones*
D. Trump	Strategy for US engagement in CA (formally continued, but with a strong change of focus)	• Continuing migration from NT countries *Focus on border control & and readmission agreements* • Stopping the "Troika of Tyranny" (relevant for Nicaragua)
J. Biden	Collaborative Migration Management Strategy	• Continuing migration from NT countries
	US Strategy for addressing root causes of Migration in CA	*Focus on anti-corruption efforts*

Source: Author.

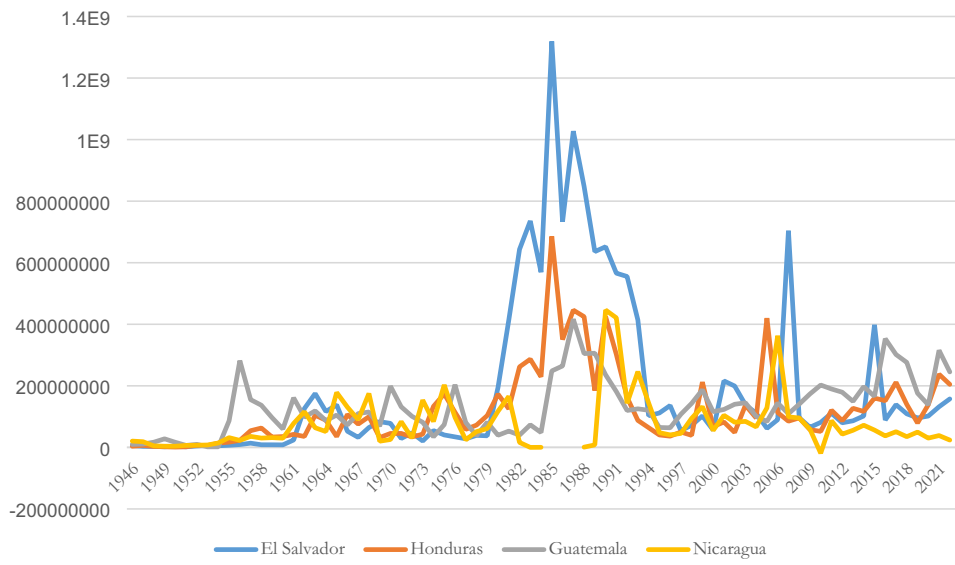

Figure 1. US obligations (constant USD) to Northern Triangle countries. *Source*: https://www.foreignassistance.gov/

annually, about a third of the previous 15 years (Meyer and Ribando Seelke 2010, 19). Nicaragua was an exception, with aid cuts to pressure the Sandinista government, while significant funds supported Contra guerrillas.

The twenty-first century saw significant increases in US foreign aid around 2005–2008 and 2015–2016, with a smaller rise in 2022 and a notable decrease in 2018. The first increase supported CA economies through CAFTA-DR and Millennium Challenge Corporation agreements with Honduras and El Salvador. The 2016–2017 rise followed the adoption of Obama's Central America strategy (CAN Strategy), with over 2 billion USD allocated by Congress between FY2016 and FY2018 (Sullivan et al. 2020, 28). In 2021, the Biden Administration proposed 4 billion USD in aid over four years, and although Congress did not immediately approve the full amount, the United States began scaling up projects that had been reduced or closed during Trump's presidency (CRS 2023, 2). The 2018–2019 decrease reflected Trump's decision to withhold aid to pressure CA countries on migration control, with Nicaragua's aid having already been reduced due to election fraud accusations in 2009 (Rogers 2009).

In summary, from a financial perspective, between the "big moments"—the signing of CAFTA-DR, the adoption of Obama's CAN Strategy, Biden's Root Cause Strategy, and the migration turmoil during Trump's presidency—US–CA policy was not a priority, with funding levels remaining stable and low.

Critical Episodes

In addition to a larger shift in US political and funding priorities, it is essential to examine other occasions where CA countries have featured prominently in the discourse of top-level US officials. In this article, I refer to such situations as "critical episodes" (see Table 3), a handful of which took place over the years. During the Bush Administration, two critical episodes arose: the 2004 El Salvadoran and 2006 Nicaraguan elections. In the Obama Administration, there were two notable critical episodes: the 2009 coup in Honduras and the 2013 crisis involving unaccompanied minor migrants. Under the Trump Administration, one critical episode involved the migrant caravans of 2017–2018 and one—his reaction to protests in Nicaragua in 2018. In the first 2 years of the Biden Administration, two events could be considered "critical periods": the growing tensions with El Salvadoran leader N. Bukele, whose governance was becoming increasingly authoritarian, and the administration's efforts to combat corruption in CA. The latter included imposing various sanctions on regional officials, a strategy implemented since mid-2021.

Three of these eight instances (#1, #2, and #6) were linked to broader US geopolitical objectives to curb the spread of socialism in CA. The other two (#7 and #8) were directly tied to the US anti-corruption agenda for the region's development and stability. Two more critical episodes/periods (#4 and #5) were triggered by the perceived threat to US security by the migrants. Finally, one case—the US role in the Honduran coup (#3)—was a particularly interesting case of intervening due to the lack of clear CA policy. However, as later discussed, this ambiguity and eventual acceptance of the coup stemmed, at least in part, from stereotypes inherent in asymmetrical relations.

Fear as the Reason Behind the Crisis Approach

Most of the major strategic pivots—the signing of DR-CAFTA and the CAN and Root Cause Strategies—along with the eight critical episodes/periods, were driven by two broad categories of reasons that align neatly with Womack's model: fear of external actors and concern over internal CA dynamics affecting US domestic policy.

Table 3. Critical episodes in the US approach to CA

Case	What happened	Reason
1. 2004 El Salvadoran presidential elections	The US proactively supported one side (the government) in the elections	**External actor** US geopolitical goals (Stopping socialism of the twenty-first century)
2. 2006 Nicaraguan presidential elections	The US proactively supported one side (opposition) in the elections	**External actor** US geopolitical goals (Stopping socialism of the twenty-first century)
3. 2009 Coup in Honduras	The US avoided taking a clear position in a way that favored the coup	**No coordinated policy.** *Underlying issues: US geopolitical goals (Stopping socialism of the twenty-first century)*
4. 2013 nonaccompanied minor crisis	External events—an increase of families and children from Northern Triangle countries at the US border >> US changes its policy toward CA	**Internal threats** Perceived threat and internal pressure
5. 2017-2018 migrant caravans	External events—migrant caravans heading to the US border >> US changes its policy toward CA	**Internal threats** Perceived threat and internal pressure
6. 2018 Nicaraguan protests	The US ramped up sanctions against Nicaraguan officials after mass protests	**External actor** US goals in CA (and broader geopolitical goals—weakening Venezuelan, Cuban, and Nicaraguan "axis."
7. 2021 < Tensions with El Salvador	External and internal pressures: increasingly autocratic behavior and anti-American stance of El Salvadoran president N. Bukele + Biden's approach to CA>> US implements preconceived CA strategy	**Internal threats** (+US goals in CA.) Implementation of the US CA policy (focus on corruption) related to the perceived threat of migration + and internal pressures
8. 2021 < anti-corruption measures against CAN elites	US attempt to implement Biden's CA strategy >> sanctions against several Guatemalan, El Salvadoran, and Honduran figures (politicians, businesspeople, judges) >> US implements preconceived CA strategy	**Internal threats** (+US goals in CA.) Implementing the US–CA policy (focus on corruption) related to the perceived threat of migration + and internal pressures

Source: Author.

External Threats: Socialism of the Twenty-First Century and Growing Shadow of China

The Bush Administration's narrative around CAFTA-DR presented it as a tool for prosperity, development, and regional transformation while also positioning it as a strategy to counter Venezuela's growing influence in the subregion. The focus was on trade liberalization to diminish the impact of Cuba and Venezuela and strengthen the US presence (White House 2005).

Moreover, similar reasons pushed the US officials to openly intervene in the 2004 and 2006 elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua, respectively. In 2004, Assistant Secretary Roger Noriega visited El Salvador before the election, warning voters about their relationship choices with the United States amid threats of deporting

Salvadorans, which could halt 2 billion USD in yearly remittances (LeoGrande 2007, 379). White House Special Assistant Otto Reich conducted a teleconference from a US-backed party office in El Salvador, expressing concerns over an FMLN victory. Before the 2006 Nicaraguan elections, US figures like Ambassador Paul Trivelli and Secretary Carlos Gutierrez publicly threatened repercussions if Nicaraguans elected Ortega (LeoGrande 2007, 379).

Finally, the fear of a Cuban–Venezuelan axis reemerged in the Trump Administration's rhetoric. The 2017 NSS specifically targeted Venezuela and Cuba, labeling their governments as followers of "anachronistic leftist authoritarian models" (White House 2017, 51). In 2018, Trump declared Venezuela an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security. That year, National Security Advisor John Bolton included Nicaragua in the "Troika of Tyranny" (Wemer 2018) and emphasized the administration's commitment to opposing dictators in the hemisphere.

Concerns about Venezuelan influence were not limited to Republican-led administrations. Some observers argue that it was one of the reasons why the Obama Administration acquiesced to a military coup in Honduras in 2009 (Harvard Political Review 2015).

Strategic documents highlight the threat of nonhemispheric actors, though actions remain limited. China's regional presence was largely ignored for years; even Costa Rica's 2007 shift from Taiwan to Beijing caused no alarm (Solís 2021). Under Trump, China became a priority. The 2017 NSS warned that "competitors have found operating space in the hemisphere" (White House 2017, 51), and Trump and Pompeo later identified China's influence in CA as a key issue (Solís 2021). Biden maintained this stance, emphasizing the need to counter China, Russia, and Iran (White House 2022, 41). Yet, El Salvador and Honduras' shifts to China did not trigger sanctions, and their neutral stance on Russia's Ukraine invasion drew little high-level US attention.

Intermestic Issues: Drugs and Migration

Another key trigger group involves intermestic issues—drug trafficking and migration. While drug cartels dominate public and policy debates, they have not sparked major crises in US–CA relations as they have in Mexico. Under Bush, combating cartels was a priority, but CA received limited funding under the Merida Initiative, which initially focused on Mexico. In 2011, Obama separated CA's component, creating the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), though without a significant increase in funding.

In the early twenty-first century, security concerns in the subregion intensified for the United States, especially with the 2014 "unaccompanied minor crisis," when 68,541 children were apprehended at the US–Mexico border—a 77% increase from the previous year (Lind 2014). Migration has long been central to US relations with its southern neighbors, but since 2014, the focus has increasingly shifted to migration issues, a trend that persisted through the Trump and Biden administrations, with Biden introducing two key strategies on migration management.

The 2014 crisis also marked heightened "securitization" of migration and perceived southern "disorder." As Vice President, Biden supported Obama's CAN policy, asserting that the region's "security and prosperity are inextricably linked with our own" and warning that without action, "the Western hemisphere would feel the consequences" (Biden 2015). The concept of "root causes" of migration and instability has since securitized many aspects of CA's social, political, and economic life. While Obama's approach emphasized economic development and governance, Trump prioritized border security, and Biden's Administration complemented the securitization of the border with the promotion of good governance and anticorruption efforts.

In short, whenever US politicians have envisioned more structured engagement with CA, it has typically revolved around two broad issues, as Womack predicted: involvement of extra-regional actors or the subregion's impact on internal US matters like drug use and migration flows. An interviewed US–CA relations expert noted that, despite varying strategies across administrations, the United States has consistently viewed CA as a series of problems needing solutions throughout the twenty-first century.[2]

Falling to Good Old Stereotypes (and Opening the Door to Good Old Fellas)

Given the shifting priorities of US policymakers and the evolving international landscape, how has the United States shaped its policy decisions? As Womack highlights, stereotyping has played a significant role in US policymaking, with both Republicans and Democrats often demonizing the "bad" left and adhering to a specific view of the historic US role in Latin America.

Republican policymakers often relied on Cold War-era memories and clichés. For example, in 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick framed the CAFTA-DR agreement within a historical narrative, suggesting it would bring positive change to the region, even portraying US support during the Cold War as crucial to democratization (USTR 2004). Similarly, John Bolton's "Troika of Tyranny" and the epithets used for the FMLN and Sandinistas during the 2004 and 2006 elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua reflect this same reliance on outdated narratives.

This suspicion about the left is not confined to Republicans. Observers noted that Hillary Clinton's ideological mistrust of the Latin American left influenced her decision to ultimately accept the military coup in Honduras (Beckman 2017). Clinton herself stated that she believed coup leader Micheletti's claim that he was "protecting Honduran democracy against Zelaya's unlawful power grab," fearing Zelaya would become "another Chavez or Castro" (Clinton 2014). Hence, when faced with urgent crises and a lack of clear solutions, US policymakers defaulted to stereotypical views of the Latin American left. Second, both Republican and Democratic policymakers share a belief in the US's unique role in the region, though Republicans are more openly aligned with the Monroe Doctrine. While Secretary of State John Kerry declared the Monroe Doctrine's end in 2013, his successor, Rex Tillerson, revived it in 2017, stating it was "as relevant today as it was the day it was written." Democrats, too, adhere to the notion of a US responsibility to "improve" Latin America, as articulated by Lars Schoultz (2018, 304). US strategic documents often depict the region as a source of disorder requiring US intervention. For example, in 2015, then-Vice President Joe Biden asserted that CA "requires systemic change, which we in the United States have a direct interest in helping to bring about" (Biden 2015). Reflecting this mindset, the CAN Strategy was framed more as a conditional agreement than a development plan.

Regardless of whether crafted by Republican or Democrat administrations, US policies often lacked mechanisms for incorporating input from CA counterparts. An official US report noted that officials from nearly every CA nation felt the region was insufficiently involved in the formulation of Mérida/CARSI and that the initiative could better reflect host government priorities (Sun Wyler 2012, 17). The United States typically engages with economic and political elites closely tied to its embassies. For example, the Alliance for Prosperity Plan (APP), supported by the Obama Administration in response to migration crises, was criticized for its lack of inclusivity, reflecting mainly the interests of local elites and United States while excluding civil society actors (Pineda and Matamoros 2016, 38–9). A high-level discussion at Miami's US Southern Command base between political and economic elites

[2] Interview February 23, 2023 02 23.

and US counterparts was especially contentious for excluding other stakeholders (Solano 2015, 14).

Finally, stereotyping has influenced US personnel choices for CA and broader Latin American affairs, often appointing diplomats with Cold War-era experience to key political roles. For example, in 2003, George W. Bush appointed Otto Reich, a Cuban-born conservative involved in Nicaragua's Contra War, as "Special Envoy for Western Hemisphere Initiatives" (Blanton 2001). Similarly, Elliott Abrams, a key figure during the Reagan era and involved in the Iran-Contra affair, was later appointed by Trump as Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela, despite his 1991 guilty plea for withholding information, which was pardoned by President George H.W. Bush. Although Obama sought to distance his administration from Cold War rhetoric, it is notable that the US Ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985—who had been involved in funding and directing the Contra War (Anderson and Van Atta 1989)—was dispatched by the State Department just before the Honduran coup to discuss the future of a US military airbase, meeting with leaders planning the coup (Beckman 2017).

This section argues that throughout most of the twenty-first century, US actions in CA followed the patterns of asymmetrical behavior outlined by Womack. CA countries received top-level political attention only during specific crises or perceived threats, such as the potential spread of Venezuelan influence (2004–2008) and fears of increased migration (2014–2016, 2018, 2021). During other times, CA largely remained off the radar of US presidential administrations. The next section explores how these patterns may have influenced the US's standing and role in the region.

Then B Responds: Empowering Those That Can Adapt?

The previous section showed that US policy toward CA countries aligns with asymmetry theory, characterized by inconsistency and fluctuating between crisis response and neglect, often basing the policies on preconceived notions about CA. The section provides insights into how these US engagement patterns created and limited opportunities for various CA stakeholders.

Crisis Approach: Complaining, Acquiescing and Using the United States for Internal Political Agenda

In response to US crisis-driven policies and perceived intimidation, CA elites often adopt both compliance and resistance strategies, often simultaneously. They generally conform to US demands while leveraging opportunities for political or economic gain. For example, in response to the CAN Strategy and Trump's push for migration cooperation, CA leaders positioned themselves as cooperative partners, securing increased funding or policy concessions, such as dismantling anti-corruption commissions. While Nicaragua follows a distinct path, it managed to boost exports to the United States from 2007 to 2022 (Confidencial 2022) while maintaining its "anti-imperialist" rhetoric.

Conversely, when faced with US pressure, CA leaders often push back, invoking historical grievances and emphasizing sovereignty. Presidents across the ideological spectrum highlight the US's imperial past to justify resistance. After US criticism of Nicaragua's 2016 elections, Daniel Ortega asserted electoral sovereignty, declaring, "Now it's us, the Nicaraguans, who decide because we no longer have a single Yankee general here… It's we Nicaraguans who count the votes" (Wroughton and Pretel 2016). In 2022, Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei accused the State Department of interfering in Guatemala's affairs (Marroquín 2022). Similarly, Roberto Micheletti, leader of the Honduran coup, rejected US sanctions, stating, "It isn't possible for anyone, no matter how powerful they are, to come over here and tell us what we have to do" (Rosenberg 2009).

It is crucial to note that the United States does not always direct its attention and intimidation tactics toward ruling elites. Although this was indeed the case in most critical episodes, there were times, such as during the Bush Administration when the United States focused on opposition groups instead. Like the ruling elites, these opposition groups, when targeted, condemn US imperialism. At the same time, these opposition groups are less likely to comply with the US pressure.

US attention, whether supportive or critical, is often exploited in domestic political battles within CA. Both ruling elites and opposition groups use US criticisms to further their political aims, particularly during elections. For instance, in 2004, El Salvador's ruling ARENA party leveraged US opposition to the FMLN candidate to gain an advantage in the presidential campaign (Calderón Morán 2005, 156). Similarly, in Nicaragua's 2006 presidential elections, right-wing candidates used US support to challenge their internal opponents and the Sandinista candidate (Revista Envio 2006).

Exploiting the United States stance for domestic political gain extends beyond election periods. In 2021, after the United States announced a "pause" in relations with El Salvador, opposition figure Claudia Ortiz questioned whether El Salvador's alliances would shift toward organized crime or undemocratic governments (Silva 2021). Similarly, even during periods of US neglect, the United States can be invoked. In 2022, Salvador Nasralla, a Honduran presidential appointee-turned-opponent, used his meeting with US Ambassador Laura Dogu to openly criticize Xiomara Castro de Zelaya (El Heraldo 2022).

Under several administrations, the United States has identified bad governance and corruption as root causes of instability and migration, leading it to support and provide refuge for activists opposing corruption and authoritarianism. Analysts agree that the United States has consistently backed CICIG and anti-corruption initiatives in Guatemala, sometimes even against the wishes of its own officials. Securing US support was crucial for those committed to maintaining the commission and anti-corruption measures (Bermúdez 2015). Similarly, in 2015, leaders of the Honduran anti-corruption movement "Los Indignados" sought US involvement by marching to the US embassy (Criterio 2015).

In short, the US pressure has an unequal effect on different groups inside the country it tries to affect. It favors those who can present themselves as solutions to the problems it seeks to fix and is always leveraged in internal political battles in CA.

Stereotyping: Seeking Opportunities in the US Decision-Making Circles

The inherent biases within the US policymaking system favored right-wing CA elites often tied to the financial sector with strong connections in the United States. An interviewee noted the challenge in speaking out against then-popular Juan Orlando Hernández during his first term. Criticism aimed at Hernández was often met with skepticism by the US policymakers and analysts, as his critics were frequently viewed as supporters of Mel Zelaya, the deposed leftist leader, casting doubt on their motives.[3]

The tendency to stereotype in US foreign policy has facilitated the influence of various lobby groups, effectively utilized by CA elites who understand the US policy system. These lobby firms hired during crises and oblivion periods often subcontract figures with relevant political baggage and connections capable of addressing Republicans and Democrats.

After the 2009–2010 Honduran coup, the de facto government invested at least 400,000 USD in lobbying to secure Congressional support, demonstrating their understanding of US politics by gaining bipartisan backing. They hired Noriega, a former Assistant Secretary for Latin America under George Bush, and Lanny Davis,

[3] Interview December 6, 2023.

a former advisor to Bill Clinton (Chayes 2017, 99). In contrast, the ousted government of Zelaya struggled to achieve similar support (Carpintera 2009).

It appears the Honduran opposition learned from this, as in 2023, the government led by Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, hired Arnold and Porter to "improve and deepen" its relations with the US government (Avila and Aguilar 2023). Interestingly, the same firm had previously worked for a former Honduran president, Juan Orlando Hernández (Hsu 2021). For the Castro Administration, Arnold and Porter subcontracted a firm founded by Hugo Lorens, the US Ambassador to Honduras during the coup (Avila and Aguilar 2023).

In 2021, El Salvadoran president Bukele, willing to ensure the IMF loan, enlisted the same company to "provide strategic advice" and assist in "relations with the United States and multilateral institutions," with the effort led by former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Tom Shannon (Easley 2021). Similarly, former Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei used Taiwan's cooperation money to lobby for Guatemalan interests. His company of choice, the Ballard Partners (Gramajo 2022), was founded by Trump's fundraiser, Brian Ballard. The previous government of Jimmy Morales and several Guatemalan lawmakers had collaborated with another lobby company as well, related to the Republican Party and linked with the vice president of the United States, Mike Pence (Lakhani 2017). Even Nicaragua, before completely breaking its relations with the United States, used the services of a DC-based lobby firm (Wilson 2013)

The active use of lobbying does not solely reflect stereotyping—richer counterparts naturally have more resources to acquire such services. However, I argue that those perceived as trustworthy leverage these opportunities more effectively due to their connections, education, social class, and language skills. As one CA activist noted, competing with these influential groups is challenging, stating, "It is not the same to have a human rights organization advocating your cause and to have a personal lobby working for you."[4] The same interviewee lamented that influential groups have learned how to control their image in the United States. Something that is still difficult for the opposition or civil society.

As demonstrated here, the CA elites lobbied both in times of crisis and during the moments of oblivion. We do not have data to state when the lobby efforts had stronger or weaker influence; however, based on the asymmetry theory, one may hypothesize that when the highest-level political attention is focused elsewhere, the influence of lower-level bureaucrats increases.

Oblivion: (Dis)empowering Whom?

The US's inconsistent focus has led to the discontinuation of various funding initiatives, deeply affecting countries reliant on external aid, such as remittances and foreign assistance. This volatility, especially Trump's cuts, which reduced 80% of US-funded Northern Triangle programs (Welsh 2021), has had a severe impact on NGOs, civil society, and social movements. Only organizations with state or private sector co-funding can endure, while those lacking financial backing struggle to sustain their activities amid shifting US priorities.

While economic support is vital, political backing is equally critical. The US's inconsistent stance on anti-corruption has weakened these initiatives. Some administrations pushed for anti-corruption commissions and funded prosecutors, while others deprioritized them. For instance, Obama backed CICIG and pressured Guatemala to maintain it, but Trump's migration policy, which forced countries to retain migrants, contributed to its closure. Similarly, during his first 2 years, Biden publicly supported the Guatemalan president, echoing Trump's approach. An interviewed Guatemalan expert considered that this US stance increased the

[4]Interview on February 7, 2024.

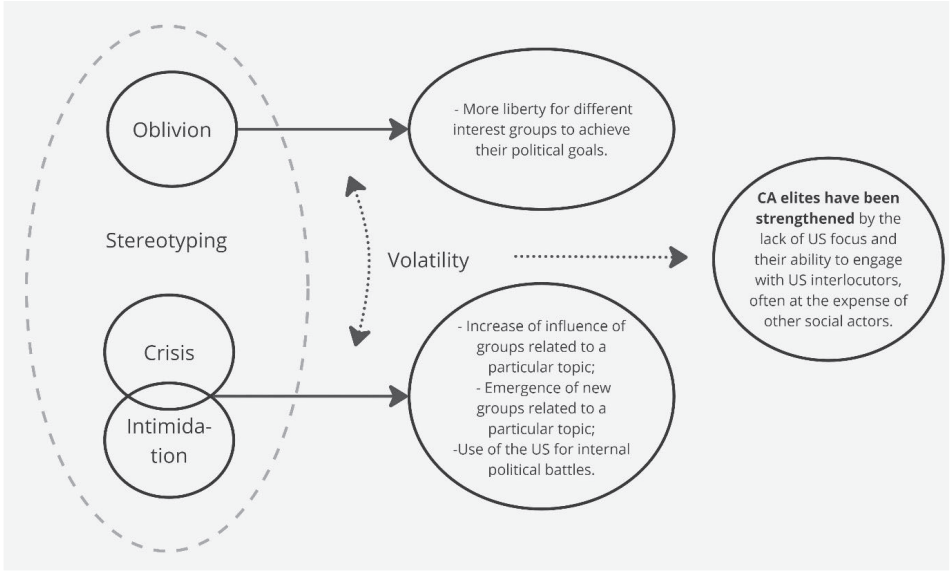

Figure 2. Dynamics of asymmetrical interactions. *Source*: Author.

ability of Guatemalan elites to resist US pressure after the presidential elections in 2023.[5]

Summary

The empirical analysis demonstrated that, as Womack's model predicted, US policies in CA oscillated between neglect and crisis-driven approaches, both shaped by stereotypes. During crises, CA elites strategically positioned themselves as indispensable, aligning their goals with the US agenda, which sometimes led to the emergence of new groups or demands, such as anti-corruption movements, or bolstered ruling elites through legitimization (as seen with Obama's CAN Strategy) or electoral support (as in El Salvador). During periods of neglect, CA elites had more autonomy to pursue preferred policies, which allowed opposition groups to gain strength in some cases, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the FMLN in El Salvador, and Zelaya in Honduras.

The analysis shows that both crisis intervention and neglect can strengthen or weaken domestic actors depending on the country's context. In CA, US policy inconsistency has systematically favored ruling elites with financial resources and ties to US policymakers, who benefit from positive stereotyping and easier access to decision-makers. In contrast, negatively stereotyped groups (e.g., left-wing movements) or those lacking US connections and financial backing (e.g., civic activists demanding transparency) struggle for sustained influence. Their successes are sporadic, slow, and contingent on external shifts. For instance, protests in Guatemala and Honduras took nearly a decade to yield limited political change despite broad support.

As a result, every US administration engages with CA elites skilled at navigating US policymaking, leveraging connections, and waiting out tensions. Unlike US politicians bound by electoral cycles or local reformers needing urgent change, these elites exploit US volatility to entrench their power. Figure 2 summarizes this argument.

[5] Interview on December 2, 2023.

Conclusions

Responding to Long's call to analyze asymmetrical relationships rather than solely small-state strategies, this article applied asymmetry theory to US–CA interactions in the twenty-first century. Unlike previous studies that focus on weaker states, this article emphasizes how asymmetrical power distribution constrains the stronger actor. It argues that an abundance of power brings structural limitations and advances three key arguments—one empirical, outlining US–CA relations, and two theoretical, demonstrating how asymmetry operates. First, this research shows that US policy toward CA aligns closely with asymmetry theory. It underscores the US's inconsistent approach, shaped by competition with other actors, perceived internal threats, and historical engagement in the region. It argues that this inconsistency has allowed certain CA groups—especially those with US ties—to gain advantages while marginalizing others. These groups, when empowered, can even resist US influence when it conflicts with their interests.

Second, this article demonstrates that asymmetry generates opportunities and challenges for both weaker and stronger actors. However, these constraints are not fixed; rather, they are fluid arenas where power is continuously negotiated. US–CA relations are not merely a top-down imposition but a process of mutual adaptation, where regional actors leverage resistance, alliances, and institutions to influence US policies. This aligns with Tourinho's (2021) concept of co-constitution, which challenges the notion that power flows solely from dominant states. Instead, weaker actors actively shape international structures through decentralized contestation over norms and influence.

Third, this article highlights that asymmetrical relations are mediated not only at the state level but also through the interactions of substate actors. While asymmetry constrains both stronger and weaker states, various stakeholders—competing elites, business groups, opposition parties, and civil society and their coalitions—have leveraged these dynamics to either align with or resist US influence.

This research is preliminary and has several limitations. First, US policymaking is far more complex than portrayed here. This article does not examine key actors such as Congress, US agencies, think tanks, or influential religious groups like evangelicals. For instance, Congress plays a significant role in shaping US–CA relations, and its members often hold positions that diverge from those of the executive branch. In 2022, Republican lawmakers had markedly different views on President Bukele compared to the Biden Administration or Democratic Party members (Gressier and Sanz 2022). These decentralized influences add further complexity to US engagement with CA, though they fall beyond the primary scope of this study.

Similarly, each critical episode, broader political strategy, or CA actors' responses could be examined in-depth as individual case studies. However, the approach used here enabled the identification of recurring patterns and trends. Moreover, it provided a broader perspective on the agency exercised by various CA actors, highlighting their diverse strategies in navigating asymmetrical relations.

Finally, asymmetry is not the only factor constraining US influence. Over the past two decades, the growing presence of extra-regional actors has strengthened CA countries' bargaining power. Additionally, as Hershberg (2024)notes, "there are constraints in the twenty-first century that great powers did not encounter in the 20th," making interventions, such as supporting insurgencies or deploying troops, more costly. Thus, this article does not argue that asymmetry inevitably leads to the stronger party's failure. Rather, it demonstrates that relational forces in asymmetrical relationships do not always work to the advantage of the more powerful state.

However, this study raises key questions for future research. Greater asymmetry seems to create more space for interest groups to maneuver beyond official policy. What are the pathways of influence? Does power always flow from A to B, or can CA governments also shape US decisions through lobbying? How do Congress,

think tanks, and agencies interact to influence policy? Moreover, the research invites us to think about how we define influence. While the US government may seem grappling when faced by Giammattei Ortega, or Bukele, the interconnectedness of CA and US elites indicates that the interests of some coalitions are being served. Whose influence weighs most? Finally, what are the chances for alternative groups to emerge in such a context?

An in-depth examination of the effects of asymmetry would provide a better understanding not only of the US's CA policy but also of the United States as a regional and global power. In the words of Womack, a focus on asymmetry facilitates an inquiry into how power differentials affect relationships, including through methods of (attempted) control, the interrelation of power and agendas, and how disparities influence the definition of interests on both sides. A more thorough analysis of each of the critical episodes would provide a clearer understanding of how different actors leverage the opportunities and overcome the constraints.

Moreover, asymmetrical relations are very common. How does the US approach such relations differently or similarly to, for example, Russia's, China's, or even the EU's? Too often, the United States has been studied as an actor sui generis. Yet, in a world that is becoming multipolar, multinodal (Womack 2015), or multiplex (Acharya 2009), comparing the "American way" of managing asymmetrical relations with those of other actors is becoming even more relevant.

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