



Analysis of Guatemala's Foreign Policy in the Fields of Migration and Security

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Abstract

Guatemala, as one of the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America, has in recent decades faced structural challenges in the areas of migration and security, which have had a direct impact on the orientation of its foreign policy. Its geographical position situated between Central America and the United States has made Guatemala a key corridor for irregular migration, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. These dynamics have compelled the country to adopt specific security and diplomatic strategies. From this perspective, Guatemalan foreign policy, especially toward the United States, has become reactive and increasingly shaped by external pressures and internal constraints. Theoretically, this article draws on the frameworks of constructivism and defensive realism to explore how both soft and hard security threats, along with global and regional normative structures and domestic discourses, have influenced Guatemala's foreign policy behavior. In recent years, Guatemalan governments have attempted to pursue pragmatic approaches to secure national interests within a complex regional and international context, even at the cost of reduced autonomy in foreign policy decision-making. A central component of Guatemala's foreign policy in the past decade has been its complex engagement with the United States in managing the migration crisis. U.S. administrations particularly under Trump and later Biden have exerted political pressure and offered financial incentives to compel Guatemala to adopt mechanisms to stem migration flows. The signing of the "Safe Third Country Agreement" between Guatemala and the U.S. in 2019 stands as a clear example of this approach, which, despite facing significant domestic opposition, was justified within a logic of threat balancing and diplomatic pragmatism. On the other hand, security as both a domestic and foreign concern has acquired a pivotal place in Guatemala's foreign policy agenda. The expansion of criminal organizations, structural corruption, and the inefficiency of the judicial system in addressing transnational crimes have led Guatemalan governments to increasingly rely on international security, intelligence, and military cooperation, particularly with the United States. Nevertheless, this growing dependency has triggered criticism concerning national sovereignty and the erosion of independent foreign policy-making. Beyond U.S. relations, this article also examines Guatemala's interactions with other regional and international actors such as Mexico, Honduras, and international organizations like UNHCR and IOM. Within this context, Guatemala has sought to leverage multilateral diplomacy to manage migration challenges and attract financial and technical support. Simultaneously, the country has participated in regional initiatives such as the "Central American Migration Alliance," although such participation has mostly remained at the discursive level or limited to small-scale joint projects. Domestically, public opinion, media, and civil society organizations have played a growing role in shaping migration and security policies. Although Guatemala's political structure has traditionally been dominated by conservative elites and the military, rising social awareness of the human costs of migration and violence has gradually pushed the public discourse toward more humanitarian approaches. However, a persistent gap remains between official rhetoric and policy implementation, which continues to challenge the country's foreign policy coherence. The article concludes that Guatemala's foreign policy in the domains of migration and security is largely driven by external pressures, internal urgencies, and short-term pragmatism rather than a coherent long-term strategy. Any meaningful transformation in this policy sphere requires a broader reform in governance structures, improvements in socio-economic conditions, and the strengthening of institutional capacities. Guatemala can

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only move from a reactive to a proactive foreign policy stance if it fosters relative autonomy and adopts a development-oriented diplomatic strategy in its regional and global engagements.

Keywords: Guatemala; Foreign policy; Migration; Security; United states; Central America

Introduction

In recent decades, Guatemala has emerged as a focal point in regional and international discussions on migration and security in Central America. Positioned at the heart of the so-called "Northern Triangle" alongside Honduras and El Salvador Guatemala has experienced deep-rooted structural challenges including poverty, corruption, violence, and weak governance, all of which have fueled both internal and external migration [1]. These socio-political conditions have not only strained Guatemala's domestic stability but have also significantly shaped the trajectory of its foreign policy, particularly in relation to the United States and regional neighbors. Migration, in this context, is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a multidimensional issue that intersects with national security, human rights, economic development, and international diplomacy. The increasing outflow of Guatemalan migrants many of whom seek asylum or economic opportunity in the United States has prompted successive Guatemalan administrations to engage in diplomatic negotiations, regional initiatives, and security collaborations aimed at managing the causes and consequences of migration [2]. Consequently, foreign policy in Guatemala has become highly securitized, reactive, and often subordinated to the strategic interests of more powerful international actors, particularly the United States. The bilateral relationship between Guatemala and the United States has been deeply influenced by Washington's evolving immigration agenda. Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. adopted a more coercive stance, pressuring Central American governments into signing migration agreements designed to externalize border control. Guatemala's controversial "Safe Third Country Agreement" exemplifies this dynamic, as it sought to force asylum seekers from El Salvador and Honduras to apply for protection in Guatemala rather than the U.S. despite Guatemala's limited institutional capacity to support such a framework [3]. Although the agreement was suspended in 2021 under President Joe Biden, its implications for Guatemalan sovereignty and diplomatic agency remain deeply relevant. Security concerns both domestic and transnational have also become a cornerstone of Guatemala's foreign policy orientation. The rise of organized crime, narcotrafficking, and gang-related violence has undermined public trust in the state and positioned Guatemala as a key partner in U.S.-led security initiatives in the region [4]. However, such cooperation has often reinforced a militarized approach to public security, sometimes at the expense of democratic governance and human

rights. The Guatemalan government's dependency on foreign aid and security assistance has further complicated its ability to design autonomous and long-term foreign policy strategies.

At the regional level, Guatemala's engagement with neighboring countries and regional bodies has been characterized by both cooperation and fragmentation. While the country has participated in multilateral frameworks such as the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity and the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS), its capacity to lead or significantly influence regional migration policy remains limited [5]. Additionally, Guatemala's domestic political instability exacerbated by corruption scandals, judicial interference, and a weakening rule of law has hindered its credibility and effectiveness in the international arena [6]. From a theoretical perspective, this article draws upon constructivist and defensive realist approaches to analyze how Guatemala's foreign policy is shaped by both material constraints and ideational factors. Constructivism helps explain how national identity, discourses of security, and normative pressures from international institutions influence Guatemala's diplomatic behavior. Meanwhile, defensive realism highlights the state's prioritization of survival and security in an anarchic international system, which often leads to strategic alignment with more powerful actors even at the cost of autonomy. This article argues that Guatemala's foreign policy in the domains of migration and security is best understood as a balancing act between external pressures and internal vulnerabilities. It explores how Guatemalan governments have attempted to navigate this complex terrain through a combination of bilateral diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and short-term strategic concessions. In doing so, the article sheds light on the broader implications of migration and security politics for small and fragile states in the Global South. Ultimately, the case of Guatemala illustrates the challenges that peripheral states face in crafting coherent and sovereign foreign policies under conditions of structural dependency and geopolitical asymmetry. As the global migration regime continues to evolve and security concerns remain pressing, understanding Guatemala's foreign policy responses offers critical insights into the intersection of domestic fragility and international diplomacy in the 21st century.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive-analytical approach. The data consists of official government documents, reports from international organizations,

academic articles, and analyses published by think tanks and human rights institutions. Information was collected through library research and content analysis of relevant sources, and then interpreted using the theoretical frameworks of constructivism and defensive realism. The aim is to explain how internal and external factors have influenced Guatemala's foreign policy in the areas of migration and security.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs two main theories to analyze Guatemala's foreign policy in the areas of migration and security: Constructivism and Defensive Realism. These theories help in understanding how Guatemala interacts with the United States and other regional and global actors, especially in issues related to security and migration.

Constructivism

Constructivism, developed by Alexander Wendt and other scholars of international relations, emphasizes that the identities and interests of states are shaped not only by material realities but also by social interactions and discourses [7]. According to this theory, foreign policy decisions, especially in the realms of migration and security, are influenced by not just material factors like resources or geographical location, but also by social, cultural, and normative structures. This theory is particularly relevant in analyzing Guatemala's foreign policy because its interactions and relations with the United States and other countries are shaped by both shared and divergent social and political identities. In the context of migration, Guatemala's policies are influenced not only by economic and material factors but also by national and regional identities. As a developing country, Guatemala has shaped its identity within economic and security frameworks that influence its relations with the United States, a global superpower [8]. Moreover, Guatemala's engagement with international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is also driven by human rights and humanitarian concepts, which significantly impact its foreign policy [2]. According to constructivism, Guatemala's diplomacy concerning migration is based on both shared identities with other Central American nations and the United States and the normative pressures exerted by international organizations. Guatemala, as a member of international organizations, has been involved in promoting human rights and humanitarian discourse in its migration policies.

Defensive Realism

Defensive realism, a branch of realism in international relations introduced by John Mearsheimer (1990), focuses on the idea that smaller and medium-sized states, such as Guatemala, seek to ensure their security and avoid external threats without aiming to increase their power or engage in large-scale military conflicts. In this framework, national security is always prioritized, and the foreign policies of smaller states are primarily focused on countering external threats and preserving their sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the case of Guatemala, defensive realism is particularly relevant in analyzing the country's relations with the United States and other regional powers. As a country with significant economic and social vulnerabilities, Guatemala seeks to secure its internal stability against various threats, including illegal migration, drug trafficking, and violence from criminal organizations. In its dealings with the United States, Guatemala has always aimed to take advantage of security and economic cooperation, while attempting to avoid excessive dependency on a global superpower [9]. Within the framework of defensive realism, Guatemala's foreign policy seeks to preserve the status quo and avoid external conflicts. In its negotiations with the United States regarding migration, security, and the war on drugs, Guatemala aims to protect its national interests while maintaining a balance in its relationship with the U.S. This approach is evident in security and migration agreements between Guatemala and the United States, such as the controversial 2019 "Safe Third Country Agreement" [3].

Combined Theoretical Approaches: The Interaction of Constructivism and Defensive Realism

Guatemala's foreign policy in migration and security cannot be fully understood through a single theoretical lens. The combination of constructivism and defensive realism as a hybrid framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the social identity-based and security-driven aspects of Guatemala's foreign policy. This combined approach is crucial in analyzing how Guatemala interacts with the United States and other regional countries like Mexico and Honduras. In this context, Guatemala uses both multilateral diplomacy and humanitarian discourse to address migration pressures, while also strengthening its security and intelligence cooperation to counter internal and external threats. This multi-faceted approach helps Guatemala preserve its security and national interests while attempting to maintain positive relations with the United States and other neighboring countries.

Findings

This section explores the major findings of the research regarding Guatemala's foreign policy in the domains of migration and

security. The analysis is based on government documents, international reports, and secondary literature related to Guatemalan migration patterns, internal security issues, and foreign relations. Guatemala's foreign policy in these areas is strongly shaped by its geographical location, its economic vulnerabilities, the dynamics of its bilateral relationship with the United States, and regional security challenges.

Guatemalan Migration Policy and Its Impact on Relations with the United States

Guatemala is one of the main countries of origin for migrants heading to the United States. Its migration policy has been largely shaped by bilateral relations with the U.S., domestic economic pressures, and security conditions. A significant event in this context was the signing of the "Safe Third Country" agreement in 2019, through which Guatemala agreed to accept asylum seekers who had transited through its territory on their way to the United States. This agreement reflected the extent to which Guatemala's foreign policy is influenced by U.S. diplomatic and economic pressure. It was particularly the result of policies under the Trump administration aimed at reducing migration flows at the southern U.S. border. While framed as a bilateral agreement, the deal predominantly served U.S. interests and posed significant logistical and humanitarian challenges for Guatemala. Analysts argue that this policy was part of Guatemala's broader strategy to secure continued U.S. financial and security assistance amid internal and regional threats [2,3].

Internal Security and the Fight Against Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime

As a transit country for narcotics en route to the United States, Guatemala faces serious internal security challenges posed by transnational criminal organizations and drug traffickers. One of the cornerstones of its foreign policy has been the strengthening of security cooperation with the U.S. and regional partners to combat organized crime. This has involved bilateral and multilateral agreements aimed at counter-narcotics and anti-terrorism efforts. The United States has provided Guatemala with significant funding, training, and technical assistance to enhance its law enforcement capabilities. Additionally, Guatemala has collaborated with neighboring countries such as Mexico and Honduras to dismantle drug trafficking networks. Despite these efforts, widespread corruption within Guatemalan police forces and government institutions remains a significant barrier to effective law enforcement [10].

Socioeconomic Impact of Migration on Guatemala

Migration particularly undocumented migration to the U.S.-is a consequence of socioeconomic instability, poverty, and violence in

Guatemala. For many citizens, migration is a survival strategy in the face of limited employment opportunities and rising insecurity. According to various reports, high rates of youth unemployment, gang violence, and climate-induced displacement have contributed to the surge in out-migration. Remittances sent by migrants represent a substantial portion of Guatemala's GDP, exceeding 14% in recent years. However, the mass departure of working-age individuals has also led to negative impacts, such as labor shortages in rural areas and increasing social fragmentation within communities [11]. Consequently, while migration helps alleviate household poverty through remittances, it also deepens social challenges and pressures on public services and governance systems.

Guatemala's Relations with Neighboring Countries and Its Role in Regional Security

Guatemala's geographic position in Central America necessitates close coordination with neighboring countries particularly Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador on security and migration issues. Regional cooperation has primarily taken place within frameworks such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), which aims to address shared security threats, improve border management, and foster economic integration. Guatemala has participated in joint operations targeting human trafficking, narcotics trade, and transnational gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18. However, political instability, weak institutional capacity, and inter-state rivalries have hindered the effectiveness of regional security mechanisms. Despite these challenges, Guatemala continues to pursue multilateral engagement as part of its foreign policy strategy to address transnational security threats [2].

Human Rights and the Humanitarian Dimension of Migration Policy

One of the most contested aspects of Guatemala's foreign policy in the migration domain is its human rights record. The implementation of the "Safe Third Country" agreement and other restrictive migration policies have sparked criticism from human rights organizations, who argue that Guatemala lacks the infrastructure and legal frameworks to protect asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants. According to Human Rights Watch, many asylum seekers returned to Guatemala were left without adequate shelter, healthcare, or legal assistance [12]. The country's fragile judicial system and limited resources have raised concerns about violations of international refugee law. In response to such criticism, the Guatemalan government has attempted to reform certain aspects of its immigration policy, but progress has been slow and inconsistent. The humanitarian crisis at Guatemala's borders also includes internally displaced persons and returnees from the U.S. who often face reintegration challenges. The lack of

institutional support and persistent violence increases the likelihood of repeated migration cycles, undermining the long-term stability of Guatemalan communities.

Results and Discussion

Guatemala's foreign policy in the domains of migration and security reflects a complex interplay of geographic location, economic vulnerability, institutional fragility, and its entangled relationship with both the United States and neighboring countries. The findings of this research indicate that migration is not merely a domestic challenge but a strategic issue deeply embedded in Guatemala's foreign relations. The country's migration policy has largely been shaped by pressure from the United States, economic dependence, and security cooperation. One of the most illustrative examples of this dependency was the signing of the "Safe Third Country" agreement in 2019, through which Guatemala agreed to receive asylum seekers who had transited its territory en route to the U.S. Although this agreement was presented as bilateral cooperation, it served U.S. strategic interests far more than Guatemala's, placing significant logistical and humanitarian burdens on a country that lacked the infrastructure to handle such responsibilities. This arrangement led to strong domestic and international criticism, particularly from human rights organizations that questioned Guatemala's capacity to ensure adequate protection for asylum seekers. Guatemala also faces severe internal security threats, primarily due to its role as a major transit country for illicit drug flows to the United States. In response, one of the central pillars of its foreign policy has become security cooperation with the U.S., including joint efforts in anti-narcotics operations, intelligence sharing, and law enforcement training. These efforts have been supported by bilateral and multilateral agreements aimed at enhancing security capabilities. Nevertheless, systemic corruption within Guatemala's police forces and judiciary has severely undermined the effectiveness of such initiatives. Despite the increase in U.S. funding and technical assistance, institutional weakness and impunity continue to hinder meaningful progress. This highlights a fundamental contradiction between Guatemala's foreign policy goals and its internal governance capacities. Socioeconomic drivers also play a critical role in shaping Guatemala's migration profile. For many Guatemalans, migration has become a survival strategy in response to high levels of poverty, youth unemployment, gang violence, and climate-related disruptions. These push factors have contributed to significant outflows of migrants toward the United States in recent years. Remittances sent by migrants now account for over 14% of Guatemala's GDP, making migration an economic lifeline for the country. However, this dependency presents a double-edged sword: while remittances alleviate poverty for many families, they

also mask deeper structural problems in the labor market, weaken rural economies, and contribute to social fragmentation as working-age populations are drained from communities. Regionally, Guatemala has pursued cooperation through institutions such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), participating in joint efforts to combat transnational crime, manage borders, and foster regional security. This includes operations to dismantle human trafficking networks and criminal gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18. However, political instability across the region, lack of institutional capacity, and interstate rivalries have prevented these initiatives from achieving consistent results. In practice, Guatemala still relies more heavily on bilateral engagement with the United States than on multilateral regional solutions, revealing the limits of Central American integration mechanisms in addressing complex transnational threats.

Human rights concerns represent another contentious dimension of Guatemala's migration and security policy. The implementation of restrictive asylum agreements most notably with the U.S. has drawn condemnation from human rights organizations. Reports have highlighted Guatemala's inability to provide basic legal, medical, or housing services to asylum seekers and returnees, many of whom are left in precarious conditions. In many cases, these individuals face renewed threats of violence or persecution upon return, leading to repeated migration cycles. Guatemala's judicial system lacks the capacity and independence to enforce international refugee protections, and institutional neglect continues to expose vulnerable groups to harm. While some efforts have been made to reform immigration frameworks, such as the introduction of reintegration programs and legal aid centers, progress remains slow and uneven. Overall, Guatemala's foreign policy in the areas of migration and security can best be described as one of pragmatic realism. The government seeks to maintain economic and political stability by aligning with the strategic priorities of powerful actors, especially the United States, even when such alignment results in domestic political backlash or a compromise in national sovereignty. This approach has brought short-term benefits, such as continued financial assistance and security cooperation, but it has also exposed the country to deeper structural vulnerabilities. As citizens grow increasingly disillusioned with the state's ability to protect rights and ensure justice, the credibility of the government's foreign policy direction is being called into question. In essence, Guatemala is navigating a precarious path, balancing its national interests with external pressures in a context marked by corruption, poverty, institutional weakness, and regional volatility. While the country has demonstrated some willingness to engage with regional and international actors to address migration and security challenges, its overreliance on U.S. policy priorities limits its strategic autonomy. The absence of a long-term, development-centered

vision in foreign policy further undermines efforts to construct sustainable solutions. Without comprehensive reforms to strengthen governance, enhance rule of law, and promote inclusive development, Guatemala's foreign policy will remain reactive, externally driven, and constrained by systemic fragilities.

Conclusion

Guatemala's foreign policy in the fields of migration and security reflects its sensitive geopolitical location, structural weaknesses, and historical dependency on the United States. A review of recent policy trends and diplomatic actions reveals that Guatemala has acted more reactively and under external pressure especially from Washington rather than following an independent, development-oriented, and forward-looking strategy in its foreign relations. Migration in Guatemala is not only a social and economic phenomenon, but also a security and political issue at both national and international levels. Due to high levels of poverty, inequality, gang violence, weak public services, and environmental crises, Guatemala is a major source country for migration toward the north. At the same time, its economy is heavily dependent on remittances from migrants, placing the government in a contradictory position: on one hand, it must curb migration flows to meet U.S. expectations; on the other, it relies on those same flows to maintain economic and social stability. One of the clearest manifestations of Guatemala's foreign policy dependency was the "Safe Third Country" agreement, which primarily served U.S. migration objectives. Despite being presented as bilateral cooperation, this agreement imposed significant burdens on Guatemala's already fragile infrastructure and institutions. Hosting asylum seekers without sufficient institutional capacity not only deepened the humanitarian crisis but also damaged the government's credibility among domestic and international audiences. In terms of security, Guatemala's role as a transit route for narcotics and a hub for transnational gangs has pushed its foreign policy toward increased security cooperation with the United States. While these collaborations include joint anti-narcotics operations and intelligence sharing, their effectiveness has been repeatedly undermined by internal corruption, the pervasive influence of criminal networks, and institutional fragility. Guatemala's attempts to engage regional mechanisms, such as the Central American Integration System, have not yielded significant results either. While these initiatives have symbolic value, regional instability, political fragmentation, and lack of strategic cohesion among Central American countries have prevented these platforms from becoming effective tools for cooperative action. Consequently, Guatemala continues to rely more heavily on bilateral relations with the United States rather than investing in regional partnerships, a decision that further limits

its strategic autonomy. Internally, the absence of development-oriented policies to address the root causes of migration such as poverty, inequality, and insecurity has forced successive governments to focus primarily on crisis management. Instead of implementing long-term structural reforms, authorities have leaned on short-term external assistance and ad hoc agreements. Migration, therefore, has become both a social safety valve and a diplomatic bargaining chip. While it offers the government leverage in negotiations with powerful states, it also exacerbates internal vulnerabilities. This dual role of migration illustrates the fragile nature of Guatemala's foreign policy a policy that is increasingly shaped by external priorities rather than national development goals. Moreover, attempts to securitize migration have come at the expense of human rights protections. Returnees and asylum seekers often face precarious conditions upon arrival, including inadequate access to health services, legal aid, or employment. The Guatemalan state, weakened by years of corruption and political instability, lacks the institutional strength to guarantee the rights and dignity of these vulnerable populations. This failure not only fuels repeated cycles of migration but also undermines the legitimacy of the state itself. Although some efforts have been made to reform immigration frameworks and reintegration programs, progress has been slow, uneven, and highly dependent on foreign funding. In this context, Guatemala's foreign policy can be characterized more by tactical maneuvering than by strategic vision. Its short-term alignments may bring temporary diplomatic or financial relief, but they do not address the deeper structural problems that drive migration and insecurity. The country's continued reliance on the United States for aid and security assistance reveals the limitations of its current foreign policy model one that prioritizes stability and compliance over autonomy and long-term resilience. To move forward, Guatemala must adopt a more holistic and development-based foreign policy approach that prioritizes national interests, strengthens institutional capacities, and builds strategic partnerships beyond traditional allies. This includes promoting good governance, empowering civil society, investing in education and employment, and enhancing regional cooperation. Only by addressing the root causes of migration and insecurity through comprehensive reforms can Guatemala hope to reduce its vulnerability and chart a more independent course in its foreign affairs. Ultimately, Guatemala finds itself at a crossroads. It can continue down the path of dependency, reactive diplomacy, and institutional stagnation or it can embark on a new trajectory grounded in inclusive development, democratic accountability, and regional solidarity. The choice it makes will shape not only the future of its foreign policy but also the well-being of millions of its citizens whose lives are deeply affected by migration, security, and the broader global dynamics in which Guatemala is entangled.

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