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Trump's War on Drugs Revisited: Cartels, Sovereignty, and the Fragile State in Central America

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When Donald Trump revived the language of a "war on drugs," he did more than repackage an old American policy framework. He reframed narcotrafficking as an external invasion, one that justified border fortification, economic pressure, and even the rhetorical possibility of designating cartels as terrorist organizations, the term narcoterrorism. While Washington speaks of invasion, the geography of the drug trade tells a different story. The core battlefield is not at the U.S./Mexico border. It's more to the south, in the corridors of Central America, where sovereignty is malleable, institutions are decentralized, and organized crime has evolved beyond the stereotype of a simple trafficking network. In Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, the drug economy is not an external intrusion. It is embedded in political economies, social structures, and in some cases, state institutions themselves. To understand whether a renewed American "war" can succeed, one must first understand the terrain.

For decades, Central America was described as a bridge, a logistical passageway for cocaine moving from the South to North American markets. That description is now outdated. The region has evolved into a semi-autonomous criminal ecosystem. It is no longer merely a corridor; it is a marketplace. Cartels and local syndicates do not simply pass through. They store, negotiate, launder, invest, and govern.

In Honduras, powerful trafficking families transformed coastal and border regions into operational hubs. Airstrips, maritime routes, and land corridors became protected infrastructure. Political elites were not always distant observers. In certain cases, criminal networks and political power converged in mutually reinforcing arrangements.

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El Salvador presents a different but equally complex case. There, organized crime historically intersected with both transnational trafficking and indigenous gang structures. Criminal organizations developed territorial control mechanisms that resembled parallel governance systems. The state's recent policies have disrupted gang dominance domestically, but transnational trafficking networks are less easily dismantled.

Nicaragua operates in a quieter register. It does not generate the same headlines, yet its geography makes it strategically indispensable. Limited transparency, political centralization, and reduced external oversight create conditions where organized crime can adapt with minimal public scrutiny. Stability, in this context, may conceal informal accommodations rather than eliminate criminal flows.

Costa Rica challenges the stereotype of fragility. As one of the region's more stable democracies, it nonetheless finds itself increasingly entangled in cocaine transit and money laundering operations. Its ports and logistics networks, symbols of economic openness, are also attractive to traffickers.

Trump's approach to the drug trade rested on three pillars:

1. Border securitization

2. Economic and diplomatic pressure on transit states

3. Militarized rhetoric toward cartels

The strategic logic was simple: reduce supply by forcing upstream compliance.

However, this framework assumes that transit states possess both the capacity and the unified political will to dismantle criminal infrastructures embedded within their own political economies. That assumption is debatable.

In Honduras, for example, past prosecutions revealed uncomfortable links between political figures and trafficking networks. External pressure may produce high-profile arrests, but it does not automatically rebuild institutions or reconfigure entrenched patronage systems.

In El Salvador, the government's aggressive internal crackdown on gangs demonstrates that strong-handed tactics can reduce visible violence. Yet the international dimension of drug trafficking, maritime routes, regional logistics, financial flows, requires multilateral coordination, not unilateral pressure.

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Nicaragua presents a deeper dilemma. Diplomatic isolation, sanctions, or rhetorical confrontation may reduce cooperation rather than enhance it. Organized crime flourishes in geopolitical gray zones.

Costa Rica, meanwhile, illustrates the limits of securitization narratives. Its challenge is less about state collapse and more about infiltration and adaptation within otherwise functioning systems.

A recurring misunderstanding in U.S. policy debates is the tendency to view cartels purely as criminal enterprises. In reality, they operate as hybrid actors, part corporation, part militia, part political broker. In parts of Central America, traffickers finance campaigns, negotiate local security arrangements, and provide employment in regions where the formal economy is weak. They embed themselves socially before they entrench themselves politically. A "war" metaphor oversimplifies this dynamic. Wars imply identifiable enemies and territorial victories. Organized crime in Central America is diffuse, adaptive, and symbiotic with structural vulnerabilities:

* Youth unemployment
* Corruption and weak judicial systems
* Unequal land distribution
* Migration pressures
* Limited economic diversification

Without addressing these conditions, enforcement alone becomes cyclical. Beyond geopolitical calculations lies the lived reality of communities.

In rural Honduras, entire towns have been reshaped by trafficking capital, sometimes experiencing short-term prosperity, followed by violence and abandonment.

In El Salvador, families once trapped between gangs and police militarization now navigate a different uncertainty: mass incarceration and concentrated executive power.

In Nicaragua, silence can replace visible violence, but opacity rarely equates to absence.

In Costa Rica, rising homicide rates linked to trafficking disputes signal that even consolidated democracies are not insulated from regional spillover.

Migration flows northward are often interpreted in Washington as evidence of border failure. Yet they are also the product of criminal economies that distort opportunity structures at home. The drug trade fuels the instability that migration policies then attempt to contain. For European security analysts, including those at RIEAS, the relevance extends beyond U.S. domestic politics.

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Cocaine consumption in Europe has reached historic levels. Maritime routes increasingly connect Latin American suppliers directly to European ports. Central American networks intersect with global logistics chains that touch West Africa and Southern Europe.

The Atlantic is not a barrier; it is a corridor. Thus, an American-centric "war on drugs" that focuses narrowly on the southern U.S. border fails to grasp the transatlantic dimension of organized crime. Central America sits at a crossroads not only of hemispheric security, but of global narcotics flows. History offers caution. The original U.S. War on Drugs, launched decades ago, did not eliminate narcotrafficking. It displaced it geographically. Colombia's fragmentation empowered Mexican cartels. Mexican crackdowns redirected routes into Central America. Pressure without institutional reform often produces mutation rather than eradication.

If Trump's revived rhetoric translates into heavier sanctions, aid conditionality, or security assistance, the outcome will depend on whether policies prioritize:

* Judicial independence
* Anti-corruption mechanisms
* Economic alternatives for vulnerable populations
* Regional intelligence cooperation

Without these elements, the region may experience intensified violence without structural transformation.

The drug trade in Central America is not simply a supply chain feeding American demand. It is a political economy embedded in fragile sovereignties and transnational networks. Donald Trump's "war" framing reflects domestic political imperatives, border control, national security, electoral signaling. But the operational reality in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica is more complex.

Cartels adapt faster than policies framed around static battle lines. A durable strategy requires moving beyond confrontation toward **institutional resilience**. It requires recognizing that organized crime thrives where governance is selective, where opportunity is scarce, and when corruption bridges legality and illegality.

In the end, the question is not whether Washington can wage another war on drugs. It is whether Central American states, under pressure, under scrutiny, and under strain, can rebuild sovereignty from within.