

FROM VISION TO EXECUTION:

A ROADMAP TO SUCCESS FOR THE U.S. ROOT CAUSES STRATEGY IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE

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A Roadmap to Success for the U.S. Root Causes Strategy in the Northern Triangle

Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras face widespread [economic insecurity](#), [violence](#), [poverty](#), and [weak and corrupt governance](#). The Biden Administration recently released its [Root Causes](#) and [Collaborative Migration Management](#) Strategies as mandated in a February 2nd [Executive Order](#). AfP welcomes the Root Causes Strategy that outlines a five-pillared approach around economic insecurity and inequality; combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance and the rule of law; promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press; countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes; and combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.

To ensure successful implementation of the Executive Order and Strategy, AfP urges the U.S. government to implement recommendations including ensuring alignment with the Global Fragility Act through a long-term integrated strategy that is evidenced based. Additionally, conflict prevention and peacebuilding must be integrated throughout all sectors, including climate change, and it is vital that programs and the strategy are locally led and owned and work with faith-based organizations. It is also critical for those implementing the strategy to understand the U.S.' history in the region and to work with humility. Finally, immigration continues to be a [key wedge issue](#) and is used to amplify divisions in the U.S. A comprehensive response to challenges faced by the U.S. immigration system especially at the Southern border also requires an examination of the long-term impact of immigration on polarization in the U.S. and how to support initiatives that build social cohesion.

Background:

Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras face widespread [economic insecurity](#), [violence](#), [poverty](#), and [weak and corrupt governance](#). Epidemic violence, including [gang violence](#), has made the Northern Triangle the [world's deadliest region outside a war zone](#), with severe gender-based violence and [femicide](#). Prior to the global pandemic, in 2019, the region was already among the [lowest GDPs per capita](#) in Latin America and the Caribbean and in the bottom third of the [World Bank rankings](#). According to the [Fragile States Index](#) (FSI), the Northern Triangle's overall fragility has somewhat declined in the last few years, but its countries still rank within or close to the top third of most fragile states and cohesion/political fragility has recently increased. [The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project](#) (ACLED) observed 9,807 violent incidents and 7,440 fatalities from violence in the region since 2016, although these statistics have slightly declined since 2018. COVID-19 is [exacerbating](#) the region's conflict dynamics by weakening institutions and pushing more people into poverty. [Climate change](#) is also increasing instability in the region.

On average, [311,000 people](#) flee the region per year, and most come to the United States at the southern border. In 2019, the U.S. apprehended approximately [608,000 unauthorized people](#) from this region. While the numbers decreased in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and the Trump Administration's [tightening of immigration controls](#), the [numbers are again on the rise](#). This June, [188,829 migrants](#) arrived at the southern border, the largest number in a single month. Drug cartels



extort these migration flows by taxing migrants and handlers, generating between [\\$30 million and \\$180 million](#) in revenue annually.

Immigration is also being [weaponized](#) in the United States. The growing [population diversity](#) and increasing migration flows at the U.S. southern border are adding to [cultural anxiety and exacerbating perceptions](#) in the U.S. that immigrants are a threat. Even though President Biden during his first few days told Central Americans [not to come to the U.S.](#), the number of migrants arriving at the southern border has been surging [since the Biden Administration took office](#). U.S. officials are struggling to respond and Republican Governors have sent [National Guard troops](#) to the southern border. The [Anti-Defamation League](#) states this issue is “galvanizing the anti-immigrant movement,” and it is leading to increasing [white nationalism](#), xenophobia, and [hate crimes](#).

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In addressing the roots of the conflict in this region, it is vital to understand the long-standing historical roots of U.S. involvement in the region that contributed to [civil war, political instability, and democratic backsliding](#). In the late 1970s and 1980s, Central America became a key area of U.S. foreign policy, and U.S. development assistance [spiked during this period](#). The [U.S. supported](#) El Salvador’s repressive government in the country’s civil war against leftist revolutionaries, and [in Nicaragua](#), the U.S. supported right-wing rebels against the Marxist government. U.S. development assistance [fell in the 1990s](#), but increased again by the early 2000s as regional conflict increased. However, a significant amount of these funds [were allocated to the war on drugs, rather than for security and development](#). The U.S. also admitted involvement in the [2009 coup](#) against President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras.

In his second term, President Obama enacted the [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#) that outlined a whole-of-government, integrated framework for all U.S. government interactions in the region. The overarching goal of the strategy focused on prosperity, security, and governance as “mutually reinforcing and of equal importance” and was led by the NSC. The strategy began to show [evidence-based results](#) within two-and-a-half years, with economic growth remaining steady and corruption cases implicating high-level government officials. Some aid programs also successfully reduced migration; in Honduras in 2018, beneficiaries of a USAID agriculture and food security program migrated at half of the rate of the surrounding community.

The U.S. Congress appropriated more than [\\$3.6 billion](#) for the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America between FY 2016 and FY 2021. In FY 2016, 2017, and 2018, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras [respectively received](#) \$198.4 million, \$361.5 million, and \$273.3 million in aid. Between FY 2016 and FY 2019, 40% of the funding appropriated for the strategy focused on long-term democracy promotion, economic reform, agriculture, education, and environmental



protection. 33% supported law enforcement and the justice sector, while 20% concentrated on crime and violence prevention and other traditional development programs. However, the previous Administration [cut assistance](#) under the program in March 2019 as “punishment” for migration flows from the region. By January 2021, USAID programs in the region reached fewer than half as many people as they did prior to the cuts.

Current U.S. Government Northern Triangle Strategies and Funding Request:

The Biden Administration issued an [Executive Order](#) mandating the development of two strategies, the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration (Root Causes Strategy) and the U.S. Strategy for Collaboratively Managing Migration in the Region. The Executive Order aims to address the root causes of migration in the Northern Triangle and collaboratively manage the issue by ensuring the coherence of U.S. government programs. It calls for a multistakeholder process that works with foreign governments, multilateral institutions, the private sector, and civil society to combat corruption, strengthen governance, respect human rights, counter and prevent violence, and address economic insecurity in the region. President Biden also named Vice President Kamala Harris as head of Northern Triangle policy and selected Ricardo Zúñiga as [Special Envoy for the Northern Triangle](#).

For FY 2022, the Biden Administration requested [\\$861 million](#) in foreign assistance to Central America, within a proposed four-year \$4 billion plan on countering the root causes of migration. In April, it also announced [\\$310 million](#) in emergency assistance for the Northern Triangle aimed at humanitarian relief and addressing food insecurity.

On July 29, the Biden Administration released its [Root Causes](#) and [Collaborative Migration Management](#) Strategies as mandated in the Executive Order. The Root Causes Strategy outlines a five-pillared approach that includes addressing economic insecurity and inequality; combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance and the rule of law; promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press; countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes; and combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.

The strategy aimed at the root causes of migration in the Northern Triangle is aligned with the [Global Fragility Act](#) that seeks to address upstream prevention and conflict drivers. The strategy also clearly articulates an overarching multisectoral strategic goal: “a democratic, prosperous, and safe Central America where people advance economically, live, work, and learn in safety and dignity, contribute to and benefit from the democratic process, have confidence in public institutions, and enjoy opportunities to create futures for themselves and their families at home.”

The strategy enshrines important overarching principles, including consultations with multi-sector stakeholders throughout implementation, coordination, assessment, and adaptation, and a robust communications plan. It also importantly shifts the problem-solving mentality around complex root causes of migration, accepting that “even with a strong, sustained commitment, the type of systemic change envisioned in the Strategy will take time to achieve, and progress will not be linear.”



“ The strategy faces key challenges...it does not state how much funding the U.S. will allocate for each of the five strategic pillars. It also fails to delineate specific timelines for its progress and implementation, instead using vague “short-term,” “medium-term,” and “long-term” markers.

However, the strategy faces key challenges in its current form. Conflict dynamics and extreme violence rank among the highest drivers of migration in the Northern Triangle, but managing and preventing violence is not listed until pillar IV of the strategy. It does not state how much funding the U.S. will allocate for each of the five strategic pillars meant to achieve its overall multisectoral strategic goal. The strategy also fails to delineate specific timelines for its progress and implementation, instead using vague “short-term,” “medium-term,” and “long-term” markers as benchmarks of success. Additionally, the strategy does not clearly outline the interagency coordination process and who is responsible for different components of the strategy.

To ensure successful implementation of the Executive Order and Strategy, AfP recommends the following:

1. Align with the Global Fragility Act

The GFA acknowledges sustainable peace requires focusing U.S. foreign assistance on preventing violence and violent conflict in fragile and conflict affected countries through an adaptive, evidence-based, and coordinated interagency and international cooperation approach. President Biden’s Executive Order and proposed strategies align closely with the central principles of the GFA.

Working With a 10-Year Time Frame

The Root Causes Strategy does not note specific timelines for its objectives and interim objectives. The GFA calls for a 10-year strategy that exceeds the typical grant cycle and can break the shorter-term programmatic cycle. By expanding the traditional strategic and program evaluation and implementation timeframe, the U.S. can employ a more adaptive and flexible approach in the Northern Triangle and put the Root Causes Strategy’s focus on nonlinear problem solving into practice, especially by synergizing efforts and mapping out realistic benchmarks for progress.

Using An Evidenced-Based Approach

The GFA formally mandates a richly data-driven approach to country-level planning. Across programs in the Northern Triangle, this approach should operate at both the specific program strategy level, emphasizing the narrow and specific impact of agency activities, and at the national level. The fact is that most programs and implementing partners do not or cannot prove that their programs prevent conflict, reduce violence and extremism, and/or build



sustainable peace.

Donors and policymakers must play a critical role in supporting an ethos of transparency through assuring the open dissemination of findings, both successes and failures; supporting mechanisms for institutional learning; mainstreaming evidence-based design while supporting risk and exploration of new programmatic approaches; publishing programmatic tools and indicators; and providing open data platforms that adhere to strict data-protection and privacy policies. There are many key considerations when developing an effective design, monitoring, and evaluation (DM&E system), including the consistency and scope of reporting, timeframes for monitoring, consistency across measures, and general human resource questions (such as who collects what data, how measures are standardized or disaggregated across different contexts, how knowledge is managed and shared, etc.). Investing time early in the implementation plan to effectively design the DM&E model, with key consideration to lessons learned from past efforts, will significantly improve the system and help safeguard its success and sustainability.

The U.S. must also institutionalize adaptive management in its Northern Triangle strategy. Conflict affected and fragile contexts are violative and not static. Peacebuilding programs must be highly responsive to these shifting contexts and become standard practice, yet current monitoring and evaluation frameworks are often too rigid and linear to allow for adaptive learning and programming. Adaptive management must include securing buy-in for an enabling culture and clearly defining technical requirements. It also requires effective and well-resourced systems for information management and a learning agenda.

2. Ensure Robust Interagency Coordination.

Strong interagency coordination requires that roles for federal departments and agencies are assigned to avoid duplication of efforts. Effective assistance and diplomacy in the Northern Triangle requires alignment of U.S. government activities in the region. The Obama-era [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#) outlined an “intensive interagency process” in its design and implementation. The NSC [led and coordinated](#) the Obama-era strategy and ensured all agencies were bound by it.

The new Root Causes Strategy lacks a clear delegation of lines of effort for agencies. Development and implementation of the Root Causes Strategy will require whole-of-government coordination within and across agencies that have fallen short in past iterations. Meaningful implementation of the strategy will require new models for interagency coordination, senior-level ownership, and effective integration of ambassadors and embassy country teams in the field.

The U.S. should preserve the Obama-era strategy’s interagency commitment to common understanding of the problem and ownership of the new regional strategy by one lead government body or agency, whether the NSC or the Vice President’s office. Lack of a clear lead body or agency has caused significant challenges when implementing these types of strategies under prior administrations, especially when funding was available. Such was the



case in the [Section 1207 Program](#), which, from its outset in 2006, was beset by confusion over ownership, organizational culture clashes between the Department of State and the Department of Defense (DoD), and competition over control of resources and strategy between USAID/DCHA/CMM and the then-State Department Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization.

Each federal department that may be included in the Root Causes Strategy, including Health and Human Services, Agriculture, and Labor, should focus on its mandate and respect the others' roles. It must be clear who is leading in order to ensure there is no confusion, duplication of efforts, or turf battles. This coordination can better integrate the work of numerous task forces devoted to the region, including the USAID's [Northern Triangle Task Force](#) and the Justice Department's [Task Force Alpha](#). Functional coordination will require top-level, senior official leadership designation, with a senior official at each relevant U.S. agency, at the level of Assistant Secretary or above, designated as responsible for leading and overseeing development and implementation of the strategy.

It would also be a missed opportunity to not early on integrate U.S. embassies into the Root Causes Strategy development and implementation. Chief-of-mission authority and buy-in will be critical to the sound development and execution of the Root Causes Strategy.

The U.S. must also integrate existing and planned security assistance and cooperation programs in the region. Human rights abuses by security forces are a key driver of violent extremism, and in fragile and conflict affected countries, security sector reform must be an integrated part of any strategy. The US government must integrate existing and planned security assistance programs. An important part of increasing synergy between DoD and civilian agencies is mitigating risk and ensuring DoD interventions do not cause harm.

3. Integrate Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Across All Sectors and Avoid Siloes

A "triple nexus" integration of conflict prevention, development, and humanitarian assistance across all U.S. efforts in the region can break out of traditionally siloed strategies. When peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian aid fail to effectively integrate, important context and main drivers of violence and fragility are ignored. Inequality, economic strains, abuse by security forces, and ineffective and illegitimate governance are grievances that are drivers of conflict, and development and humanitarian assistance are instrumental in addressing these and other grievances and reducing conflict dynamics. The [developing consensus](#) in the empirical literature is that the links between economic development, good governance, and sustainable peace are so strong that weaknesses in any one of those pillars undermine the others.

Programs in the Northern Triangle across all the pillars of good governance and development need to be adapted so indicators and outcomes that measure their impact also address conflict dynamics. This approach means that a strategy must revolve around the integration and interoperability of conflict prevention and peacebuilding in development assistance



programs and security sector reforms in conflict affected and fragile states.

The Root Causes Strategy must break down silos between sectors and support cross-sectoral collaboration. For instance, the existing economic model based on extractives, agribusiness, and tourism has also provided a larger context in which fragility thrives. In Honduras, for example, small farmers, Indigenous people, and Garifuna people are being [driven off of their lands](#) by land grabs. Collaboration with the private sector through public-private partnerships and [Local Economic Development Engines](#) (LEDEs) can help form a whole-of-society approach in the region.

Donors must mandate meaningful implementation of conflict prevention indicators and conflict sensitivity principles. The peacebuilding field must develop conflict prevention impact indicators tailored to other development sectors. It is essential to track the project's impact on conflict and peace dynamics in its target context and more broadly. Developing and tracking integrated indicators, particularly those that measure changes in violence and peace dynamics closely linked to the projects, is critical.

The U.S. strategy should set up [context-specific hubs](#) that coordinate assistance through iterative sharing and analyzing of information and linking communities of practice. These “help desks” and country support “facilities” models used by the [European Investment Bank](#) and the [Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency](#) are resources that can help the U.S. address the main drivers of conflict in the Northern Triangle while promoting development and providing humanitarian assistance.

The U.S. must also prioritize violence reduction in areas with the highest levels of violence. It is critical to focus first on violence clusters in very specific neighborhoods so that these neighborhoods with epidemic levels of violence can be stabilized to allow other development programs to be successful. This coordinated approach of bringing down violence and then implementing development programming for those specific communities will have the best chance of breaking cycles of violence.

4. Build Political Will in Host Countries

Achieving basic health, safety, and security goals in the Northern Triangle will not be possible if the region's host countries lack the necessary political will. Building political will requires a coordinated international approach that exerts pressure on the governments in the region. The U.S. should emulate the GFA's call for [“compact-based partnerships.”](#) This approach, used by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), provides funding to partner country governments on the condition that they carry out reforms under shared objectives and expectations. The U.S. can employ a compact-based approach in the Northern Triangle to co-create shared objectives and set expectations and responsibilities to create mutual accountability. This approach will ensure coordinated interagency responses in the face of corruption or democratic backsliding in a host country.



Without political will and government accountability in the Northern Triangle, foreign assistance and programming are unlikely to accomplish their desired goals. A [review](#) of U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle from 2014 to 2019 found corruption and poor governance undermined the delivery and effectiveness of aid. Corrupt officials often [diverted assistance](#) for their own benefit and “technical” approaches did not scale up to long-standing political shortcomings. In Honduras, the president and top security officials have been implicated in [drug trafficking](#), and a [U.S. bill has called for](#) the suspension of U.S. security assistance given the vast corruption and human rights abuses in the country.

The recently announced Anti-corruption Task Force and the Root Causes Strategy’s combating corruption pillar can start to address this issue, but the U.S. must implement a truly proactive approach to anti-corruption in the region. The U.S. should utilize partnerships with global and regional multilateral institutions to create leverage against corrupt governments, looking to partners like the Organization of American States or the Inter-American Development Bank and precedents like the UN-backed [International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala](#) (CICIG). Many commissions [have foundered](#) (or been dismantled) in the region due to government hostility, including the CICIG in 2019 and the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). The International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES) is not able to independently conduct investigations.

Therefore, regional commissions should co-create with civil society or, absent host government cooperation, the U.S. could form non-governmental commissions like the National Anti-Corruption Council in Honduras, which [successfully reported](#) that the government in Honduras embezzled \$300 million from the country’s public health system. International financial institutions can exert leverage for governance reform through the billions they provide in assistance to the region.

The U.S. should also look to the “Engel List”—which tracks senior officials who have committed or participated in corruption in the Northern Triangle and is enshrined in the December 2020 [U.S. Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act](#)—to hold governments to account. The U.S. should base Engel List designation on clear criteria so as to prevent misuse of anti-corruption mandates. At the same time, the U.S. must also recognize that the Engel List only sees the tip of the iceberg when it comes to corruption and its systematization beyond a few bad eggs, with Guatemala’s chief anti-impunity prosecutor having stated that the list barely scratches the surface of corruption in the country.

5. Empower Locally-Led Civil Society

The Root Causes Strategy mentions the importance of local leadership in the context of anti-corruption work. However, to revitalize its approach to the Northern Triangle, the U.S. needs to provide funding and resources to different, noncapital-centric groups and individuals working all across conflict prevention, development, and humanitarian assistance, including religious leaders, faith communities, and faith-based organizations (FBOs). Local communities face the brunt of violence in the Northern Triangle; in Petén, Guatemala indigenous groups are facing



violent displacement. Local organizations on the front lines of conflict are often the actors best equipped for building peace, yet they are systematically neglected and marginalized by current funding approaches. The U.S. should put systematic and comprehensive consultative mechanisms in place for both U.S.-based and local civil society.

For these mandated consultations to be effective, they must be comprehensive and transparent. We strongly recommend that meetings and consultations must reach individuals who are living and working in conflict affected and fragile regions in the Northern Triangle and front-line peacebuilders, religious leaders, faith communities, FBOs, and other stakeholders. Religious leaders, faith communities, and FBOs have a long history of service provision in Central American countries and are "[uniquely](#) positioned to make a profound and durable impact by virtue of their geographic, moral, and political reach and influence." Faith actors have played a significant role in facilitating conversations and recommendations for the Root Causes Strategy through initiatives such as Faith in Action International's [Root Causes Initiative Policy Framework](#). While experts in Washington, DC have significant expertise, it is imperative there is also meaningful participation from local stakeholders in conflict affected and fragile states. The consultation process must be inclusive of U.S. government country teams, with substantial input from long-serving local national staff, local civil society, and local government to ensure the process is not only transparent, but also grounded in local solutions.

Failure to include local voices outside of Washington, DC and other stakeholders will result in a flawed strategy and implementation plan. It is also important that the consultations not be one-off engagements. Instead, an ongoing process of check-ins and consultations will allow stakeholders to comment on evolving policies and issues and be more connected to the strategies as they see their perspectives being integrated. This can create a standardized and adaptive co-creation feedback loop for policies and programs in the region. Through consultations, the U.S. should not only aim to involve local organizations and communities in program design/implementation, but also build up the capacity of local organizations.

It is not enough to request and get extensive feedback through a consultation process. Recommendations and advice must also be seriously considered. Unfortunately, there are too many examples where local expert recommendations have been ignored. A consultation process must provide safeguards so key recommendations and advice are seriously taken into account. The recommendations and advice also must be transparently published and addressed. If key comments and recommendations are not included in the Root Causes Strategy's implementation, the U.S. government should identify publicly why not and how these issues are mitigated and/or resolved in the overall strategy.

As argued in a [report](#) by AfP and Peace Direct, there are [significant challenges](#) to ensuring local ownership and partnership with bilateral and multilateral donors and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Lack of design, monitoring, and evaluation capacity can be a critical barrier for entry for local peacebuilders and organizations. This capacity deficit exacerbates other obstacles imposed by the international aid community, including risk aversion, prejudice, operational constraints, and a general skepticism that local actors have



the requisite depth, scope, and scale of impact. Partnerships need to develop based on solidarity and trust from the beginning between local partners and INGOs. INGOs that promote local leadership should be able to transition in a more sustainable way, while also addressing existing power imbalances and engaging in mutual transformation.

Increasing local ownership is critical for the Root Causes Strategy to succeed, and procurement reform is essential to provide local organizations with more flexible financial opportunities and other tools that enable them to better generate, implement, and scale local solutions. Procurement reform should include the ability to provide flexible funding for core support of local organizations, rapid emergency response funding, seed funding for community-based groups to generate their own funds, and small grant programs administered by local civil society organizations in regional hubs. Finally, there should be more opportunities for local civil society to use open innovation programs to elevate their voices and build partnerships across communities and with the private sector and government.

In engaging civil society, existing best practices call for the inclusion of all major identity groups involved in a conflict and engaging groups that represent the different ethnic or religious identities that might be involved in the conflict. These include women and girls and youth, as enshrined in the Women, Peace, and Security Act/Agenda and the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, as well as faith-based actors and organizations. The U.S. and the Root Causes Strategy should employ a rigorous intersectional approach that consults deliberately with local communities, including women, girls, and youth, and considers gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic location, ethnicity, ability, education, religion, indigeneity, class, and caste. This approach can complement efforts to build trust with local partners and communities and disrupt traditional assistance streams in the region that have not yielded results. The U.S. can look to support groups and initiatives such as the [EDYTRA Foundation](#) in El Salvador, [Impulsa tu Empresa](#) in the region, and many others.

6. Integrate Climate Change Programming

Climate change [contributes to instability](#) in the region through violent extreme weather patterns, increased flooding and drought, and increased food insecurity. Guatemala and El Salvador [rank among the top 15 countries](#) most exposed to natural disasters, including droughts, and agriculture serves as the main source of economic activity for one third of the region's population. Between 2014 and 2016, three back-to-back El Niño droughts [severely weakened staple crop yields](#) across the region's dry corridor. In 2018, a dry spell destroyed the crops of [2.2 million people](#) in the Northern Triangle. The UN estimates that [31%](#) of the population in Honduras faces crisis levels of food security—in Guatemala and El Salvador, 23% and 10% of the population face similar conditions, respectively. In some regions of Honduras, [floods may increase by 60%](#) due to increased rainfall caused by climate change. Increased droughts have contributed to chronic malnutrition in children under 5 and have strongly driven migration for families and youth.

The U.S. must work to [integrate climate change response/adaptation and violence prevention](#)



work across the Northern Triangle, as rightly noted in the Root Causes Strategy. The strategy should entail an increased focus on climate mitigation and adaptation to address climate change's compounding effect on the region. It is essential to see both risk and resilience as integrated rather than siloed.

The Root Causes Strategy should include an increased focus on climate mitigation and adaptation to address climate change's compounding effect on fragility in the Northern Triangle, including targeting strategies in food security that are critical to building the resilience of communities threatened by severe droughts, floods, and waterborne diseases and strengthening water infrastructure/water resource management and drought-tolerant agriculture in alignment with next year's renewal of the [U.S. Global Water Strategy](#). Conflict, governance, and humanitarian assessments should integrate climate change risk and identification of adaptation opportunities where relevant, while conflict risk assessments should be integrated into the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of climate programs to prevent accidental exacerbation of violent conflict.

Additionally, [investment in renewable energy](#) can decrease dependency on agriculture and manufacturing, decrease vulnerability to droughts and oil price spikes, and boost resilience to disasters through decentralization of power generation. Finally, in integrating conflict prevention and climate change response and adaptation, the Root Causes Strategy must work through a community-driven, human rights-based approach. This means deliberately consulting with groups most at-risk for the harmful impacts of climate change, including [indigenous communities](#). For instance, in Guatemala's Western Highlands, 79% of indigenous peoples suffer from increased poverty, and 58% of the indigenous population faces chronic malnutrition, both caused by droughts' impact on subsistence farmers.

7. Take a Humble Approach

Given past U.S. involvement in the Northern Triangle and its negative impact on democracy, peace, and local trust in the region, the U.S. should pursue a humble approach that aims to rebuild trust with local partners. During her [recent trip](#) to Central America, Vice President Harris did not discuss these historical dimensions within the new U.S. Northern Triangle engagement strategy. The Root Causes Strategy does not address its historical involvement in the conflict dynamics.

Explicitly noting the United States' controversial history in the region can help transition to a new chapter for the Northern Triangle. For instance, the anti-corruption work of Task Force Alpha should recognize that the U.S. has emboldened and enabled corruption of top officials like the president of Honduras and the country's political and military institutions that are both corrupt and repressive. Doing so can serve as a form of transitional justice so that partners can re-conceptualize their relationships with the U.S. and the U.S. can establish newfound legitimacy in the region. A human rights-based approach should also ground the U.S. strategy in the region through actions such as halting evictions and displacement of grassroots communities throughout the Northern Triangle.



A humble approach must clearly define U.S. interests in the region and who benefits from those interests. The U.S. should seek stability not just for the sake of business margins or to prevent a migration crisis at its border, but to ensure peace and prosperity for those residing in the region. The Biden Administration's strategy must articulate for whom and what that long-sought-after stability is serving. It should also remain cognizant of and avoid strengthening bad leaders and actors in the area, such as narco-terrorist leaders who remain problematic to local communities and governments and repress civil society.

8. Support the Revitalization of Public and Private Community-Based Structures to Address Local Conflict, Justice, and Worsening Social Cohesion

In addition to the Root Causes Strategy and U.S. Strategy for Collaboratively Managing Migration in the Region, President Biden signed an additional [Executive Order](#) in February 2021 that asked the Domestic Policy Council to coordinate the Federal Government's efforts to "welcome and support immigrants, including refugees, and to catalyze state and local integration and inclusion efforts." To address intolerance, xenophobia, and hate crimes, the Biden Administration also signed the [COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act](#) into law, which seeks to increase accessibility of hate crime reporting at the local and state level through public outreach and reporting resources in multiple languages, as well as creates a point of contact to expedite review of hate crimes related to COVID-19.

These policy initiatives undertaken by the Biden Administration are commendable. However, violent, and fragile states face a multitude of impending and imminent [post-pandemic crises](#) expected to further drive [migration](#) to the U.S. at a time when immigration is already a [deeply divisive and polarizing issue in U.S. communities](#). The Biden Administration should focus on better integrating and coordinating immigration and social cohesion efforts to ensure the issue of immigration does not deepen cultural and political divides.

A comprehensive response to challenges faced by the U.S. immigration system due to the arrival of migrants fleeing violence in the Northern Triangle also requires an examination of the long-term impact of immigration on polarization in the U.S. While there is widespread support for [policy interventions on immigration](#), support for immigration policy has not translated into broad acceptance of immigrants. Immigration continues to be a [key wedge issue](#) and is being used to amplify divisions in the U.S. Images of migrants arriving at the southern border are used to promote fear of the other. In segments of the U.S. political and media landscape, fear of immigrants is a dominant narrative. Such narratives create divisions, undermine solidarity and pluralism, and set communities against one another.

The Biden Administration should support organizations and initiatives that promote social cohesion and inclusion of immigrants within host communities. As a critical first step, the Biden Administration should revitalize the [Community Relations Services](#) (CRS) at the Department of Justice, and [strengthen](#) the capacity of community and religious groups to prevent and respond to conflict and tension that may arise between immigrants and host communities, because of actual or perceived racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural differences