

China's Strategic Interests in Central America: El Salvador Breaks Off with Taiwan

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El Salvador's decision to break off ties with Taipei and "defect" to Beijing obviously had a lot to do with the economic aid that China promised it, but the People's Republic is embracing the Central American nation for strategic reasons that go far beyond the symbolism of international recognition and include the establishment of an influential foothold in the US' "backyard".

El Salvador's Shocking "Defection"

The [US was shocked by El Salvador's decision](#) earlier this week to break off ties with Taipei and "defect" to Beijing, so much so that it [ominously declared](#) that it will "reevaluate" its relationship with the country. The Central American state's presidential spokesman explained that his government was motivated by economic factors, [remarking](#) that

"Fundamentally, it's an interest in betting on the growth of our country with one of the world's most booming economies. El Salvador can't turn its back on international reality."

Expectedly, the official US statement on the matter [warned](#) that "China's apparent interference in the domestic politics of a Western Hemisphere country is of grave concern to the United States" and that "China's economic inducements facilitate economic dependency and domination, not partnership", which is a [common infowar narrative](#) that it's deployed all across the world in an attempt to dissuade countries from participating in Beijing's One Belt One Road (OBOR) global vision of New Silk Road connectivity.

Silk Road Scaremongering

That's actually what the fuss is mostly all about too, OBOR, because of China's interest in reportedly helping El Salvador reopen the La Union port in the Gulf of Fonseca, which triggered [fake news claims](#) that it's secretly planning to open up a military base there. Beijing has no interest in doing so, nor is it even capable of pulling this off if it wanted to because of the cross-hemispheric Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) involved that pass through US-controlled maritime territory in the "[Compact Of Free Association](#)" states and Hawaii.

What the US is really scared about, however, is that China will use the Salvadoran port in the tri-border area with neighboring Honduras and Nicaragua to extend its political influence in the US' Central American "backyard" through economic means, essentially weaning the

region away from Washington per [Beijing's grand strategy in this part of the world](#) and putting the People's Republic in a position to exert influence here just like the US is doing in the South China Sea, albeit through economic and other means instead of military ones.

The Chinese government is capable of indefinitely subsidizing certain companies that operate at a loss so long as they succeed in dislodging established competitors from targeted markets, such as the US in Central America, which is a matter of national economic security for Washington because of the 2004 [CAFTA-DR free trade agreement](#) that it signed with these states (including El Salvador, the first country to implement it in force) and the Dominican Republic.

What this means in practice is that CAFTA-DR will have to either be renegotiated or scrapped just like NAFTA in order to eliminate any chance of China exploiting these countries' free trade arrangements with the US in order to gain backdoor access to its market. This is a very delicate situation for the US because the countries involved might simply clinch a regional Silk Road free trade agreement with China if Trump pulls out of the CAFTA-DR, therefore strategically "ceding" this region to Beijing.

"Weapons Of Mass Migration"

Economic security isn't the only concern for the US either because the three countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras form what Washington policymakers like to call the "[Northern Triangle](#)", which is where many of its illegal migrants originate. The notorious MS-13 cartel from El Salvador is an especially [serious security threat all throughout the US](#), but now Washington has to contend with the prospects that its government could come under Beijing's influence and refuse to accept the forced repatriation of these criminals.

This theoretical "[Weaponization of Mass Migration](#)" is enough to send chills down the spine of every Trump Administration official who might credibly fear that the other countries of the "Northern Triangle" could try to more aggressively bargain for a better migration deal for their compatriots and potentially "blackmail" the US that they'll go the way of El Salvador if Washington doesn't capitulate to their demands. Illegal migration is one of Trump's signature domestic issues, but now he might be forced to contend with the prospects of his policies have geopolitical implications vis-à-vis the [New Cold War](#) with China.

Ghosts Of The Old Cold War

Just like during the Old Cold War when the specter of a communist "domino effect" rattled US decision makers so much that they overreacted to the USSR's influence in Central America through coups and death squads, so too might the same thing be happening nowadays in the New Cold War when it comes to "containing" China in this region. In fact, history has already proven itself capable of repeating in this part of the world given the ongoing [US-backed Hybrid War on Nicaragua](#) and the [de-facto dictatorship](#) that it recently helped impose on neighboring Honduras.

It therefore wouldn't be surprising if this same regional strategic template is expanded to El Salvador just like it was during the Old Cold War when the US supported the government's anti-communist death squads, albeit remixed with the US backing anti-government "rebels" (death squads) this time ahead of the February 2019 presidential election. The 2014 one was [narrowly won](#) by the FMLN's candidate, the leftist party that emerged from the civil war,

and the victor is a former rebel who probably still privately harbors a hatred for the US and sympathy for socialist countries like China.

That would partially explain why the government was willing to risk the US' wrath by bravely going through with this move, which is more of a geostrategic pivot away from Washington than anything else. With Washington being painfully aware of this, it therefore can't be discounted that it will try to destabilize the situation in one of the hemisphere's poorest and crime-ridden countries in order to tip the electoral balance in favor of the pro-American right-wing ARENA party that previously enjoyed a monopoly on power for two decades until the FMLN's [narrow 2009 upset](#) that repeated itself in 2014.

The FMLN has its work cut out for it because it must simultaneously safeguard security in the [world's deadliest country outside of a warzone](#) while also delivering something of significance to its population in order to justify the risky pivot towards China that will undoubtedly incur the US' punishment sooner than later, especially in the run-up to next year's vote. Should the FMLN win once again, probably by another razor-thin margin, then it could be expected that the US will allege fraud, impose sanctions, and then use this as the justification for clandestinely arming "democratic freedom fighters" from neighboring Honduras.

Concluding Thoughts

For all of the aforementioned reasons relating to the US' economic and strategic security, the tiniest mainland country in the Western Hemisphere has suddenly turned into a New Cold War battlefield between the US and China, and its upcoming election early next year will be a pivotal test for assessing which of these two is "winning". It should be warned, however, that Central America once again has all the trappings of a regional crisis because of just how closely the contemporary state of affairs mirrors the one from the 1980s [at the high point](#) of Hybrid War unrest.

A repeat of that scenario could cynically be used to justify Trump's border wall and redirect the [new Mexican leader's](#) strategic focus towards dealing with a large-scale crisis along its southern frontier that might ironically include its own uncontrollable migrant component. This possible eventuality carries with it the risk of enormous blowback for US interests that far eclipse whatever domestic political gains it might reap from such a scenario, which therefore throws Washington into the dilemma of either "surrendering" El Salvador and potentially the rest of Central America to China or militantly pushing back and destabilizing its own "backyard".

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