Guatemala: National Security and Regional Implications

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to this meeting on national security and regional implications for Guatemala. The first time I went to Guatemala was 1966, almost 50 years ago. The country was in the middle of a civil war which would rage on for another 30 years and claim a huge number of lives. But when the war ended in 1996 with the peace accords, there was a great sense of optimism about national security for Guatemala: that the situation would now be better and that Guatemala could look forward to a much more promising future, not only in the area of national security but in other areas as well.

In many ways, the situation has improved. But sadly, national security remains a key problem for Guatemala. Today, of course, the problem is not the civil war – thank goodness, that’s long past us. Like any modern society, Guatemala has home-grown problems of violence that we are familiar with in this country and elsewhere. But Guatemala also lives in a dangerous neighbourhood, and it’s a neighbourhood that brings to Guatemala problems that are not entirely of its making but which it has to deal with.

So the topic today, ‘National Security and Regional Implications’, brings together these two issues. If you ask, what’s this got to do with the UK, the answer is very simple. First of all, there are always spillovers when there are major security problems in other parts of the world. Secondly, this is a part of the world where Britain has major historic responsibilities. Everybody knows about the former colony of Belize, which became independent in 1981 and shares a border with Guatemala, but Britain actually had a second colony in this part of the world in the 19th century called Miskito, on the eastern coast of Nicaragua and Honduras.

So this is an area where Britain certainly needs to be well informed, needs to understand what is happening. We are very grateful today that we have an opportunity to address these questions. Sadly, the president himself is unable to attend. He had to postpone his visit at the last minute. But we’re lucky to have with us the minister of security, Mauricio Lopez Bonilla, who is a retired army officer and has held the rank of minister of security since 2011. He was the campaign manager for the president in his successful run for the presidency in that year. He is also known – I think this is no secret – to be the closest adviser to President Pérez Molina in Guatemala. So if anyone can speak for the president on these issues, it is certainly our speaker today.

He will speak in Spanish. If you need translation, you’ll find English on channel 1 and Spanish on channel 2. If you want to make comments on Twitter as we’re going along, you’re welcome to do so with #CHEvents.

The minister will give a brief introduction for about 15 minutes or so and then we’ll throw it open for Q&A for the rest of the time that we have. Minister? Thank you very much.

Muchas gracias. [English translation] Good afternoon, everyone. First of all, I want to send the regards from the president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina. Because of several very important reasons, he is unable to be here today. He is not able to be here for this event which is extremely important for all of us. So I am here with a delegation. I have the minister for the economy, Sergio de la Torre, and the minister of energy and mines. It is also a great pleasure to have the Guatemalan ambassador to the UK here with
us. I would also like to send my regards to Sarah Dickson, the UK ambassador to Guatemala. She is very
dynamic and she’s very worried about the bilateral agenda between Guatemala and the United Kingdom.

We never have much time but I would like to give you a short introduction so that we are all aware of the
context. First of all, it’s important to say that when you look at the map, Guatemala has a very important
privilege in its strategic position. We are next to what is the biggest market in the world. We are also in a
position in which we have access to both oceans. We have a border of about 1,000 kilometres with our
sister country in the north, Mexico; we also have a border with El Salvador and Honduras. We also share
a geographical area with Belize.

So it’s very important for us, when we’re talking about security in countries such as the Central American
countries, these countries that are coming out of a transition, as it was mentioned beforehand in the
introduction. We had internal armed conflict that lasted for many years. The first challenge is to build
strong institutions, and that these institutions have agendas that go beyond the four years of government.
The Latin American countries are very involved in politics and there are a lot of political battles during
electoral campaigns. When we have new, emerging democratic countries, the main challenge is often to
have strong institutions, as it should be, after a time of internal conflict and authoritarian regimes.

The first big step and the first big challenge is to find out how to have values that have to do with
authority, respecting and complying with the law, and also defending a democratic state. After all these
armed battles and battles between ideologies, what we’re left with is a deep discussion in order to find out
how we can have a modern state, a democratic government, to build a democratic rule of law, in order to
face the new challenges of security beyond the framework of the East-West conflict and all these issues of
the Cold War that had to do with Central America.

So it is quite difficult to find all these democratic values, to build them, when we’re coming with all this
past of conflict that has affected the entire society. We have a reality and to see all this together is
extremely important for us. When we’re talking about security, we want to leave behind certain old things
that had to do with old values of defence. We cannot think in traditional terms when we talk about
defence. We do not have the threat of armed intervention or problems of sovereignty. Yes, the sovereignty
of the state is threatened when we look at compliance with the law, but the threats are completely
different to the threats we were facing in the past.

In countries such as Guatemala, there are internal factors that carry security problems for us. Sometimes
we can see a total lack of governance because we are in a transition, but also because we are in a
geostrategic position. This is also a geographic situation that some people take advantage of: those who
don’t recognize any borders, those who are involved in transnational organized crime. Sometimes there
are problems between countries in order to try to have a regional effort, but criminals don’t have these
problems. They use them. They use the borders and the divisions in order to be able to organize all their
criminal activities in the area. This has a very strong impact in the different countries.

An internal security problem for us nowadays is the weakness that we have with the rule of law, the fight
against impunity, and controlling the main insecurity factors and criminal factors that have to do with
organized crime. We have to highlight the issue of drug trafficking. When we look at the regional
perspective, organized crime – mainly drug trafficking – is the main threat for us. When we try to think
about the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that we have, we have to have strong institutions, democratic
institutions that will guarantee the minimal aspects of security. This is something very important. In that
sense, being able to define not only the policies and the strategies but also the entire judicial system that
will give us the tools to fight against organized crime is essential.
We must not deny that with the framework of insecurity and endemic violence that we have in a region such as Central America, one of the very important factors that has to do with how this situation is growing is the social inequalities that we have in the area. The fight against poverty is therefore extremely important. If people don’t have alternatives, if they have no jobs, if there is no investment, if there is no hope of having a good life – for all citizens to have a good life – then organized crime (and crime in general) finds a very fertile land in which it can grow.

The most important part of our societies, young people – nowadays, from a very young age, young people start to participate in crime. They start to be in gangs that also have a transnational aspect to them. I’m talking about two specific gangs that were very famous at the very beginning in the United States. They came from political refugees that went to the USA and then they were sent back to Central America, mainly to El Salvador: Mara Salvatrucha is one of the main gangs, and Barrio Diesiocho. They are two gangs that carry out many activities. We're not just talking about young people dealing with gangs who do petty crime. We're talking about criminal structures, criminal groups in which we have many minors, people under 18, but who are as strong as the mafias that we know nowadays in Guatemala, south of Mexico, Tabasco, Chiapas, El Salvador, Honduras. In all these countries we have this problem with these transnational gangs.

If you go to see the FBI webpage, you will find a task force that is set to tackle the problem that these two gangs are creating in the USA. In many cities in the United States, it’s become an extremely difficult problem to tackle.

So when we look at all this panorama, having strong institutions is very important. Which positive and negative aspects do we have when we're trying to have new policies or innovative policies? Guatemala nowadays has an international commission against impunity in Guatemala. It’s an experiment from the United Nations and it has carried out real results, not only in the fight against impunity but also in trying to have a judicial system which will give us the tools to fight against organized crime. Nowadays, being able to fight against money laundering and the laundering of other assets, and all the crimes related to money laundering, and also to have activities when it comes to seizing certain assets, is a very important tool that we have in our country. This entity has been essential for this.

When we look at the weaknesses, we have been building strong institutions in order to face these kinds of threats, and we still have a long way to go. We are building these strong institutions; we have a clear idea of what we have to do and how to achieve it. We believe that when we look at the framework of major challenges, not only of security in Guatemala but in the entire region, cooperation with bilateral agendas and also creating a regional agenda is extremely important.

I just want to finish this point by saying that we have a work dynamic that has to do with generating positive synergies for cooperation. With Mexico, we already have created a group that works bilaterally in several areas. We are not just talking about work at a border level but transnational work in security. So we participate in this group, we share information. It’s a permanent group that has to do with policing issues, intelligence, immigration, coordination between the different borders, and also border crossings. This has allowed us to have a transnational agenda that has worked very well.

We would like to duplicate that model with El Salvador, Honduras and Belize. This is part of our main regional strategy to work all together in order to be able to tackle organized crime in a much more effective way.
The major challenge – and this is the conclusion of my first part – has to do with organized crime, and mainly when we look at drug trafficking and all activities related to drug trafficking. We are looking at all the stages involved in this. What we have been saying is we want to be recognized, because traditionally drug trafficking is seen in two scenarios: we have the supply and the demand. But we have a third one – we have the one in between. We have transit: all those countries through which you have all the trafficking of drugs going from the supply to the demand. In that sense, this has to do with the consequences of the protection of both the supply and the demand. So the trafficking of weapons and money – the drugs go from south to north, and from north to south we have the money, we have the weapons. There is the fight for territory for controlling this traffic and to see who will be helping the cartels in the south or in the north. All this involves the transit countries, going from Panama to Guatemala. This involves these countries in a war that is not our war. We didn’t decide to do it and we don’t think we should fight this war. This is extremely unfair because then there is not a shared responsibility, because we look at the resources that have to do with tackling supply and demand.

Our countries have a great potential but one of our main problems has to do with security. Nevertheless, because we are involved in this war on drugs, we have to use our own resources. We have very few resources, resources that many times we don’t even have and that we would like to invest in health, in education, in trying to create better conditions for citizens. We have to use all these resources for security reasons. If we don’t do it, if we don’t seize enough drugs, then we can have economic measures against us. This will threaten our country. So we really think we’re in a position, and President Otto Pérez has been defining regional strategies that have to do with this lack of balance, this asymmetry, this unfairness of being forced to participate in this war – this war that we’re not ready for.

Thirdly, as well, we have to start to find new lines of action that are more effective than what we have seen so far. In a few words: creating strong institutions, having a clear vision at the regional level, is very important. We cannot work in an isolated manner. We have to define policies together and we have to have regional dynamics. This could be the starting point for very joint work all together. Now more than ever, we are talking about prevention, because we are always doing the opposite – we have always looked at repression, reaction, but we’ve talked very little about prevention in this area. We think this is essential.

To conclude, I would just like to say that the main challenge is to change this paradigm of security in the region. We have to think about prevention and not about reaction. We have to look at this in all areas of activity. We think this is a starting point for a new dynamic in changing this security paradigm. Thank you.