

Season 26



Debating the 2025-2026 Stoa Policy Resolution

The United States Federal Government should substantially reform its policy toward one or more countries in Central/South America.

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Current Issues in US Foreign Policy in Central / South America



"Guatemala seizes over half a ton of cocaine from Costa Rica"
-- AFP 10 February 2024

(Photo by JOHAN ORDONEZ / AFP)

Foreign policy issues are in the news all the time, and debaters will have no shortage of ideas to draw from for Affirmative cases. Negatives must prepare some generic briefs against common themes that will appear in multiple debate rounds, to be prepared even if they are encountering a new plan for the first time. Here, we will survey topic areas in the Status Quo and proposals for change that are common in the literature today.

Economic & Trade Policies

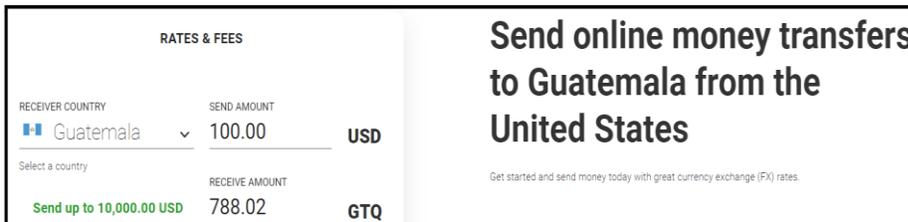
Five of the resolution countries (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador) plus the Dominican Republic are members of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (often abbreviated as CAFTA or CAFTA-DR). So, Affirmatives will not get much traction proposing “Free Trade” with these countries since we theoretically already have it.

“Nicaraguan exports to the United States have increased by approximately 70% since the United States – Central America – Dominican Republic – Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) went into effect for the United States and Nicaragua on April 1, 2006. Other signatories of the agreement are Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. CAFTA-DR creates the second-largest U.S. export market in Latin America, behind only Mexico. Most Dominican Republic and Central American exports into the United States have benefited from duty-free treatment as a result of a trade preference program provided by the U.S. Congress to promote regional economic development (the Caribbean Basin Initiative, CBI).

CAFTA-DR reciprocally reduces tariff and non-tariff barriers for U.S. exports into the region.”¹

Some have suggested kicking Nicaragua out of CAFTA, but this cannot be done by unilateral US action alone, so an Affirmative debate plan for this is probably is not viable.

There are various articles claiming that free trade agreements (FTA) may be harmful, either to the small countries we trade with or to the U.S. itself. Having much lower wages and labor standards, poor countries can often set up factories that produce goods much cheaper than they



The screenshot shows a 'RATES & FEES' section with a table of exchange rates. The table has two columns: 'RECEIVER COUNTRY' and 'SEND AMOUNT'. The first row shows 'Guatemala' with a dropdown arrow and a 'SEND AMOUNT' of '100.00' in 'USD'. Below this, there is a 'RECEIVE AMOUNT' of '788.02' in 'GTQ'. A green banner at the bottom left says 'Send up to 10,000.00 USD'. To the right of the table is a promotional text: 'Send online money transfers to Guatemala from the United States' and 'Get started and send money today with great currency exchange (FX) rates.'

RECEIVER COUNTRY	SEND AMOUNT	CURRENCY
Guatemala	100.00	USD
	RECEIVE AMOUNT	
	788.02	GTQ

can be produced in this country, and then export them to the US under an FTA, driving US manufacturers out of business. Some

believe that US exports of agricultural products, of which we have surpluses, drives out of business the small farmers in poor countries and devastates their rural economies and local food supplies.

The U.S. also has a free trade agreement that includes Mexico (the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, USMCA) and free trade agreements with Chile and Peru as well.

¹ <https://ni.usembassy.gov/united-states-central-america-dominican-republic-free-trade-agreement-cafta-dr/>

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Another sometimes overlooked aspect of US economic policy with Central America is the role of remittances in propping up the economies of poor countries in the region. Remittances are monies sent back to the home country by their citizens who have migrated to the United States to find work. These are very large sums. For example, in 2022, more money flowed into Guatemala from remittance income than from all its foreign trade export sales combined. These countries effectively are exporting their labor and receiving payment for those exports in remittances. You can debate whether this is a good or bad thing and for whom it is good or bad.

Trade sanctions are another fertile area to look for case ideas this debate season. The US has historically resorted to trade sanctions as a knee-jerk reaction every time we don't like what some country is

doing. And when they don't work, usually Congress or the President will add more. For example, the US currently has trade sanctions on Nicaragua and Venezuela, and there are bills pending in Congress to add yet more. More sanctions or less sanctions, either of these could be AFF cases this year.



Foreign Aid Policies

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) was a subsidiary of the State Department that conducted most of the economic and humanitarian foreign aid dispensed annually by the federal government. It, along with most of that aid, was shut down by Pres. Donald Trump in his second term of office in 2025.

It is likely that numerous Affirmative cases this year will be written on adding, removing, or reforming foreign aid to the resolution countries, given their relative poverty and troubled economic conditions. Since most humanitarian aid has already been removed, over the objections of everyone in the "Aid Industrial Complex,"² it is easy to find proposals for

² Pres. Dwight Eisenhower, in his Farewell Address to the nation before leaving office in 1961, warned Americans about the dangers of the growing influence of a "Military-Industrial Complex." He was concerned about corporations' dependence on government for military contracts for their profitability, giving them financial motivation to lobby Congress for increased (unnecessary?) defense spending, perhaps by inflating the threats the nation faced beyond their actual reality. Likewise, some describe the proliferation of aid organizations whose existence depends on (inflated?) "needs" in foreign countries and lobbying Congress for more aid money to be disbursed through them to the "needy" as an "Aid Industrial Complex."

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Affirmative plans to restore aid to one or more countries along with estimates of lives saved if such is done.

One can certainly argue that if foreign aid could resolve poverty and ignite economic development, Central America would be rich today, given how much aid they have already received. Perhaps it hasn't been enough, or hasn't been targeted to the right sectors or the right projects. Or perhaps the social conditions, government corruption, and economic structures of these countries are so dysfunctional that foreign aid can never produce its intended results and it's hopeless to try.

Presidents routinely announce initiatives to aid Latin America with economic development. These are forgotten and abandoned when a new administration comes to power and begins its next initiative to try to accomplish the same things. Lather/rinse/repeat every time the White House changes occupants.

The Biden Administration's "Central America Forward" initiative was designed to improve the economies of Latin American countries and "address the root causes" of mass migration to the north.

"...Vice President Harris launched "Central America Forward" in February 2023 in partnership with the Partnership for Central America, a 501(c)(3) organization. Central America Forward supports inclusive economic growth while also emphasizing the importance of good governance, good jobs, reducing violence, and empowering women. Central America Forward reaffirms the broader goals of the U.S. Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Migration...has mobilized \$5.2 billion in private sector commitments to support inclusive economic growth in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Over 50 companies and organizations have joined this initiative and made investments in the region."³

While noble in its goals, it remains to be seen whether CAF can succeed where previous federal initiatives with the same goals have failed. It's also questionable whether those "investments in the region" would have happened anyway or were already in progress and CAF merely takes credit for them. While not on Pres. Trump's agenda, the CAF program still exists and received funding from other sources outside the U.S.

But economic development is not the only goal of foreign aid. There are also programs promoting health care, crime prevention, drug enforcement, judicial system reform, education,

³ <https://www.state.gov/progress-on-central-america-forward/>

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and probably many more. Affirmatives this year may pick one or more of these to increase, reform, or abolish.

Bear in mind that USAID programs, when they were operating pre-Trump II, often did not send money directly to foreign governments. Instead, USAID contracted out the specific programs it wants the money spent on to various NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations, so-called despite the fact that a lot of them get a lot of money from governments).

"We also provide not \$1 to the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala," [USAID Administrator Samantha] Power said at the House hearing. "We invest in civil society that are holding those governments accountable, including independent media, including anti-corruption organizations." ⁴

In addition to aid programs, the US has also sent lots of aid for disaster relief at various times. The region is vulnerable to earthquakes and hurricanes, which periodically create havoc in these poor countries. The US military base and personnel at Soto Cano, Honduras, are often used to support such disaster relief efforts.

Multinational Development Banks

Numerous international organizations, most of which the US is either a member or a major stakeholder, exist for the purpose of lending money to poor governments. Examples include the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration.

Why would countries need or want these outside institutions to lend them money? Because poor countries typically have trouble borrowing money the old-fashioned way (selling bonds). Poor countries are a poor credit risk, so bond markets either won't find any demand for their bonds (nobody would buy them) or the willing buyers would demand such high rates of interest (due to the likelihood of not getting paid back) that the borrowed funds would be unaffordable. These institutions will offer to lend money at lower interest rates to poor governments either for specific projects (schools, roads, hospitals, etc) or to pay off higher interest debt (like those bonds we mentioned earlier) that the country finds itself unable to pay.

There are several potential problems that Affirmative cases might want to address with a reform plan. First, if the government receiving the loan is oppressive and evil, one can argue that

⁴ <https://rollcall.com/2023/05/03/democratic-appropriator-urges-end-to-aid-to-northern-triangle-countries/>

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lending them money enables their bad behavior and prolongs dictatorship and human rights violations. Second, one can argue that if countries can't borrow money from the market, the loan is probably a bad idea. Indeed, one can ask why putting poor countries further into debt is ever a good idea. Third, these loans are often given with strings attached. The IMF is well known for offering "bail out" loans that dictate to the receiving country various budget and economic reforms they require as a condition of the loan. If those "conditions" are harmful, the target country may be worse off. At the very least, its government's sovereignty will be compromised if an outside institution (unelected by its citizens) is dictating government policies. Fourth, if the bail out creates incentives for bad behavior (we can spend all we want and IMF will bail us out), then the whole process is harmful regardless of its good intentions.

The U.S. has enough influence over some of these institutions that an Affirmative plan could fiat actions only by the US government sufficient to block them from lending to specific countries we don't like. For example, the US has done this before in the case of blocking IMF lending to Iran.

Military / Security Policies

The US provides millions of dollars in military equipment and training every year to many of the countries in the region (excluding Nicaragua and Venezuela but including, at various times, even, oddly enough, Costa Rica, which has no army).

Justifications for military aid include blocking the influence of regimes that are hostile to the US and its interests (like Nicaragua and Venezuela), competing with the influence of outside great powers (like China and Russia), solidifying alliances and partnerships with ruling governments, and increasing their security capabilities to counter gangs, drug dealers, and insurrections. The US also sells weapons to some of these countries, for all of the same reasons.

Such military aid and sales are controversial to say the least. You can expect to hear debate cases this year advocating cutting or eliminating military aid and/or arms sales to one or more of the countries. Many believe arming governments that have been, could be, or are now oppressing human rights means our nation is aiding and abetting harm to their citizens, and prolonging the life of evil regimes.

Under this header also comes the issue of illicit drugs. South America is a large supplier of illicit drugs intended for the US market, and Central America is a common transit route for those drugs to reach their destination further north. There are two directions Affirmative plans might go with

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regard to drug trafficking. We might try to increase efforts to interdict drugs, given how many are entering the US every year and the harm they cause. Alternatively, we may recognize that we have already tried just about everything to stop the drugs and they arrive nonetheless. Maybe time, lives and money vainly spent interdicting them would be put to better purposes?

Immigration

“Although immigration policy has traditionally been considered as falling within the sphere of domestic affairs, recent developments worldwide have propelled international migration on the agenda of decision-makers and scholars concerned with foreign policy and international relations. By virtue of its dominant position in the Western Hemisphere and its strategic as well as trade policies toward source countries, the United States plays a major role in determining the region's population movements; and its response to these movements is in turn shaped in large measure by foreign policy considerations.”⁵

Many of the other foreign policies the US pursues in the region have, at their root, concerns about mass migration of migrants and illegal immigration coming up Central America, through Mexico, and into the United States. A good argument can be made that changing immigration policies specifically toward nationals of any of the countries could be a foreign policy within the scope of the resolution.



Other cases may change US foreign policy directly toward those nations with the intended goal of reducing migration.

Understand that there are “pull” and “push” factors affecting large scale immigration from Central America. The “pull” factor is the vast disparity between standards of living in the U.S. compared to their countries of origin. This is why we don’t have mass migration from Canada towards the U.S.: their living standards are close to ours, so there is nothing to be gained. But when our standard of living is ten times what they have at home, the incentive to immigrate, even illegally and along dangerous migration routes, is extremely alluring.

⁵ Aristide R. Zolberg <https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/0-271-00789-3.html>

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“Push” factors are the problems in foreign countries that cause enough discontent or disruption to the lives of their people that they begin looking for a better life elsewhere. Economic stagnation,

The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees who, coming directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened ... enter or are present in their territory without authorization, provided they present themselves without delay to the authorities and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence.

- Text of the Refugee Convention

for sure, is one but war, violence, gang activity, and natural disasters are other factors as well.

One could argue that, if these other factors were the primary issue, the migrants would move to the first safe place not affected by those problems, i.e., Mexico. The fact that they pass through a safe poor country and continue all the way to a rich country suggests that economics plays a big role.

Before you write an Affirmative case dealing with immigration, be sure you understand the background of current immigration laws. Debaters (and politicians) often throw out policy recommendations without taking the time to find out what powers the government actually has or what rules currently apply. There are several things you will need to pay attention to:

- The 1951 Refugee Convention. The U.S. is a party to the 1967 Protocols of the Refugee Convention (which incorporates the text of the original 1951 version), because the President signed and the Senate ratified the treaty. Among other things, it requires that a country to which migrants have come (legally or illegally) cannot be sent back to a country where their lives would be in danger. This requires some adjudication and processing to determine whether the migrant has a valid claim. And it explains why a lot of people who show up at our southern border aren't just sent back immediately: We signed a treaty that says we can't do that.
- US Code Title 8. Laws contained in this section of federal law make it a crime to enter the U.S. outside of an authorized checkpoint. Understand that illegal “entry” is not the same thing as illegal “presence.” “Being here” without a valid visa or permission is a civil offense and does not prove the crime of illegal entry.⁶ If someone is arrested for illegal entry, they can claim asylum (under the Refugee Convention) and they must be allowed to go through hearings, proceedings, etc. to determine whether their claim is valid.

⁶ For example, someone with a visa might have entered the country legally and then overstayed past the validity of their visa and are now “present” illegally, even though they “entered” legally.

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- US Code Title 42. This was a policy in effect from March 2020 to May 2023 as a “public health” policy ostensibly related to Covid. It deported migrants immediately (usually to northern Mexico), refused to hear asylum claims, but carried no penalty for illegal entry into the United States. Even though it appears to contradict the Refugee Convention, the Supreme Court allowed it when it was challenged.
- Temporary Protected Status. This is a law passed by Congress in 1990 that grants a (theoretically) temporary suspension of immigration proceedings (including allowing them to live and work here) against someone here illegally if they came from a country designated by the Dept. of Homeland Security as experiencing an emergency situation and were already in the US at the time of the emergency declaration. It is “not” applicable to new immigrants arriving after the emergency declaration. It stipulates that the immigrant loses the protected status and can be deported once DHS determines that the home country emergency is over. For example, there are over 188,000 Salvadorans currently living in the United States because they were in the US (illegally) when an earthquake hit El Salvador in 2001 and it was deemed too dangerous to return. DHS has been extending the emergency every couple of years for over 2 decades. Unless DHS extends them:
 - El Salvador’s designation expires in September, 2026.
 - Honduras expires in Sept. 2025.
 - Nicaragua expires in Sept. 2025. (TPS was granted because of a hurricane that happened in 1998 which, apparently, has not ended yet)
 - Venezuela was set to expire in Sept. 2025 but it’s currently being contested in court and may be extend into 2026.

Generic Issues

A number of issues are going to come up over and over again and should be briefed as generic arguments to be used in multiple rounds, regardless of the specific case being run. These can be especially helpful if a Negative has no specific evidence against the Affirmative case. You should (and Monument Publishing will be doing some of these) brief on topics like:

Corruption It’s possible that a large number of policies toward many of the resolution countries would fail – not because they’re bad policy ideas, but because their governments are so corrupt that any funding would be stolen or any activities would be derailed.

Human Rights Everyone wants human rights respected, and some Affirmative cases will be written with a view towards either promoting greater respect for them or else retaliating against countries that violate them. Negatives should be prepared to argue why the U.S. has no

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obligation to citizens of other nations, and why human rights cannot be the top priority in our foreign policy. In addition, historically it has happened that outside pressure on human rights actually hardens resistance by the targeted regime and makes the oppressed people worse off.

Complicity Is the United States “complicit” in the misdeeds of a foreign government if we trade with the citizens and corporations located there? If we give foreign aid to them? If we give weapons to their government? If we sell weapons to them? Negatives need to be able to counter this common justification for Affirmative plans that are often merely symbolic virtue signaling with no expected real-world effect.

Illegal Drugs A sharp Negative brief to have in your briefcase might be a “nothing we can do” brief against any AFF case claiming to reduce regional trafficking in illegal drugs. If money, equipment, manpower, firepower, laws, sanctions, and jails could solve for illegal drugs, they would have been solved by now. Listen to the 1984 hit song “Smuggler’s Blues” by Glenn Frey to get the vibe and mindset of this generic position.

Immigration Good Since many federal policies toward Central America are designed to reduce migration into the United States, what if we questioned the underlying premise that such migration is bad? Maybe it’s a good thing that more people want to come to our country. Maybe they are hard workers who will contribute to society. Maybe they will do “jobs Americans won’t do.” And maybe many of the stereotypes (criminals, won’t assimilate, consume government resources) can be proven false.

Immigration Bad Inverse of the above. In case AFF plans to bring more immigrants into the US from the resolution countries, you should have a generic brief against more immigration.

Foreign Aid Good There will surely be plans to cancel various US foreign aid programs to the target countries. Without knowing in advance which countries and which programs, a good generic brief to have would be one arguing that foreign aid is helpful, useful, justified, not a burden on taxpayers, and net beneficial.

Foreign Aid Bad Likewise, some AFF plans will increase foreign aid in some way. Generic arguments against foreign aid are sure to be useful this year.

NGO’s bad Affirmative cases may use Non-Governmental Organizations (charitable groups like CARE, Save the Children, Red Cross, etc.) as contracting agencies to carry out their plans. While they may be better than the corrupt governments in the region,

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NGO's come with their own sets of problems, and critiques of their mindset and methodology can be found to generate a generic brief against such plans.

Foreign Trade Sharp Negatives will research briefs that talk generically about why foreign trade isn't that important or beneficial, why Free Trade Agreements are good (and why they're bad), and why trade sanctions are generally a bad idea. Until you find out which countries AFF's are proposing to sanction (probably all of them at some point!), a generic on how sanctions are bad will be very useful.

Human Trafficking This is a perpetual issue someone writes a case about, whenever it's topical and sometimes when it isn't. At Monument, we're not especially fond of these cases, but we will have a generic NEG full of information about how this issue is grossly exaggerated by the media (it sells) and by celebrities (virtue signaling) and NGO's (exaggerate the problem to promote fundraising). A lot of efforts against HT end up punishing the erstwhile victims. My take on it is this: "Human trafficking is like getting hit by lightning. It's really terrible when it happens, but it almost never happens."

Hegemony Negatives should be prepared to argue that any AFF plan that reduces US influence with governments in the region is bad because we lose in the competition to other great powers (Russia, China). And that's bad because their influence makes the world a bad place. US hegemony is essential to maintaining peace and stability. Negatives should also be prepared to argue that an Affirmative policy change should not be justified "Because China!" China may not have as much influence in Latin America as AFF is claiming, and even if they do, it may not be harmful.

Truth & Reconciliation Programs

As you recall from the former chapter in this series, many Latin American countries have governments with violent histories. Deaths, disappearances, torture, wrongful imprisonment, and various atrocities have been committed in the past by various officials who may have used their high office to escape prosecution. Now that they have transitioned to democratically elected governments, what should be done about these old cases? Bringing them up may open old wounds and restart violent conflicts that wrecked these countries in generations past. Ignoring them may give a free pass to grossly abusive and evil behavior.

Countries with such a past sometimes set up committees or programs to investigate these past abuses and reach some kind of resolution. It may involve prosecuting the offenders. It may

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involve bringing them to truthfully confess what they did as a condition of amnesty or some other compromise short of full prosecution.

The United States, along with the UN, set up such a program in Guatemala years ago (at Guatemala's request). It lasted for a while and accomplished some things, but was ultimately shut down by the Guatemalan government when they started going after people close to the president of the country.