

# **Navigating the Narco Corridor: The Pursuit of Security in Central America**

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## **Navigating the Narco Corridor: The Pursuit of Security in Central America by Manuela Jimenez Hernandez**

Central America has emerged as a major drug trafficking corridor due to its strategic location between South American producers and North American consumers. This prominence is relatively recent: in 2007, less than 1% of South American cocaine passed through the region on its way north (Meiners, 2009). However, United States interdiction in the Caribbean maritime routes in the 1990s and in Mexican-bound air shipments in the early 2000s gave way to the “balloon effect”, pushing traffickers to find less restricted or surveilled routes through Central America. States have unevenly responded to this new threat. El Salvador has curbed crime and gang control, therefore, drug trafficking as well, via President Bukele’s highly militarised ‘mano dura’ approach. In contrast, Costa Rica has been demilitarised since 1948, and heavily relies on civilian law enforcement and international cooperation for national security, which has faced increasing strain from Pacific maritime trafficking and skyrocketing homicide rates, with 2023 recorded as the most violent year in the country’s history.

This policy brief argues for a multilateral strategy capable of addressing the region’s growing security pressures while accounting for the demilitarised nature of some states in the region. It highlights that enhanced international cooperation, strengthened civilian enforcement, and maritime coordination will be key. A committed, region-wide effort is vital to contain trafficking networks, and to support lasting security. Central America’s shifting trafficking routes have overwhelmed non-militarised security models while empowering militarised ones, undermining regional cohesion. Without coordinated, multilateral maritime and enforcement reforms, trafficking and violence will continue to rise.

### **Regional Context**

The increased monitoring of the traditional Caribbean and overland routes compelled drug traffickers to shift their operations, leading to the resurgence and prominence of the Central American and Pacific corridor. Historically, multi-ton shipments often skipped Central America entirely via air or sea. US-Mexico suppression efforts in the 1990s and 2000s, and increased monitoring of Colombian airspace, forced traffickers to establish new smuggling chains through the Central American landmass and the wider, less surveilled Pacific Ocean.

Today, Central America has emerged as a key transit corridor for cocaine destined for the United States, with government estimates suggesting that 86% of cocaine sold in the U.S. was first trafficked through the isthmus. (Blume, 2022). Within this corridor, Costa Rica, Panama (due to the canal), and El Salvador have become crucial players. Costa Rica’s Pacific route has become quite active, in 2020 alone, Costa Rica seized 37 tons of cocaine by mid-October (Ávalos,

Papadovassilakis, & Dittmar, 2021). El Salvador's coast, particularly the Gulf of Fonseca, is also widely used for drug entry to then transit through Guatemala and Mexico before reaching the US as the final destination. Nayib Bukele's administration has prioritised strategies of militarisation and massive imprisonment through policies like the Plan Control Territorial and states of exception. While Bukele's measures have achieved major reductions in homicides and gang activity, they have raised serious concerns regarding violations of human rights, the weakening of the rule of law, and potential abuse of power.

However, the tactical vulnerability of non-militarised states, such as Costa Rica and Panama, is a major factor in this issue, as it limits the approaches that could be considered to tackle this security issue. Despite its long-standing institutional stability, Costa Rica constantly struggles with capacity and efficiency challenges in countering drug trafficking. Traffickers from South America may reach the country's largely under-monitored Pacific coast using speedboats and semi-submersible vessels, unloading at clandestine docks, or they may use the aerial route by landing small planes in hidden airstrips. Authorities uncovered at least 140 of these airstrips in early 2020. Rodrigo Chaves' approach in Costa Rica has been to delegate responsibilities regarding security to the legislative and judicial branches of the government while maintaining its civilian-focused model and tradition of demilitarisation to achieve a more balanced perspective (Obando-Sanchez, 2024). Nonetheless, this strategy has been heavily criticised, since it was implemented amidst increasing violence rates primarily driven by criminal competition for drug trafficking territory and routes. Law enforcement units are stretched thin and struggle with resource and personnel shortages, leaving much of the country vulnerable. Overall, to address the root causes of transnational crime, the region needs to adopt a swift and holistic approach that combines thorough surveillance with effective prevention and competent law enforcement.

### **El Salvador: Militarised Security and the Bukele Model**

El Salvador used to be the crime capital of the world with the highest homicide rates per capita in the 2000s and 2010s. Nayib Bukele took office in 2019, his entrance signalling a significant shift. His government acted fast to consolidate power, and adopted an aggressive, militarised approach to public security and crime. This move was most obvious in March 2022, when the administration established a state of exception, which remains in effect today. Under these crushing pressures due process is often cast aside, allowing the National Civil Police (PNC) and the army to use unrestricted amounts of force with almost total impunity, resulting in about 60,000 arrests in 2022-2023 (Obando-Sanchez, 2024).

This "mano dura" approach frames the country's previous security challenges as a justification for the remilitarization of public order. Named "Plan Control Territorial", the operation

aims to centralise by intensifying military presence in conflict areas. Though controversial and, at first, futile, the Bukele model has yielded great successes for El Salvador's national security. Reaching record low homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants from 50.3 in 2018 to 17.6 in 2022 (Vado De Berti, 2025), visibly reducing gang territorial control in most communities, and overall improving public perception of security with the new measures. This new militarised approach extends beyond gang activity crackdowns. It has been applied in anti-narcotics operations along the state's Pacific coast, with the navy recently partaking in one of the biggest drug interceptions in the history of the country, seizing 1.4 tons of cocaine in international waters about 900 nautical miles of Salvadoran land bringing the total volume of cocaine seized by the "mano dura" champion in the 2024-2025 fiscal period to 37.2 tons (El Salvador News, 2025).

While the Bukele model has definitely ushered in a new era of safety and prosperity to El Salvador with measurable operational successes, the overall strategy and the president have been heavily scrutinised by the international community. Critics point to the administration's lack of transparency when presenting security policies, the weakening of the rule of law, and escalating civil rights concerns regarding due process. Despite proving to be an effective model for curbing violence and drug trafficking interference, the strategy therefore raises concerns about both its compatibility with democratic rule and its long-term sustainability. The contradiction between fast security advantages and the decline of institutional guarantees implies that the Bukele method, however beneficial in the short term, bears governance costs that hinder its acceptance as a regional model to adopt.

### **Costa Rica: Demilitarised Security and Civilian Policing**

Costa Rica distinguishes itself from the other Central American nations through a stable democratic governance since the mid-20th century, ever since the military was abolished after the 1948 civil war. It has gradually built a security system grounded entirely in civilian institutions, primarily the "Fuerza Pública" (the national police). While Costa Rica's civilian-focused approach has yielded success for the country in the past, it has found itself in hot water in recent years. As trafficking routes have shifted due to the "balloon effect" in the Caribbean, Costa Rica has increasingly become a key logistical hub rather than merely a transit point, exposing the structural limits of the civilian police force tasked with securing the coastlines. The national coast guard estimates that 70% of the narcotics enter the country through the western coast along Puntarenas, Quepos and the Osa peninsula (Abi-Habib, 2024).

A central vulnerability of Costa Rica's demilitarised model lies in its lack of extensive radar coverage and advanced maritime monitoring systems, forcing authorities to rely heavily on foreign intelligence, most notably from the United States' Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South),

to detect and capture drug shipments transiting the Pacific (Meiners, 2009). To further compliment their involvement in JIATF and compensate for their lack of military, Costa Rica has pursued regional and international cooperative security measures that align with its civilian ethos. Joint maritime and intelligence operations with the United States, Colombia, and Panama have become essential to countering “transportista” networks, and recently San José has also sought technical and financial assistance from the European Union to strengthen port security, judicial capacity, and financial crime investigations, signalling a preference for multilateral civilian cooperation (Euronews, 2024). Costa Rica also participates in information-sharing mechanisms under the Central American Integration System (SICA), particularly the Programa Regional de Seguridad, which allows authorities to coordinate investigations and share real-time intelligence without resorting to militarisation (Obando-Sánchez, 2024).

Despite rising violence, Costa Rica retains systematic strengths, public trust in institutions remains high, and it continues to uphold a strong human rights record, and the non-militarised posture also provides diplomatic flexibility, allowing it to partner internationally without becoming dependent on armed forces or authoritarian-like practices. Nevertheless, weaknesses persist, resource constraints and lack of personnel limit the Fuerza Pública’s ability to patrol the nation's coastlines and rural areas, while slow and impotent judicial processing and prison overcrowding reduce the deterrent effect of arrests. (Blume, 2022; Vado De Berti, 2025). These gaps have enabled organised crime to entrench itself through corruption, money laundering, and selective violence, which was acknowledged in U.S. Treasury sanctions against Costa Rican narcotraffickers (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). Therefore, Costa Rica demonstrates that while civilian-led security can support long-term democratic stability, demilitarisation alone is insufficient and inefficient in the face of transnational organised crime. Sustained regional cooperation, intelligence-sharing, and external support remain indispensable if Costa Rica’s model is to endure under growing criminal presence.

### **Comparative Insights: Militarisation vs. Civilianization**

El Salvador and Costa Rica reflect divergent institutional responses to security pressures rather than competing policy models. El Salvador’s deterrence-based militarisation shows that coercive saturation can rapidly disrupt criminal ecosystems by overwhelming gang control and swift trafficking interceptions, temporarily substituting for weak or overwhelmed institutions (Rosen, 2025). On the other hand, Costa Rica’s civilian governance approach rests on the opposite assumption, that security derives from institutional legitimacy, popular trust, and cooperation rather than coercive force. While the former delivers immediate containment, it becomes dependent on executive singularity, mass incarceration, and military mobilisation, heightening risks of institutional strain and rights erosion. The latter preserves democratic accountability and prevents any single

branch of government from abusing its power but reveals cracks when legitimacy is not matched by enforcement capacity and, allowing organised crime to exploit gaps due to leniency.

The broader regional lesson in Central America is that security outcomes depend on the state's capacity to see through their actions become durable outcomes, not tactical intensity. Militarisation works as an emergency instrument where criminal governance eclipses state authority, but it places long-term costs onto courts, prisons, and civil liberties. Without parallel investment in judicial oversight, coercion risks appearing plainly aggressive rather than transformative. Conversely, civilian-based systems enhance legitimacy and governmental balance but depend on intricate coordination mechanisms, intelligence integration, and financial enforcement to counter limited coercive reach (Dudley, 2023). Therefore, replicating Bukele-style coercion is structurally infeasible and normally destabilising for non-armed states, as it would require building military capacity while undermining civilian insight. Instead, sustainable security must be built through civilian capacity-building, judicial enhancement, and regional intelligence-sharing that restrain criminal adaptation across borders. Therefore the key insight for Central America is not whether force or governance is preferable, but whether states possess institutions capable of absorbing short-term enforcement shocks and translating them into long-term stable rule.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The intensification of drug trafficking in Central America requires policy responses that reflect the region's spectrum of militarization taking special consideration of non-militarised states and the transnational nature of maritime crime.

#### **1. Establish a Central American Pacific Maritime Security Network**

A maritime security network should be created along the Central American Pacific coast as a non-armed coalition linking the coast guards of El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, and Guatemala. This network would function as a permanent platform for real-time coordination, enabling participating states to share radar feeds, vessel-tracking data, and secure communication systems. Given the uncoordinated surveillance capabilities across the region, this joint situational awareness would significantly reduce interdiction gaps exploited by transportistas (Dudley, 2023). External support would be necessary, the U.S. JIATF-South could provide intelligence fusion and technical assistance, while the EU's PACMAR programme could supply training and infrastructural support (Meiners, 2009; Euronews, 2024). Crucially, this security network this network should remain institutionally civilian to preserve democratic oversight and avoid securitisation spillovers.

#### **2. Expand Intelligence-Sharing and Surveillance Capacity**

Building on the previous point, a Regional Maritime Intelligence Centre should be established under SICA or the OAS to centralise data analysis and operational planning. This centre would integrate satellite imagery, photographic identification systems data, and drone surveillance to generate a common operating picture across the Pacific corridor. Rather than reactive interdiction, the emphasis should be on predictive policing, using pattern recognition to anticipate trafficking routes and position civilian assets accordingly (Blume, 2022). Early-warning mechanisms would allow non-militarised states to compensate for limited force projection by improving timing, coordination, and selectivity in enforcement.

### 3. Strengthen Legal Harmonisation and Joint Prosecution Frameworks

Contraband seizures will remain fragile without legal compatibility. Central American states should align maritime law enforcement procedures to permit cross-border pursuit, shared evidence collection, and joint investigations. Legal harmonisation is particularly vital for Costa Rica, where civilian agencies face procedural bottlenecks and judicial impunity that traffickers exploit to evade prosecution (Vado De Berti, 2025). Establishing transnational prosecution methods, fast-track extradition protocols and further investment in judicial processing would improve conviction rates and reduce reliance on tactical seizures that fail to dismantle criminal networks' internal structures.

### 4. Further Build Civilian Enforcement and Community Investment

Finally, sustainable security requires investment beyond interdiction. Non-militarised states must increase funding for coast guard infrastructure, personnel training and recruitment. In order to prevent traffickers from recruiting vulnerable fishing communities, community-based coastal security initiatives should be extended (Abi-Habib, 2024). Encouraging alternative livelihoods and financial inclusion would strengthen civilian authority and legitimacy by lowering local reliance on trafficking economies. The ability of civilian institutions to convert enforcement into long-term social and legal resilience is what creates enduring security, as demonstrated by regional experience.

## **Conclusion**

The evolution of drug trafficking in Central America has exposed the limits of unaligned national responses and highlighted the region's growing need for cooperation in matters of security. While El Salvador and Costa Rica represent distinct approaches, their experiences demonstrate that unilateral strategies, whether militarised or civilian, are insufficient against transnational criminal networks. Short-term gains achieved through coercion risk institutional degradation, while demilitarised systems face capacity and resource constraints.

The central lesson of this brief is that regional security cannot be imposed through force nor sustained through civilian based models without international cooperation. Effective counter-trafficking efforts must be rooted in joint non-armed governance, shared intelligence, and collective maritime control that reflects the transnational nature of the threat. Investing in integrated surveillance technologies, judicial cooperation, and transparent accountability mechanisms offers a path toward durable security without sacrificing democratic legitimacy. Ultimately, Central America's ability to confront evolving trafficking dynamics will depend on its capacity to move beyond differing national models and toward a cohesive regional framework.

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