5-9-2013

U.S. President Barack Obama, Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla Discuss Wide Agenda, Including New Approach to Fighting Drug Trafficking

George RodrÃguez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation
U.S. President Barack Obama, Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla Discuss Wide Agenda, Including New Approach to Fighting Drug Trafficking

by George Rodríguez

Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: 2013-05-09

Half a century after the first formal visit by a US president to Costa Rica, this month President Barack Obama became the fifth US leader to arrive in Costa Rica, to give a new turn to the bilateral tie.

An innovative approach to drug trafficking stands out among the key topics on the agenda for the dialogue between officials of both countries, headed by Obama and Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla, a lengthy list of topics that included development, education, entrepreneurship, environment, health, and, of course, security.

After a similar brief stay in México (SourceMex, May 8, 2013), Obama arrived in Costa Rica by midafternoon on May 3 for a 22-hour visit to the Central American nation previously visited by four US presidents.

Eight months before being assassinated in Texas, President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) was the first US president to make an official visit to Costa Rica, at the height of the US-Cuba confrontation within the framework of the Cold War. This was two years after Kennedy had to abort a counter-revolutionary invasion of Cuba, planned during the second administration of predecessor President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961), when it turned into a failure. It was also a year after the US, under Kennedy, toughened the embargo it had begun to impose in 1960 on the Caribbean island-nation.

Then came President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), in December 1982, when another US-sponsored, and failed, counter-revolutionary effort was just beginning, this time against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, Costa Rica’s next-door neighbor to the north.

The war launched by Reagan, which claimed thousands of lives during eight years, was waged by the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN)—whose forces were known in Nicaragua as "la contrarrevolución" or "la contra," while Reagan called them "freedom fighters"—ended in 1990. This was the result of the signing, three years before, of the regional peace agreements contained in the Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica (NotiCen, Jan. 16, 1987), which closed the three wars then being waged—Nicaragua (1982-1990), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Guatemala (the lengthiest, 1960-1996).

Reagan was followed by President George Bush Sr. (1989–1993), an ex Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director and Regan's former vice president. The fourth president to visit the country was President Bill Clinton (1993-2001).

Trade, security issues of mutual concern

In a gradually changed geopolitical stage in this area, Obama arrived in Costa Rica in the midst of a new regional era: that of free trade agreements (FTAs) and also of organized crime—mainly drug trafficking.
The former has opened a window of opportunity for development, according to governments—not to grassroots, civil-society organizations—while the latter has kept Central American nations hostage to a new type of violence replacing that of times of war. And Costa Rica has not been the exception, although, regarding organized crime, to a much lesser degree than its neighbors in the region.


"We’ve talked about strengthening institutions, international issues—in particular about Costa Rica’s effort to become more involved on the international economic stage," said Chinchilla. "We’ve also talked about making more use of the key instruments in both nation’s relations, such as the CAFTA (Central America Free Trade Agreement) platform, and we’ve talked about an issue that is present, although it doesn’t define our relations, such as that of security."

"And we’ve also talked about a topic … that will greatly define progress and development as a whole—not only between the US and Costa Rica but between the US and the Central American region—which is clean energy, and topics related to education, entrepreneurship, and innovation," Chinchilla added.

Organized crime "continues to somehow weigh harshly on institution’s stability and on the integrity of our nations," Chinchilla stressed. "We reiterated the importance of keeping up the cooperation levels we’ve maintained so far. But we particularly made a point of stressing the efforts being carried out both by SICA [Sisterma de la Integración Centroamericana] countries and by the US government ... to tend to the problems of organized crime and drugs with a more integral and diverse approach."

Advocating against militarizing the struggle, Chinchilla explained that Costa Rica, a country that abolished its army more than six decades ago, "cannot allow itself to advance toward a war scenario," thus favoring mechanisms to reduce the use of drugs, create opportunities to young people, strengthen the state of law.

Coinciding with his host, Obama told the press conference that "the United States recognizes that we’ve got responsibilities, that much of the violence in the region is fueled by demand for illegal drugs including in the United States. So, we’re going to keep pursuing a comprehensive approach not only through law enforcement but through education and prevention and treatment that can reduce demand. In the absence of security, it’s very hard to develop."

"Problems like narcotrafficking arise, in part, when a country is vulnerable because of poverty, because of institutions that are not working for the people, because young people don’t see a brighter future ahead," Obama warned.

"What President Chinchilla and I spoke extensively about are initiatives like education, institution-building capacity, trying to create greater economic opportunities," Obama said. "Because the stronger the economies and the institutions for individuals who are seeking legitimate careers, the more those are there, the less powerful these narcotrafficking organizations are going to be."

Regarding the fight against drug trafficking, Obama stressed that "it can’t just be law enforcement," and that "it also has to be human development, inclusive economic development, we’ve got to make sure that everybody feels opportunity. We can do better than we’re currently doing, and I know that
President Chinchilla has taken great interest, here in Costa Rica, around these human development issues.

-- End --