Mexico and Central America: A Delayed Encounter
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The surprise arrival of massive migrant contingents (known as “caravans”) to the border between Guatemala and Mexico constituted a watershed in the history of Central American migration to the United States through Mexican territory. This text is published by the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI) in order to contribute to the discussion in Mexico, in the United States and in Central America itself. The contribution of Central American social activists and academics with their local perspectives enhances and complements their Mexican counterparts’ reflections and proposals. Now is the time to undertake concrete measures for this delayed encounter.
Mexico and Central America: A Delayed Encounter
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Introduction

Luis Rubio

One of the most pressing matters currently demanding Mexico’s attention in the international sphere is its relationship to the Northern Triangle: the three Central American countries where the largest human mobilizations we have encountered originated, seeking to traverse the country in order to reach the United States. It is a common, ancestral practice, but in the last year it has gained a political connotation that has been exacerbated each day, pitting Mexico against its northern neighbor and threatening the viability of its own interests.

Thousands of Hondurans and Salvadorans join the Guatemalans crossing their country to reach what they hope will be their employment destination through Mexico.

There is nothing new in these migrational patterns, which have been in place since the 19th century. What is new is that they have become a source of conflict now that the American government, headed by its current president, denies entry to new migrants and intends to expel those who entered in the past. This situation has created a new reality in Mexico’s southern border, where the Mexican government is attempting to reduce the flow of migrants to avoid more problems with the American government. Mexico acts on President Trump’s threats of imposing tariffs on Mexican exports, the main driving force behind the country’s economy, unless the migrant flow from Central America is stopped.

This work was carried out under Gustavo Mohar, a professional with considerable experience on the matter who rallied an exceptional group of experts to analyze every element of the issue, beginning with a careful description of the established border between Mexico and its Central American neighbors. The texts that constitute this editorial endeavor include the new migrational reality of the United States, followed by detailed, urgent analysis of the causes of migration not just from Central America, but from the Caribbean and from outside the continent, as well as the political economy and dynamics of the phenomenon. Efforts that have been made to deal with an extremely complex phenomenon are also analyzed.

The text is published by the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI) in order to contribute to the discussion in Mexico, in the United States and in Central America itself. It also explains and summarizes the dilemmas in the region, analyzing its problems and pointing toward different options—all of them complicated— for Mexico to deal with in the near future.
The surprise arrival of massive migrant contingents (known as “caravans”) to the border between Guatemala and Mexico constituted a watershed in the history of Central American migration to the United States through Mexican territory.

This report, written at the initiative of Dr. Luis Rubio, Chairman of the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI), has proven pertinent and opportune. I am grateful for his request to coordinate the group of distinguished specialists who enthusiastically accepted our invitation to participate in this endeavor. The contribution of Central American social activists and academics with their local perspectives enhances and complements their Mexican counterparts’ reflections and proposals. One renowned expert in this enthralling subject presents an American social and academic perspective; an international conflict negotiator provides his experience given his considerable background working with Central American avatars.

Central American migration to Mexico is hardly a recent phenomenon. Nowadays, it is explained by a continuous and conflictive social, economic and political situation in a region that has undergone civil wars, foreign interference (even invasions) and now faces high levels of violence and insecurity. Additionally, the intermittent stability of its governments and chronic concentration of wealth explain, at least partially, the turbulences in the sub-region known as the Northern Triangle of Central America.

Although the issue of migration is the axis around which this report is centered, it is worth noting that, as a whole, these essays allow for a broader, more comprehensive approach to the relationship between Mexico and Central America and the internal circumstances of each of the actors involved.

At the risk of omitting, biasing or neglecting relevant portions of their texts, I will now outline some of the main reflections put forth by the authors:

» Attempts at Central American integration, with Mexico’s participation, have taken place since the early 80s up until the Comprehensive Development Plan for Central America (PDI or Plan de Desarrollo Integral in Spanish) in 2019

» The border between Mexico, Guatemala and Belize is now a sub-regional labor, social and commercial market. This is not widely known, and has not been encouraged by the three countries’ governments
Attention to Belize has been historically relegated by the Mexican authorities. As pointed out by the current Mexican ambassador, “it may be because it doesn’t cause problems like the ones we have with the Guatemalan border.” A new vision that acknowledges the strategic nature of our small but important neighbor and boosts close ties with it is required.

According to one of the leading experts on the issue in Guadalajara, the Northern Triangle of Central America is an instance of forced integration by the United States and, more recently, by Mexico. Central American migration can be analyzed from a regional perspective if each country’s specific processes and patterns of migration are taken into account.

President Trump’s anti-immigration policy, especially against Mexicans and Central Americans, is a “theatrical strategy” for electoral purposes that mostly distorts the image in wide segments of American public opinion of what is really a humanitarian crisis.

The Mexican government’s migration policy has been erratic; the recent display of containment in its northern and southern borders have de facto turned Mexico into a “proxy border” for the United States.

Are Mexico’s migrational containment measures sustainable in the long term? Is it too audacious/naïve to expect Mexico to look south the way it looks north?

Four factors can explain the “Central American wave:” (i) demography; (ii) weak, poor states; (iii) a blocked micro-economy; (iv) a systematic governability crisis.

The mass migration flow since October 2018 cannot be explained without taking into account the fact that Honduras, Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador have to deal with gangs, which are the de facto authorities in many regions of the countries.

Another aspect that cannot be overlooked for the clarification of this situation are the claims, voiced by spokespeople of the movement that won the last federal elections, that Mexico had the capacity to welcome Central American migration and provide employment and general support.

Despite common issues within the Northern Triangle, each country displays varying degrees of advancement or backwardness.

Much of the explanation of the American government’s reactions can be found in the fact that “when migration reaches unprecedented
volumes, you lose control and only a few, if any, win” (meaning human traffickers)

“Mexico,” according to one of the co-authors, “has to take on the implications of becoming a country of transit and of destination for foreigners, mostly from Central America but also from the Caribbean, the rest of Latin America and off-continent nations”

Two co-authors traveled to the border and present hard facts and an updated review of the reality in that forsaken area

The economic problems of Central America that cause and sustain the mass exodus of men, women and children are solidly described from their origins, explaining why millions of citizens leave these countries

An evident conclusion is that this matter warrants further study and follow-up work. Above all, the Mexican government needs imagination and political will to handle a critical issue with the design and implementation of a state strategy in accordance with the present and foreseeable scenarios of Mexico’s relationship with the Central American isthmus and its corresponding political, economic and social implications.
An Overview of the Migrant Emergency
Mexico and Central America: From Civil Wars to Plagues
Salvador Arriola

This essay attempts to evidence the coincidences that occurred in Central America and its relationship to Mexico in fields of utmost importance, both during the period of reconstruction and the achievement of peace in 1980 and in 2019. The central aim is to extract valid lessons from the projects and initiatives that were developed mainly between 1980 and 2000 to reinforce the El Salvador-Guatemala-Honduras-Mexico Comprehensive Development Plan (in Spanish, Plan de Desarrollo Integral, PDI) and the future process of Central American integration.

During the early and mid-1980s, Mexico put forth various regional and international proposals for solving problems in Central America. Prominent among them is the declaration by heads of state or government and personal representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean on January 12th and 13th, 1948. This declaration features their “support to the Action Committee for the Support of Economic and Social Development in Central America (CADESCA) [an initiative of the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs], a Latin American regional mechanism recently established to assist, inter alia, in mobilizing resources for economic and social development aimed at solving the major problems of the Central American people.”

1See Declaración Compromiso de Acapulco [Commitment to Peace, Development and Democracy], Rio Group, November 29th, 1987.
2Idem.
Likewise, on the occasion of the presidential meeting known as the Acapulco Commitment to Peace, Development and Democracy on November 29th, 1987, Mexico once again presided over the negotiations that led to consensus on the Central American issue, like paragraph 28, proposed by the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit: “The negotiating process currently under way should be accompanied by an improvement in the economic and social situation in the countries of the area. Consequently, we have agreed to support the implementation of an international emergency programme of economic co-operation for the countries of Central America, which would consist of measures to rebuild their economies”.

**Mexico and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI)**

The first negotiation and agreement with the CABEI took place in 1982 and 1984 (before Quito and Acapulco): after changes to its Constitutive Agreement, Mexico became the first extra-regional member of the institution.

Parallely, Mexico and Venezuela had set the San José Pact in motion, supplying Central America and the Caribbean with oil. Mexico, unlike Venezuela (which opted for bilateralism), placed most of the income it gained from Central America into the CABEI.

The decision to join the Bank allowed not only for the improvement of the organization’s financial characteristics, but its opening to third party participation allowed for the inclusion of new members—like Taiwan, Colombia, Spain and Argentina—, which along with its restructuration, also helped place the CABEI among the highest-rated in terms of credit and investment grade in the late 1990s.

The participation of Mexican companies in projects financed via the San José Agreement in the CABEI certainly increased considerably between 1988 and 2000, and encouraged other Mexican investments in the region. During that time, Guatemala was the primary destination for Mexican investment in Latin America.

**Bilateral Relations between Mexico and Central America**

Bilateral relations with Central America grew regarding various important issues beginning in the late 1970s. A detailed overview is not necessary, but Mexico’s relationship with Nicaragua was especially acknowledged and fundamental after the Sandinista victory, not just in political terms but also of financial and technical assistance. The same can be said for the country’s continuous presence and efficient contribution to the peace processes in El Salvador and Guatemala, balance-of-payments support, export credit and the solution of the Central American debt problem.

Special note must be made of the different, numerous actions of solidary cooperation during dramatic and

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*See Declaration of the First Summit of the Rio Group, November 29th, 1987, Acapulco, Mexico.*
difficult times during the late 1990s such as Hurricane Paulina (Guatemalan support for Mexico). Mexico’s distinguished, significant support for Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch, the worst in recent years, is also particularly noteworthy.

The South: The Common Border

Mexico’s top priority regarding Latin America is undoubtedly the urgent and appropriate design of a comprehensive strategy for the southern border⁴. The first step in this direction must be, together with Guatemala, to resume the Sustainable Development Plan for Border Populations (Programa para el Desarrollo Sostenible de las Poblaciones Fronterizas, PRODESFRO), which was in charge of, among others, infrastructure projects like the New Border Port (Nuevo Puerto Fronterizo Ingeniero Luis Cabrera (Suchiate II). Suchiate I collapsed shortly after the inauguration of the New Port, the only existing adequate crossing between the two countries.

The Program rests on five areas of action: 1) productive-economic; 2) social; 3) environmental-territorial; 4) basic infrastructure; 5) descentralization.

In order to apply the Program’s first stage, 19 municipalities on the Guatemalan side of the border were considered, corresponding to the departments of San Marcos, Huehuetenango, Petén and Quiché; on the Mexican side, 16 municipalities in the State of Chiapas took part in this stage of the program. For reasons beyond

Although the border with Belize has different characteristics, it is time to characterize it and give it the attention it deserves, considering this may contribute even to the improvement of relations between Guatemala and Belize.

Tuxtla Mechanism for Dialogue and Coordination

In January 1991, the First Meeting of Presidents of Central America and Mexico took place in order to constitute the Mechanism for Dialogue and Coordination. An important decision announced on that occasion was the creation of the Mexican Commission for Cooperation with Central America, derived from the need to manage Mexico’s commitment to the region in a permanent, coordinated way.

The five Plagues

It is safe to say that the situation in Central America has more serious symptoms than those stemming from the civil and military confrontations of the 1980s.

Central America presents today the highest levels of poverty in Latin America—the most unequal region

*See México: América Latina, la Frontera Sur y Centroamérica [Mexico: Latin America, the Southern Border and Central America]. Salvador Arriola, July 2017
on Earth—and an unsatisfactory performance in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)’s Human Development Index.

Additionally, the region has been ravaged by five simultaneous structural plagues that further condition the possibility of attaining sustainable development, pushing the region toward serious levels of political, economic and social regression. Due to the limits of this paper, only the main determinants of sustainable development in Central America will be listed here:

1. Financial crisis, drop in raw material prices and decrease in international investment
2. Decrease in Official Development Assistance (ODA)
3. Effects of climate change
4. Hunger and food insecurity
5. Violence and illegal drug trade

“Mexico’s top priority regarding Latin America is undoubtedly the urgent and appropriate design of a comprehensive strategy for the southern border.”
Proposals for the Continuation of Mexico-Central America Relations

Support for Central American integration has been a highlight of our foreign policy. The Comprehensive Development Plan proves it, and should be part of a broader project that also favors Central American integration.

Mexico and Central America already have a stock of valuable experiences derived from various instances of cooperation in the framework of the Puebla-Panama Plan and, above all, the Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project (Proyecto de Integración y Desarrollo de Mesoamérica), also known as Project Mesoamerica (PM), which replaced the former.

Adjusting the PM’s content to the 17 Sustainable Development goals of the 2030 Agenda after an evaluation process would be a fundamental quantum leap in the design and setting in motion of a New Route, and it would bring more strength and vision to the Central American integration process.

This would allow for the effort to consolidate the Comprehensive Development Plan to have the perspective of the proposed New Route for the Central American integration process.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the General Secretariat of the Central American Integration System (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, SICA) should be at the head of the advancement of the Comprehensive Development Plan and provide content for the New Route of Project Mesoamerica, aligning it with the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda.

The border area

Need for both Mexico and Guatemala to resume and update the PRODESFRRO, a key and essential sphere for the development of any Mexican initiative regarding Central America. Likewise, a project with Belize should be developed with similar characteristics.

Re-establishment of the Guatemala-Mexico Border Cultural Circuit, which included various activities between border populations.

Permanent analysis of the border in key areas like in the late 1990s by universities and academic centers in both countries, financed by the CABEI.

The Private Sector

When the Special Economic Zones Project collapsed, the Confederation of Industrial Chambers (Confederación de Cámaras Industriales de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, CONCAMIN) began a joint
initiative with the Mexican government to revitalize the economy in the south-southeast of the country, the Pact for the Southeast (Pacto por el Sureste) with the participation of nine governors and of large companies with interests in the region. It would be wise to take advantage of this situation to “jump” to the 19 Guatemalan and 16 Mexican aforementioned municipalities that might constitute an attractive, strategic pole for development.

» The Guatemalan president-elect, Alejandro Giammattei, will prioritize making the Mexican border a “wall of investment and prosperity.” Conditions are ripe for “connecting” and paying special attention to both sides of the border, so a common project like the PRODESFRO, if updated, becomes indispensable.

» Mexican business community ought to carry out an evaluation of their presence in Central America and design a strategy that allows them to contribute to the region’s economic growth with new instruments.

» As proposed by the Ibero-American General Secretariat (Secretaría General Iberoamericana, SEGIB), the Mesoamerican Forum of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (Foro Mesoamericano de las Micro, Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas) has been working since 2013 to reinforce the role of employment and the achievement of greater productive linkages and enterprising.

Professional Training Program in Mexico

Between 1988 and 1993, with the interests of the funds placed in the CABEI, 20 courses for Central Americans in various areas of specialization were offered: public and public business administration; hydrocarbon refinement, exploration and exploitation; perforation and exploration of geothermal wells; agricultural policy and planification; animal health and fruit growing, and investment project management.

The continuity of such programs is key to generating a greater Mexican impact in the countries across the region.

Financial Matters

These are some multilateral and bilateral options that both the Comprehensive Development Plan and the proposed New Route for Project Mesoamerica can benefit from.

Just like with the CABEI, Mexico was the first non-member (sic) of the Andean Development Corporation (Corporación Andina de Fomento, CAF), an institution that has become an important pillar of support for development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Mexico is entitled to funds from the CAF, including the possibility of carrying out joint projects with third party states in the region. Bringing together these funds and those of the CABEI, among others, would allow for greater...
financing for development projects.
The Inter-American Development Bank (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, BID) has especially contributed to Project Mesoamerica and it would also be appropriate to give it projects corresponding to the Comprehensive Development Plan.

Mexico, Central America, Venezuela and Spain are jointly represented in the IMF and the World Bank, along with Colombia in the latter case, and share executive and alternate directors. It would be advisable, especially in the case of the World Bank, for them to provide technical support for the design of coordinated proposals in favor of these objectives.

In 1991, Mexico’s initiative in the Rio Group to request loans for Latin America from the European Investment Bank (EIB). Shortly after, Costa Rica was the first Latin American country to be granted credit, a now generalized practice. The EIB is a clear option for the design and support of projects of interest to Mesoamerica.

Although financial support for the Comprehensive Development Plan has been promised by the European Commission, there ought to be a special meeting with the new members of the Commission, especially Josep Borrell, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Mr. Borrell will take office on November 1st, 2019.

The former European Economic Community, now European Union, has been among Central America’s main allies along with Mexico. The renovation of significant projects and programs that confirm the traditional interest of European partners in light of the region’s serious difficulties is fundamental.

In this context, Spain’s presence in the IMF and World Bank and the nationality of Josep Borrell (a Spanish politician nationalized as an Argentinian) must be taken into account for this intended renewed alliance.

Clearly, it is necessary to devise strategies based on the history of cooperation of traditional allies of the region such as Canada, Japan and Norway that will help face the region’s current predicament, which becomes gloomier with the threat and reduction of aid from the one who should be at the forefront of it, given its responsibility: the United States.

The issue of remittances must undoubtedly be part of the agenda, not just for sharing experiences but for establishing common strategies and actions for financing projects.

The presence of the Olmecs, the Mayans and the Toltecs and the development of the náhuatl language all throughout Mesoamerica are clear signs of a shared history and common civilizations between Central Americans and Mexicans. As part of our priorities, the need to broadcast these roots must be underscored, as they will be our best defense. The worst xenophobia is the one that occurs between brothers: it is imperative to avoid playing along with those who, whether by ignorance or ill will, attempt to create unacceptable tension between fellow Mesoamericans.
Mexico and Central America: Migrational Patterns, Processes and Circuits

Jorge Durand

Considering Central America as a region, geographical considerations aside, may prove tricky. First, there are historical inclusions and exclusions to consider. The bitter colonial aftertaste still present in Belize and Panama negatively impacts, even today, the unity or conceptualization of Central America. Costa Rica, given its political stability and comparatively superior development, could be considered a separate case; in fact, it lies outside (or is left out) of the CA4 free movement agreement between Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. The Central American Integration System (Sistema de Integración Centroamericano, SICA, 1991), the greatest effort of regional integration to this day, included all of them but Belize, which joined in 2000, and the Dominican Republic, which did so in 2013. Lastly, the Northern Triangle of Central America includes only three countries—Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras—and is a forced integration imposed from the outside by the United States (Program for the Prosperity and Security of Central America or Programa para la Prosperidad y Seguridad de Centroamérica) and, recently, by Mexico (Comprehensive Development Plan or Plan de Desarrollo Integral: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, CEPAL, 2019). Both programs, although through different approaches, share the same fundamental goal: to address and affect the migration phenomenon.
Central American migration can be analyzed from a regional perspective, but without ever failing to take each country’s specific migrational patterns and processes into account. In fact, the region is a universe of many similarities, shared ecology and socio-economic conditions, but also rich in relevant disparities and particularities. A constant in Central American migration studies is the duality of economic and political causes, considering the latter as different types of violence. Another constant is the relevance or interference of the United States as a disruptive element and cause for migration, while it also becomes the favored destination for Central American migrants.

In migrational terms, there are profound differences at the regional level: the countries in the Northern Triangle may be considered representative of labor-driven, mostly irregular mass migration to the United States. Belize is doubly peculiar, since it is both a country of destination and a country of origin for Central American migrants. Nicaragua is the regional exception, with high levels of past and present migrational intensity toward Costa Rica, the United States and, much less significantly, Panama. Costa Rica is mostly a country of destination with incipient migration headed for the United States. Lastly, Panama has a proportionally significant migration flow to the United States, linked to its historical semi-colonial condition; it is currently mostly a country of destination.

On the other hand, there are intra-regional migrational circuits in Central America, facilitated by the CA4 free movement agreement, the dollarization of El Salvador and the significant wage gap compared to Costa Rica and Panama. Also, despite its size, Belize actively participates in this circuit. Lastly, Guatemala and Belize have a history of temporary migration in the Mexican border zone, recently regulated via the Visiting Border Worker Card (Tarjeta de Visitante Trabajador Fronterizo, TVTF), which allows workers to work for a year in the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco and Quintana Roo. Traditionally, it was just agricultural day laborers, but now they are active in construction and tourist services in the Mexican Caribbean (111,347 in 2015; 87,269 in 2016).

Given this broad picture, the absence of Mexico from Central American migratory circuits and of a proper Mesoamerican circuit stands out. The latest available census data reports the presence of 59,936 Central Americans in the country in 2010. In this context, the comparison with Costa Rica, where just the Nicaraguan population is estimated at 300,000, is illustrative.

Nevertheless, the current picture can be different due to the remarkable rise in transit migrants who eventually stay or work in Mexico, the asylum seekers who are sent back from the United States or “remain” in Mexico awaiting a second hearing (MPP), the growing number of refugee status applicants and the end of the demographic dividend in Mexico. However, Mexico is still unattractive for Central American labor for two fundamental reasons: it has the worst minimum wage in the region and the one in the United States is eight times higher.
Additionally, it must be acknowledged that Mexico has traditionally been closed to immigration and only occasionally receptive, as was the case with Spanish republican refugees in the late 1930s, South Americans in the 1970s and Guatemalans in 1990. The foreign population in Mexico was less than 1% in 2010, and if Americans with Mexican parents are excluded, the number probably drops to 0.6%.

Migrational dynamics in Mexico and Central America are mainly oriented toward the United States and most Central American migration flows traversed Mexico in an irregular manner, making it a transit country—the last one. As can be seen in Table 1, the 70s, 80s and 90s had intense migration flows, doubling or tripling each decade. Mexico is a separate case due to its size and historic penchant for proximity and labor migration. In the cases of Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, it was set off by civil wars, which resulted in refugees (TPS, NACARA) and labor migration. In Honduras, the detonator was Hurricane Mitch and access to humanitarian visas (1998), which later turned into labor migration. In the case of Belize, it is economic migration, particularly of the garífuna community, which includes Honduras and Guatemala. Costa Rica and Panama are the exception, since they are rather on the receiving side.

The 20th century is witnessing very important changes in Mesoamerican emigration patterns, processes and flows headed for the United States. The first conclusion that can be drawn is the notable reduction of the growth rate of migration flows between 2000 and 2010. (See Table 1.)

### Table 1: Central Americans in the United States 1960–2010

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<td>225,739</td>
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<td>5,425,992</td>
<td>11,195,873</td>
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2[2010 Source: http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/02/P46-2010-FB-Profile-Final_APR-3.pdf](http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/02/P46-2010-FB-Profile-Final_APR-3.pdf)
The numbers never double or triple like they did in past decades, except for Honduras, the last country to join the regional migrational dynamic, which practically doubles its output in the first decade of the century. According to Pew Hispanic, the United States in 2015 had 12,025 million people of Mexican origin, 1,420 million of Salvadoran origin, 980 thousand of Guatemalan origin and 630 thousand of Honduran origin. More recent data is not available, except for the remarkable rise in emigration from these countries between January and May 2019. In total, 133,000 were detained by the border patrol, of which 11,000 were unaccompanied minors and approximately half of which were families. Most migrants who arrived in the October 2018 and January 2019 caravans were Hondurans (80%), followed by Guatemalans (9%), Salvadorans (6%) and others (5%).

In the case of Mexico, with 12 million nationals living in the United States, the most relevant indicator is that of the undocumented population due to its social, political and economic impact. In this case, the growth curve reached its highest point in 2007, with 6.9 million, and then dropped to 5.4 million in 2016, a decrease of 1.5 million. On the other hand, legal migration rose significantly: in the last years,  

“Mexico must open up to regional and continental immigration and its easy integration, given the existing cultural and linguistic affinity. This advantage would be highly valued in other contexts.”
Table 2: Gang Member Deportations from the United States²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>México</td>
<td>267,885</td>
<td>265,747</td>
<td>220,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>66,982</td>
<td>84,649</td>
<td>81,909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>42,433</td>
<td>61,222</td>
<td>60,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>51,200</td>
<td>78,983</td>
<td>59,687</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foreigners returned by nationality: Fiscal years 2015 - 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>México</td>
<td>40,676</td>
<td>37,315</td>
<td>39,842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>1,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foreigners deported according to penal status by nationality: Fiscal year 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Criminal</th>
<th>Non-Criminal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>México</td>
<td>192,334</td>
<td>85,784</td>
<td>106,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>33,060</td>
<td>11,130</td>
<td>21,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>22,168</td>
<td>9,288</td>
<td>12,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>18,452</td>
<td>6,492</td>
<td>11,960</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

an average of 165 thousand green cards were granted, on 110 thousand Mexicans were naturalized and in 2018 242 thousand temporary H2A and B visas were granted for workers. Irregular migration is still present: it is due to labor or family reunification, and it has remarkable decreased.

Another significant change has been American deportation policy, which inaugurated a new phase for Mexico and Central America: that of returnees, most of them unable to go back since they had been judicially expelled. Court-ordered removals worsened under the Obama administration: around 400 thousand a year, and by 2017, already in the Trump ear, statistics make a distinction between “criminals” and “non-criminals.” Although the term “criminal” needs to be nuanced and is often applied to misdemeanors, its impact is significant, especially when gang and mara history in Central America is directly linked to gang deportations in the United States (see Table 2). Return, whichever modality it occurs in, cuts migrational trajectories and often splits families who have been settled in the country for years. On average, the undocumented population remains there for 15 years, so the persona, family and social impact of deportation or removal is colossal.

In parallel to emigration and return processes, the migrational transit that becomes relevant and visible in the second decade of the century must be considered. Mexico has always been a country of transit given its proximity to the United States, but this phenomenon, which used to be clandestine and surreptitious, has now been rendered visible. There have been four phases in this process: first, the era of la Bestia (“the Beast”), when migrants traveled on top of cargo trains from Chiapas to the northern border. This phase ended in 2014 due to restrictive measures taken with the Southern Border Program (Programa Frontera Sur), and the caravan phase timidly began with the ones organized for Holy Week (Via Crucis), until the mass exodus of October 2018. The short-lived third phase, from January to May 2019, consisted of the mass granting of humanitarian visas and facilitating transit with an exit permit. This policy resulted in a “pull effect” derived from the exponential growth of the Central American, Caribbean and extra-continental outflow. The fourth phase is the “migration pact” that came after threats of imposing tariffs on Mexico unless it took steps to curb migration (June–August 2019). As a response to these threats, measures to contain migration from the southern border, all throughout the country along the “vertical border” and at the northern border were taken. Mexico “gave back” 37 thousand Hondurans, 22 thousand Guatemalans and 8 thousand Salvadorans between January and June 2019.

A fourth aspect of the complexity of migration in the 21st century has to do with the remarkable increase in asylum applications in Mexico. In 2013, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, COMAR) received 1296 requests, and the number increased year by year, almost doubling. Between 2013 and 2018, Mexico got 59,920 requests, especially from Central Americans, Venezuelans, Cubans and Haitians. Only in the first few months of 2019 the number was over 30,000 and is expected to reach 80,000 by the end of the year. The refugee alternative is stumped by bureaucratic sluggishness, the COMAR’s lack of budget and the little
interest Central Americans have in staying in Mexico. Part of the explanation has to do with the Mexican minimum wage, the one most migrants would be getting, being the worst in the region.

Lastly, migration must be seen as an important element in the near future. Mexico has finished its process of demographic transition and will need labor, both skilled and unskilled. Agriculture is an increasingly important exportation sector: Mexico is No. 10 worldwide and exported 35 billion dollars in produce, which requires a lot of unskilled labor. Paradoxically, some programs offer Central Americans jobs and refugee status if they stay in Oaxaca and Chiapas, where labor supply is low. Either way, Mexico must open up to regional and continental immigration and its easy integration, given the existing cultural and linguistic affinity. This advantage would be highly valued in other contexts. At the moment, no statistics are available, but the 2020 census is expected to show a completely different picture from the 2010 one, with a remarkable increase in Central American, South American and Caribbean migration.

The last three decades of the 20th century were the most important emigration period in the continent. The migrational picture grows more complex with return, transit, refuge and intra-regional migration. Each of these migrational modalities requires specific policies, unlike emigration, which was characterized as a laissez faire policy: let them be, let them pass. Forced return is still a threat for migrants, their communities and their countries of origin. Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are the top four countries with irregular immigrants in the United States, estimated at 8.4 million in 2015. Concomitantly, they are the ones with the highest number of forced returnees. Mexico and Central America are a region of migrational transit, but Mexico is “the last country of transit,” which places it at a conflictive crossroads, especially when the migrant flow increases. Since the humanitarian crisis of 2014, linked to family and child migration from Central America, migrants sought refuge in the United States, and Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans and people from outside the continent have joined them. For them, the United States is an almost absolute priority; even many who fail to be granted asylum in the United States would rather return to their countries than apply for asylum in Mexico. However, the future of the region lies in immigration and in free movement, not in walls, barriers or containment programs.

Mirar al norte como única opción, ha dejado saldos inconmensurables e inaceptables. Es posible articular procesos migratorios intrarregionales y balancear entradas con salidas, migraciones temporales con definitivas; equilibrar el derecho a migrar con el de no migrar. A nivel regional Costa Rica, Panamá y Belice son un ejemplo de que es posible articular emigración con inmigración, México y los otros países de Centroamérica deben sumarse a esta dinámica.

Looking northward as the only option has resulted in a gargantuan, unacceptable toll. Intra-regional migrational processes can be articulated; temporary and definitive migration, entry and exit can be balanced, as can the
right to migrate and the right to not do it. At the regional level, Costa Rica, Panama and Belize exemplify that it is possible to articulate emigration and immigration, and Mexico and the other countries in Central America must join this dynamic.

We are united by a common pre-Hispanic and colonial past, we share phenotypes, a language, a culture, even religious syncretism. We are separated by nationalisms and borders that stem from the interests of the traditional aristocracies: the de facto economic, political and military powers. The delayed encounter between the peoples of Mesoamerica will be possible through the migrants themselves. It is necessary to begin to think and act on the premise of intra-regional migration not as a problem, but as a factor of development and as the future of the region.
Migration and Central American Violence

Joaquín Villalobos

Throughout history, wars and natural disasters have been among the main catalysts of migration flows around the world. However, during the last few decades, a third element has made its debut, turning the prosperity and economic motivations into merely humanitarian and survival reasons. The Central American migration phenomenon, like the Venezuelan one, is the result of violence, whether by gangs or by the government.

In this sense, Latin America is the world’s most violent region, even more than regions in Africa and Asia currently undergoing armed conflict (main reason). The authority vacuum from the Rio Grande to Patagonia, on different scales and with varying effects, partially explains the shift in the search: from dollars to refuge.
During the last 20 years, violence and the lack of solid institutions have made millions of Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan (Northern Triangle) and, more recently, Nicaraguan citizens to embark on an uncertain journey to the northern Mexican border. The Central American migration crisis is directly proportional to the crisis of these states in terms of their ability to provide security.

Nevertheless, the Central American migration wave can be fundamentally explained by four factors: demography, weak and poor states, a blocked micro-economy and a systematic governability crisis. Each of them will now be described below

**Factor 1: Explosive Demography**

Generally, demography is the least analyzed factor when it comes to the migrational crisis. The number of inhabitants in the region has grown dramatically in the last forty years. Broadly speaking, Guatemala’s population grew 150%, Honduras’s grew 180%, El Salvador’s grew 45% and Nicaragua’s grew 94%. Likewise, two of these four countries hold first places in Latin America: Guatemala has a birth rate of 26.6 births per 1000 inhabitants, and El Salvador is the most densely populated country, with 313 inhabitants per square kilometer. In other words, in just 40 years, the exponential increase in birth rates didn’t just double the number of people in the area, but also created in both governments and analysts an idea of “demographic enthusiasm” in the face of a future of affluence and prosperity.

However, reality was different. Accelerated growth surpassed the governments’ capacity to provide welfare, security, justice and basic services to their citizens. It is worth remembering that overpopulation results in social marginalization, extreme poverty and criminal and social violence.

With the advent of democracy, these countries went from being controlled by military regimes to conservative elites supported by churches, backtracking in terms of birth control and family planning. The Salvadoran case is iconic, since in 2019 women are still being detained and imprisoned for having abortions: it is considered a crime with sentences of up to 30 years.

**Factor 2: Blocked micro-Economy**

It is common to think poverty has inhibited, or at least slowed, development in Central American countries. However, an analysis of remittances in the Northern Triangle countries in the last 20 years (a total of 180 billion dollars) shows a paradox. There has been no cooperation scheme able to match that. These funds, totaling an average of 1.6 billion dollars a month for the three countries and reaching citizens directly, promote a rent economy and balance-of-payment distortions.
Consumption is put ahead of productive investment, so most of that money ends up in the hands of the region’s main economic groups. Fiscal evasion has resulted in weak states that lack sufficient resources for guaranteeing minimal welfare and, therefore, security. Guatemala has the lowest tax collection in Latin America.

It is no coincidence that the main cities of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador bear witness to a phenomenon reminiscent of the apartheid: the existence of walled areas that house the elites and where commerce and industry flourish. These urban enclaves are guarded by private security companies whose employees often outnumber the armed forces. In El Salvador both groups are the same size, but in Honduras and Guatemala, these companies have respectively 5 and 6 times more people.

On the contrary, in marginalized zones, violence and extortion are rampant. In Honduras, for instance, small enterprises, responsible for around 70% of employment, pay 200 million dollars a year due to extortion. In El Salvador, these businesses report daily losses of 20 million dollars. In Guatemala, extortion has risen 72% in the last four years. Although official numbers do not exist for Nicaragua, media outlets and organizations report a significant increase in these crimes.

Paradoxically, the blockage of local economies favors the aforementioned conglomerates, while remittances stimulate migration. In order to gradually stop migration flows, minimal security standards are necessary.

**Factor 3: Weak States and No Territorial Control**

The civil governments of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua are relatively recent: the military was in power until the late 1970s and mid-1980s.

However, the democratic transition has failed to bring strong states with pluralistic societies. On the contrary: political ideology has prevailed over pragmatism, resulting in an evident lack of social cohesion. The elite lives in a walled bubble, shielded from reality, while the poor and the criminals coexist in zones where the latter define where true power lies.

These governments have failed to address the permanent violence in the region. The migration flow cannot be understood without taking into account the terror of the maras, criminal gangs formed in the United States by deported Central American ex-convicts.
These gangs have become the de facto authority in urban and rural populations of the Northern Triangle. They fancy themselves a sort of alternative power whose ultimate objective is to gain power through fearmongering, unlike organized crime, whose objective is money; for the maras, violence is an identity.

State functions have been taken over by criminal groups in dozens of neighborhoods and communities. Paradoxically, living in one of these areas is synonymous with death; violence has many faces: murder, rape, enforced disappearance, beheading, sexual exploitation, kidnapping. Even talking to a policeman or accidentally crossing a street also means death.

The balance between the intimidatory power (maras) and the dissuasive power (governments) has resulted in a clear losing side: the citizens of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In other words, when the state lacks territorial control, criminals become stronger, and the citizenry, overwhelmed by terror, the least dangerous option is to flee north.

Factor 4: Systematic Governability Crisis

The social division (the poor, the gangs, the elite and the ruling class) and the lack of territorial control do not produce an environment where citizens can thrive or, in many cases, even survive. The political and institutional instability that has characterized the last four decades has also added to the current social disaster of the Northern Triangle; Nicaragua has recently joined this unstable wave.

In the past few years, elections in all four countries have contributed to regional instability. The electoral processes in Nicaragua (November 2016) and Honduras (November 2017) were subjected to accusations of fraud and factious use of institutions. In the former case, the regime openly became a dictatorship supported by the Palacio de Miraflores in Caracas; Honduras has not been stabilized since the 2009 coup and its last presidents have been accused of being linked to illegal drug trade, corruption and electoral crimes.

In Guatemala (August 2019), the electoral process was marked by the international investigation of presidential corruption. The smoothest process was that of El Salvador (February 2019), culminating in the triumph of an alternative candidate. Politics in that country are highly polarized, and it is no coincidence that it has the lowest economic growth rate and is the most affected by remittances and violence.

The Northern Triangle countries, the political class and the elites certainly failed to note the harmful effect of remittances on the local economy, violence, security and demography. The governability crisis, including in Nicaragua, contributed to a bigger one: that of migration.
What to Do with this Central American Hell?

It is necessary to understand that the Northern Triangle is not a region of generic, uniform countries. They have problems in common, but they have varying levels of progress and backwardness regarding the four aforementioned factors.

The recently elected government in San Salvador has a certain degree of political stability and a low index of criminal penetration; however, it faces a serious mara problem and a stagnant local economy.

Tegucigalpa, on the other hand, faces a governability crisis exacerbated by the fact that the police force and the armed forces infiltrated by organized crime.

Meanwhile, Guatemala City needs to address problems on a more international scale including disputes with a UN international commission and recent altercations with the American government (safe third country). The dictatorship in Managua is collapsing the economy, and Nicaraguans, many of them headed south, have partially joined the caravans.

“The Central American Hell is violent and unstable. It is important to invest in order to guarantee the security of the poor and thus allow for greater development.”
There is no formula or procedure that can suddenly end this migrational crisis. However, progress in different areas can diminish the flow in order to ultimately improve the lives of Central American citizens.

First, all four countries have similar fundamentalist views on sex education and birth control: they are demonized by churches and criminalized by governments. The ruling class needs to drop the taboo and provide opportune assistance and accurate, independent information. Putting a stop to demographic growth and overpopulation will help overcome social marginalization. Sex crimes, often perpetrated by gang members, the de facto masters in many places, must also be adequately prosecuted.

Second, therefore, regaining control of lost territories by drafting and professionalizing a skilled police force is deemed urgent. Coercive dissuasive policies are necessary to achieve this; in other words, a plan to deploy forces and reestablish the state’s public, judicial and social control over the territory. This cannot, however, be achieved without enough members to effectively capture delinquents and restore order, so a reevaluation of police activity through strengthening public safety institutions is necessary.

Police forces in Central America must act in accordance with human rights. Only by being “citizens who create citizens” will they make society regain trust and lose fear, boost the recovery of the local economy and, lastly, guarantee peace and tranquility in their communities. The relationship between police officers and citizens is the cornerstone of territorial control.

Third, the idea that poverty is the main cause of migration needs to be set aside. Although pacifying the areas where poor populations live is vital, more responsible elites, more honest politicians and more taxes are necessary. Fiscal evasion must also be tackled, and corruption has to decrease. Particularly, Guatemala and Honduras need to rid their public institutions of organized crime, whereas El Salvador must put an end to political patronage networks in its government and institutions and use those funds for security. The international community must put a stop to political instability in Nicaragua, where, if the authoritarian government continues to rule, no positive scenario is foreseeable.

It is important not to forget that Central America currently lacks support from the American government. On the one hand, it has shut the door to migration and its asylum policy forces those desperately seeking refuge to remain in Mexico. It recently signed a “safe third country” agreement with Guatemala, effectively building a legislative wall. On the other, it also seeks to impose tariffs on remittances and repatriate gang members.
Mexico’s approach to this crisis is ambiguous and contradictory, oscillating between an open arms policy one day and persecution the next. The first results of the Comprehensive Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Integral, PDI), drafted with the collaboration of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL) but which still lacks funds for operation, are yet to be seen.

The Central American Hell is violent and unstable. Violence must be used as an agent of change through its monopoly. It is important to invest in order to guarantee the security of the poor and thus allow for greater development, so remittances can contribute to development instead of encouraging migration flows.

**How Can Mexico Help?**

Coercive control of Central American migration as an urgent measure may help temporarily reduce the flow of migrants, but at some point it will become unsustainable and the problem could become even more serious. For now, Central American migration is a foreign policy issue for Mexico, but unless the causes in its countries of origin are addressed, it will become a domestic problem, which will entail social, economic, political and even xenophobic complications. In Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, Venezuelan immigration is becoming a domestic issue. The situation for Colombia is so serious that it has escalated from a severing of diplomatic relations to military tensions. It is indispensable for Mexico to act preemptively with policies to reduce the problem by addressing its causes in the Northern Triangle:

1. Supporting their governments with campaigns to discourage emigration. This would help lessen the load of coercive controls in the southern border. The three countries lack systematic, sustained campaigns for this purpose; when they do exist, they are sporadic and flawed. Meanwhile, information on caravans is prevalent in the media, encouraging emigration. There is no media counterweight.

2. Supporting demographic policies. This will have long-term effects, but it is urgent to set it in motion, adapting to the possibilities of each country in terms of religious or cultural resistance. Support from other countries and international organizations can be welcomed, including from media campaigns to free birth control donations.

3. Strengthening the police. This is a critical issue, because Mexico faces serious security problems. However, regarding this subject, it is more capable, more experienced and has more available resources. Mexico can also help persuade other countries to contribute to the strengthening of Central American police forces.
4. Broadening and improving its penal structure and correctional centers. All three countries have a high crime density on the streets and their prisons are overpopulated, overflowing and often controlled by criminals. In Honduras, hundreds of convicts have died in prison fires.

5. Helping develop micro-economic activity. Mexico has ample experience in this matter and the remittances that Central Americans receive ought to generate a small business boom. Obviously, in order for this to be possible, the countries need to achieve progress in security issues, but however serious the situation is, it is always possible to do something that allows for the creation and development of small businesses.

6. Debating with local business unions. Policies set by the American government are not going to change. Tolerance to emigration has shut down and this means taking on the consequences of that, both in Mexico and in the Northern Triangle. There is therefore a common interest, and Mexican entrepreneurs could lead the way by discussing emigration and possible cooperation plans with their counterparts in each country.

7. Assimilating some of the migrants and remittances. As a result of deportations, Mexico will inevitably have to absorb a portion of the migrant mass. Mexico cannot compete with the wages in the United States, but both deportees and frustrated migrants must have family in the United States that sends remittances. Mexico could take in families that receive these remittances or deportees that could contribute to the national economy.

A final reflection

There are two ways to steer Mexican cooperation in the Central American migration crisis. The first is a macro perspective of development, investment and big projects. Although this should not be ruled out entirely, it must be taken into account that these countries receive 1.6 billion dollars in remittances each month, so the priority is helping them stabilize their security. Mexico has ample experience in communication aimed at discouraging migration and raising awareness on the demographic issue. It can help link remittances to economic development, strengthen police forces and improve prisons. In the Northern Triangle, in order for schools, teachers and small business owners to do their jobs, security is a nonnegotiable condition that needs to be met.
Forced Migration: Corruption and Impunity in Guatemala

Úrsula Roldán

Institutional Breakdown in Guatemala

Impunity and Corruption scandals originated in the Casa Crema are internationally known; the government was not in power to guarantee the constitutional precept of the common good, but instead occupied itself since 2017 with reinstating conditions of impunity, succeeding in removing the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG) and now, only a few months after its departure, looking for a way to keep it. In this sense, it is important to highlight that religious conservative, fundamentalist and counter-insurgent powers allied themselves with entrepreneurial groups to keep the CICIG from carrying out its investigation and achieving the timely completion of its legal procedures on various cases of state capture and co-optation, clearly in order to maintain their de facto control of the country and curb the state’s ability to draft and carry out public policies in favor of most of the population and address the country’s alarming indexes of inequality and poverty.

In Guatemala, the Executive and Legislative have proven themselves openly fascist. Reality is absurdly manipulated, fabricated and lies are spread. The ruling mafias take advantage of public resources, break the law and disregard institutions.

From Nicaragua to Guatemala, thousands of young people leave because of hunger, persecution and lack of health, education and work opportunities. These countries are anachronical states taken over by political, economic and criminal mafias that cause forced migration headed for the United States through a dangerous route across Mexico, where people can be raped, extorted, disappeared or murdered.

Forced migration and refugees are part of a humanitarian social reality that is increasing worldwide. In the case of northern Central America, the numbers keep going up. People also leave because the development models have failed and democracy was never developed and consolidated.

1 The Guatemalan presidential residence
In the late 20th century, a migrational exodus (known as the “migrant caravan”) gathered thousands of children, young people, men and women mainly from Honduras but also from El Salvador and Guatemala headed for the United States, a country which got numerous asylum requests in 2018: 33,400 Salvadorans, 33,100 Guatemalans and 24,400 Hondurans.

The American government lives in a state of political and humanitarian ambivalence: on the one hand, some support the human right to migrate and seek refuge and asylum in accordance with international agreements and conventions; others, headed by President Donald Trump, insist on building walls to keep Mexicans, Central Americans and South Americans out of their territory. The American government has sought to impose agreements with Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico to make them “safe third countries,” which would allow it to send asylum seekers who arrive at the border to these countries or have them stop migrants en route under the pretense that they are safe for refugees and asylum seekers. These unilateral instruments under the guise of “bilateral agreements” leave the migrant population and their defenders completely vulnerable: their rights become a bill of exchange and their lives are a safe-conduct for the governments who accepted this complicity.

In the case of Guatemala, Jimmy Morales, the outgoing president, repeatedly assured the United States that the country was its ally and believes the terms of the Central America Free Mobility Agreement (Acuerdo de Libre Movilidad en Centroamérica, CA4), which allows for the free movement of citizens between the four Central American states, ought to be revised. Morales recently signed a security and migrational cooperation agreement that, depending on the approach, may or may not be considered a safe third country agreement. Needless to say, Alejandro Giammattei, the president-elect, claims the agreement has to be revised because the country is not in any shape to contain migration.

Meanwhile, through economic blackmail, the Trump administration forced the Mexican government to stop the migration flow coming from Central America by means of the “Remain in Mexico” program. The newly created National Guard identifies and detains people on roads, highways, migrant shelters and civil society organizations. Then, when Andrés Manuel López Obrador rose to power, a new style of development for Central America was drafted with the help of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL): the Comprehensive Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Integral, PDI), which would imply significant financing for development projects in Mexico and Central America to stop the migrant flow headed northward.

The vacuum generated by the near total absence of the governments of the Northern Triangle of Central America, fully focused on defending themselves and those close to them instead of serious efforts to change the structural
causes of forced migration and these new migration flows, has already gone on for decades.

**American Responsibility**

The United States is historically responsible for Central American countries in various fronts. First of all, the American market’s demand for guns and drugs has strengthened organized crime and illegal drug trade in the region, now one of the most violent in the world. In 2017 alone, El Salvador and Honduras had murder rates of up to 51 and 40 homicides per 100,000 people, most of them related to gangs and criminal groups.

Historically, the United States financed bloody wars and meager peace processes. Their anti-communist and anti-drug policies from the 60s were complemented by directives against terrorism and maras that became an anti-immigrant sentiment. The narrative of fear, hate and disdain for migrants is good business in electoral and economic terms: on the one hand, it guarantees votes for the 2020 election; on the other, border security benefits companies that provide technology, shelter, detention centers, etc.

Likewise, various American administrations have strengthened local leaders and, backed coups and electoral frauds. It is sufficient to recall the cases of Ortega-Murillo in Nicaragua, Orlando Hernández in Honduras and Jimmy Morales in Guatemala. Just like the breakdown of the bicameral consensus for the struggle against corruption and impunity in Guatemala. In sum, the United States is greatly responsible for condemning Central American nations to now be seen as banana republics, or Mexican countries, according to some television hosts.

**Walls Everywhere**

Building a physical wall between Mexico and the United States, whether it is made of steel or concrete, is just expanding the already existing wall built on the pillars of the rejection of immigration and the xenophobic discourse. There are walls everywhere, spreading from the center of the continent to the north and back.

In Central America, violence is a wall that keeps migrants from returning and those who stay from supporting themselves. Forced displacement has made thousands of citizens from these countries to seek asylum or live as refugees: from 2001 to 2016, the increase was of 658%, and today over 146,000 Central Americans are part of this figure.

In Mexico, two parallel walls crush migrants: organized crime and the militarization of the southern border. Since 2014, the government implemented policies of security reinforcement
and migration containment (Comprehensive Plan for the Southern Border, Plan Integral Frontera Sur) which took only two years to display alarming results. Of the 188,595 migrants detained in Mexico in 2016, 147,370 were deported, most from Central America. When the administration changed and the National Guard was deployed, the Mexican government has been confirmed to sport a dual discourse, internationally portraying itself as a promoter of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and domestically implementing migrational policies that guarantee no protection, and on the contrary, human rights violations start at the government’s own institutions.

In the United States, executive orders regarding migration are accumulated along with President Trump and his administration’s anti-immigrant statements and constitute a wall of incalculable size. Since 2016, the increase in family separation, detentions and deportations of migrants in the United States has been on the news. While the interruption of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) places 800,000 young people at risk of deportation, the threat of suspending the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) program would affect at least 300,000 people of Central American origin, mainly from El Salvador and Honduras.

Each of these walls, as pointed out, is not necessarily made of concrete or steel. They threaten the dignity and human rights of migrants in the region, whether they are from Central America or from outside the continent.

What’s Next for Migration Policy in Guatemala?

The defense of institutionality is key for maintaining the individual freedoms of all Guatemalans and shielding them from the cynicism of the ruling class. President Jimmy Morales’s confrontations with the CICIG further wore out the country’s political and social fabric. This significantly contributed to Alejandro Giammattei, former director of the prison system from the conservative party Vamos, being elected and to Thelma Aldana, former Attorney General and acclaimed candidate to the Guatemalan presidency, being left out of the presidential race.

The president-elect recently met with Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mérida, where a plan to receive a 30-million-dollar donation for the implementation of a development plan is being drafted. The proposal requested from CEPAL for the region is known, but few details are available about the type of investment on specific plans. A recent press statement by the Guatemalan president-elect made it known that there is a plan to develop a free economic zone on the border between Mexico and Guatemala.

Any democracy in the continent, especially the Guatemalan one, which is undergoing a construction process, needs to stick to the rule of law and apply the
principles of ethics, the common good and civil liberties. Citizens should migrate because it is their right, not because the circumstances force them to in this sense, none of the international community’s plans for improving living conditions in Central America will work under weak democracies ruled by perverse links between the economic and political powers.

To counter the tangible and intangible walls and the absence and weakness of its governments, civil society has built bridges of hospitality and protection for migrants and refugees. Humanitarian displays of attention, accompaniment and defense of migrants happen every day across the region. Working on this difficult situation with congressional and local authorities in the United States is key to achieving a greater impact on displays of collective action and resistance. Just like using all international Human Rights mechanisms to defend their rights and avoid going back to authoritarian, repressive regimes with a high toll of human lives and fertile grounds for conflict.

Migrants are agents of change that bring economic and cultural wealth to the communities they settle in. It is crucial for Mexico and the Central American states to take on that responsibility and address the clamor of global pacts on the matter, as well as establish sufficient budgetary and institutional frameworks to support the development plans whose scope is enough to change the structural conditions of inequality, marginalization and poverty in migration-generating areas. No wall can contain the human right to migrate and have a dignified life.

“Any democracy in the continent, especially the Guatemalan one, which is undergoing a construction process, needs to stick to the rule of law and apply the principles of ethics, the common good and civil liberties.”
Honduras: Dark Times for the Right to Migrate and the Right to Not Migrate

Yolanda González Cerdeira

The caravans or exoduses that burst out into the regional context between October 2018 and April 2019 brought to light a forced migration crisis that has become chronic over the past few years in northern Central America and evidenced the political will of the governments of Central America and the United States.

The exodus caravans comprised mostly of Hondurans (72% according to a 2018 IOM study) helped evidence the dramatic reality of over 9,000 Hondurans that leave the country and head north every month and of the 41,000 who applied for asylum in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019). According to a UNHCR study based on interviewing people from the caravans in January 2019, 70% of them said they would be in danger if they returned to their country (La Jornada, February 6th, 2019).

The shadow of this exodus continues to spread, especially regarding public policies and measures of persuasion, containment, control, militarization and criminalization of northern Central Americans migrating to Mexico and the United States. In this sense, Hondurans, and Central Americans in general, have witnessed, i.e. seen and suffered, disappointed and powerless, and to a certain degree naïve, the policies implemented by the new Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Within the migrational context of the past 10 months, the stances of the Honduran and American governments have not left much room for surprises, taking their patterns from previous years into account. The speeches, tweets, statements, communiqués and executive orders by Donald Trump and his minions, whether it’s the Attorney General, the head of the Department of Homeland Security, of the State Department or the Border Patrol, have all been along the same lines and have to be given some credit for coherence: they all correspond to a zero-tolerance policy toward undocumented individuals, ignoring the fundamental principles of international legislation and the international human rights framework, prioritizing the interests of minors or the right to international protection and the principle of non-refoulement.

A theatrical strategy of fabricating a context of crisis and chaos to justify their measures, such as freezing the approval of the budget at the beginning of the year, creating a humanitarian crisis on the Mexico-U.S. border and ongoing blackmail and threats toward origin countries as a base negotiation pattern. A background of Donald Trump’s electoral context, the xenophobic, anti-immigrant message that gave him the Oval Office in 2016 and his close ties with friends and campaign donors like the National Border Patrol Council or the detention center industry, as remembered by Óscar Chacón (El Faro, July 2nd, 2019).

The Reactions of the Honduran Government, Backed by the White House

In the Honduran case, Juan Orlando Hernández’s administration has stuck to its well-known “we will do what we have to do” to contain the exodus and been grateful for the constant support and validation it has received from the United States for himself and his immediate entourage to stay in power amidst accusations of corruption and illegal drug trade. The first reactions of senior government officials in Honduras to over 6,000 people fleeing under the eyes of the international media were to personally and collectively criminalize and accuse several social leaders of promoting the caravan in order to destabilize the country and representing the most radical opposition in Honduras. They also tried to stop the caravan at the Agua Caliente border with Guatemala, both by physically closing the border and with police and military force to stop Honduran citizens from freely leaving their country. Some unaccompanied children from the first exodus who were in Tijuana in late 2018 said the Honduran authorities had tried to prevent them from leaving the country, beating them with sticks...
when they did. Reports by human rights organizations denounced the use of tear gas at the border against families and minors.

In February 2019, they went one step further and the increasing criminalization of migrant families traveling with their underage children became evident, now in the form of written reprimands to parents for violating the childhood code and the announcement by Executive Director of the Directorate of Childhood, Adolescence and Family (Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia, DINAF) that repeat offenders would be accused of endangering their rights, which carries a sentence of 1-3 years in prison. According to official data, up until February 21st, 2019, the parents of 1,449 children have been reprimanded.

**Eyes on Mexico**

In the meantime, while in Honduras we turned our gaze to Mexico in October 2018, we hoped Andrés Manuel López Obrador would take on new leadership in the region and end Mexico’s role as the deputy of the United States, especially in the southern border with Guatemala, as American officials had already named it in 2014. This hope and some naivete made us ignore those who warned us that he had not outlined a clear migration policy during Morena’s campaign beyond rejecting that of President Peña Nieto. Those who wondered how much he could resist pressure from the United States or what the scope of the negotiation and counterweights of the Secretariat of the Interior, which the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) and the Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión de Ayuda al Refugiado, COMAR) depend on, were also ignored. So was the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs December 20th, 2019 communiqué full of human rights and sovereignty rhetoric that nonetheless practically accepted the “Remain in Mexico” plan, a program which forced some asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases were processed in the United States.

In early 2019, however, when another exodus caravan left Honduras, hope bloomed anew when Mexican organizations were heard discussing institutional efforts to collaborate and coordinate their actions and, especially, virtually attest to the fact that on the other side of the Suchiate river lay the promise of quick humanitarian visas rather than police officers and soldiers.

Unfortunately, hope dwindled as January ended and the Mexican government’s inability to address the migrational context and humanitarian crisis became apparent (especially at the borders), as did the fact that different levels of the government engaged in disputes with each other, measures were taken for the short term, xenophobia grew and, lastly, the country had succumbed to American blackmail and accepted a temporary deal that put Mexico on guard duty, among other things deploying 6,000 National Guard members to protect the Guatemalan border and formally accepting the “Remain in Mexico” plan.
Assessment of Containment, Detention and Deportation Policies

An assessment of these measures yields devastating results. Mexico’s most urgent strategy, strengthening its increasingly militarized and police-intensive detention and deportation capabilities, resulted in what in the very short term could be seen as a positive outcome: the number of deportations. Between January 1st and July 31st, 2019, a total of 70,153 Hondurans were deported, 45,299 (64.57%) of them by Mexico. However, these numbers crumble under their own weight stained by various crises of systematic human rights violations, by the rising vulnerability and endangerment of migrants to a tragic degree, by the collapse of the migrational management system, by the saturation of detention centers, by an ever-growing number of people under irregular circumstances, by an increasingly weakened and overflowing asylum system, by the saturation of organizations and, lastly, by the endless migrational cycle. Many deportees try to leave again, since they cannot live in Honduras.

Although these situations are all adequately documented and denounced by Mexican and Honduran civil society organizations, as well as commented on by the international human rights community, the prevailing North American discourse blaming victims for their forced migration, rather than facing responsibility for it, is still very dangerous and tempting. Mexico, for instance, refuses to accept its responsibility in the crisis at the American border by continuing to allow the informal waiting list program for seeking asylum in the United States, which has caused over 18,000 people to wait between a week and four months in some of Mexico’s most dangerous cities, such as Ciudad Juárez, Mexicali or Tijuana. The tightening of migrational policy has not been effective in curbing human mobility.

Are these efficient long-term measures? Past experiences in the region show that more restrictive containment and shielding policies regarding migration flows can have an immediate short-term impact, which vanishes, however, in the medium term. Just recall the Southern Border Plan Mexico and the United States implemented because of (or under the pretext of) countering the alleged migrant minors crisis in 2014; that should have persuaded Hondurans not to leave the country and head north. Yet, 10,913 Honduran minors were detained in 2018, and in the first seven months of 2019 Mexico deported 15,870 unaccompanied Honduran minors, the highest number in the last decade. If Mexico looks over at other countries who have acted as guards in other latitudes, such as Turkey or Morocco for the European Union, it could also confirm the real unfavorable nature of the impact for the third country.

Is it too audacious to expect Mexico to looks south the way it looks north? It can start by looking at and listening to Central America, to Honduras, and trying to understand what Hondurans (currently 44% of the asylum seekers it
gets) are running from. If it listened, it would realize that according to public opinion polls, 41.4% of the population has thought of or wanted to migrate, 40.8% have family who migrated in the past year and most of them believe the reason to be the economic and security crisis (ERIC, 2019).

Upon closer inspection, it would see why the possible risks they may face in Mexico are not sufficient to discourage them. As a young migrant interviewed by José Luis Rocha devastatingly replied when he was asked why he was leaving: “in Honduras, [young people] are more likely to end up with a bullet in the head, like many people they know, than with a decent job, like almost no one”.

The Honduran regime, which rests on military force, religious fundamentalism, the far right and the entrepreneurial elite, has been marked by the promotion of public policies that result in further violence and plunder, amid accusations of illegal drug trade, corruption and links to organized crime. Honduras’s 8.5 million people face the lowest employment rate in Latin America (53%) and an underemployment rate that covers over half the working age population; 910 thousand children are left out
of the educational system (ICEFI, 2016:149); between the ages of 15 and 19, the murder rate reaches 102.8 per 100 thousand people; extortion figures exceed 200 million dollars a year (La Prensa, July 1st, 2015) and the victims’ only choices are to pay, to die or to flee. In the last 18 years, 877 thousand new households under the poverty line have emerged, and in the last 10 years the state’s health and education budget has decreased, whereas the budget for defense and security has increased. Audacity is most needed in the darkest of times, so a vision of the future is imperative.

The possibility must exist for Mexico and Central America to combine their outlooks and efforts and come together as a region with a common development proposal to guarantee the right to migrate, but above all, the right to not have to do it by force anymore.
Belize in the Context of Central American Migration

Carlos Quesnel

Belize’s Relevance for Mexico

For most of the Mexican population, the southern border is the one shared with Guatemala, which is 871 kilometers long. However, there are 288 more kilometers of land, river and maritime border: on the other side lies Belize, a strategic neighbor precisely due to its adjacency and projection to the Caribbean.

One of the reasons Belize is not prominent in Mexican public opinion is the stability of the bilateral relationship, which lacks the occasional crises and outbursts that have characterized relations with Mexico’s other two neighbors. The Mexico-Belize agenda is based on a wide variety of cooperation programs, and its biggest challenge in the past few years has been to consolidate an incipient economic relationship between two countries sharing a highly dynamic border in social and cultural terms. Unsurprisingly, one of the main issues on the bilateral agenda is negotiating a partial free trade agreement.

In general, as in other regions around the world, the border faces various challenges, like contraband and an illegal flow of people and drugs in both directions, although this has not yet affected the stability of the area. In fact, migration has not been a controversial issue, since it has mostly consisted of a limited southward flow of Mexican temporary workers in the sugar cane industry in the northern district of Orange Walk and a significant among of Belizean tourists bound for destinations from Chetumal to Mérida of Cancún, with no intention of staying in the country. Migration from Belize to Mexico is orderly, regular and documented, aside from having a positive impact on municipalities in southern Quintana Roo.

Although citizens from other countries, especially Cubans and Central Americans, traverse Belize on their way to the United States, they are still only individuals or small groups. Belize cannot be considered a relevant transit point due to the lack of infrastructure—highways are few,
in poor conditions and only intermittently have police checkpoints—jungle climate, deficient transportation, English as a national language, a longer route and a strict governmental policy that criminalizes migrants. It is no coincidence that the last wave of Honduran migrants avoided crossing Belizean ground despite Mexico tightening the border with Guatemala.

**Belize’s Migration Policy**

Belize is both a producer and a receiver of migration, which has significantly changed the composition of its population. Originally inhabited by Mayans, Englishmen and groups of African origin, its outward flow began between 1940 and 1950, in response to the increasing demand for labor in the United States. This tendency grew after hurricane Hattie (1961) and when women began to work in the service industry. By the mid-80s, a quarter of those born in Belize were living on American territory.

Its most significant emigration, mainly consisting of Belizeans of African origin, was during that time and until the early 90s, and was compensated with the arrival of Central American migrants fleeing from armed conflict in the region, mainly from El Salvador and Guatemala. In 1993, approximately 35% of the 28,000 immigrants living in Belize were recognized as refugees, 25% were legal migrants and 40% were undocumented.

The Belizean government had no problem accepting this population, since it had the lowest demographic density in the American continent and it now had a new agricultural workforce, which more urbanized citizens of African descent were not inclined to join. By 2010, 14% of the country’s population was estimated to be foreign.

In the last few decades, the ethnic composition of Belize has changed dramatically: from predominantly black to significant racial and cultural diversity including Mayan, creole, Garifuna, European, American, Mennonite, Lebanese, Indian, Chinese and Taiwanese. At least half the population is Hispanic, and most of its immigrants come from Guatemala. The fact that the creole minority has held on to political power so far despite this reality is noteworthy.

As mentioned above, one important reason Belize is not a transit country is its legislation, which criminalizes undocumented migration and punishes it with fines of up to 2,500 dollars and/or up to two years in prison. According to the Kolbe Foundation, the nonprofit that operates the country’s only jail, there were 518 convicts in it at the end of 2018, 382 of which had been detained for migrational crimes (150 Hondurans, 106 Salvadorans and 99 Guatemalans). The case of Honduran citizens has been peculiar for over five years because they are mostly female victims of human trafficking, and they are returned to their country after being imprisoned for 1-6 months.

During part of the 80s and in 1999, the Belizean government granted citizenship to a sizeable amount of Central American immigrants. Communities like Salvapan and Valle de Paz were created in Belmopan to house Salvadoran refugees.
Since violence in Central America intensified in the mid-2000s, thousands of people have sought refuge in Belize; however, the migrational status of many remains undetermined. It is estimated that there are people from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador who need protection and are not accounted for. The Refugee Eligibility Committee, reestablished in 2015, recommended that the requests of over 600 asylum seekers be granted. They are still awaiting a resolution. In mid-2019, only 28 people had been officially recognized as refugees, meaning over 3,330 asylum seekers were registered in the Department of Refugees, which is less than the estimated number of people requiring this kind of protection, which is 6,000.

It is worth noting that Belizean law stipulates that a person seeking to be granted refugee status needs to get it within 14 days of his or her arrival, which is considered insufficient time. Whether or not they do it, their status remains undetermined, so they cannot legally work and are discriminated in terms of access to public health (although in theory they are entitled to it). These problems increase their vulnerability and eventually lead them to irregular jobs that encourage their exploitation.

The situation of refugees in Belize is delicate. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has emphatically urged the government to fulfil its
international obligations and take steps to offer more protection to asylum seekers. The American government has significantly pressured Belizean authorities to the same effect. However, the response has been careful, since they claim to fear that their own nationals will be deported from that country and will then need assistance; also, some people take advantage of refugee status to legalize their long stay in the country without really being refugees. Other Central American citizens arrived in Belize due to work, study or family reasons and then a deterioration of their country’s situation forced them to remain there even if they originally planned to return.

It is important, however, to point out that Belizeans don’t flee to the United States seeking protection: most are economic migrants, so the pretext of their possible deportation is not considered a valid argument against broadening the country’s refugee program.

Caravans from the Northern Triangle

Although the flow of people from this region to the United States is not new, “migrant caravans” broke out in 2018, characterized by their high numbers and relative organization, constituting an unprecedented circumstance.

So far, Belize has not been part of the caravans’ route, due to the lack of communications infrastructure in the country both logistically and transportationwise compared to the Mexico-Guatemala border, among other reasons. However, despite the country’s human and material shortages, the Belizean authorities have reinforced their border response to a possible crossing scenario in order to keep foreign migrants from entering their territory on their way to Mexico.

This tightening of border security in Belize has been carried out with American support from the embassy in Belmopan. Indirectly, the Mexican government has helped too, deploying around 6,000 members of the National Guard and various government agencies along the southern border. This context of greater migrational restrictions in Belize can hinder attention to those who have the legitimate right to claim refugee status, so UNHCR is working with the authorities to analyze the possibility of allowing more migrants into the country.

Public Policy Recommendations

Despite the “stability” of mass flow containment, the Mexico-Belize border has not jeopardized security in the region. However, it is fundamental to acknowledge that it is a highly vulnerable border, characterized by a high number of informal crossings both by land and across the river. For instance, there are numerous cases of people crossing on foot through the Corozal free zone; also in the Hondo river, through La Unión and Botes; other points are also hard to detect and mostly used for cocaine trafficking, possibly from Venezuela and Colombia, toward the north and marihuana and edibles toward the south. Additionally, Belize has few resources to face border insecurity, both in terms of customs and migration agents and technological equipment.
So far, as a result of restrictive migrational policies, some Latin American countries and organizations deem Belize as lacking solidarity in the face of this global phenomenon. It is sufficient to recall the aforementioned refusal to grant refugee status to those in need. Furthermore, in late 2015, Belize chose not to participate in a regional mechanism promoted by Mexico for Cuban nationals stranded in Costa Rica to be allowed to traverse Belize after Nicaragua’s refusal to grant them free passage through the country to the United States. These decisions are the result of a state policy focused on keeping Belize as isolated as possible from the migrational phenomena of the region and its real internal impossibility to face the mass movement of people in a region facing such upheaval.

In conclusion, and in order to establish policies that include Belize in the solution to the current migrational situation, it would be pertinent to create a three-part strategy from Mexico to reinforce the border:

1. Domestically, formalizing an inter-institutional work group among various federal public administration entities to coordinate a comprehensive policy for the Guatemalan and Belizean borders in order to strengthen Mexico’s strategic actions for protecting its southern border.

2. Bilaterally, insisting on the need for their Belizean counterparts to resume dialogue with Working Groups on Migration and Security as soon as possibly, identifying those responsible and drafting a specific timetable for continuous communication and information exchange (not just on the eve of the Mexico-Belize Binational Commission) in order to revitalize collaboration in both areas.

3. Multilaterally, strengthening coordination and dialogue with Belize in regional organizations like the Regional Migration Conference in order to strengthen its integration into this mechanism, which could constitute a way to effectively position Belize within the Central American sphere (beyond the Central American Integration System or Sistema de Integración Centroamericana, SICA), in order to promote more opportunities for collaboration regarding the migration phenomenon.

Lastly, although the migrational issue in Belize is not the same as in the Northern Triangle countries, its precarious economic and human development situation is somewhat similar. Therefore, the Belizean government would certainly benefit from the Comprehensive Development Program (Programa de Desarrollo Integrado, PDI) that the Mexican federal government and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comisión Económica para América Latina y El Caribe, CEPAL) announced. Rather than waiting for the situation to change and for a situation of social decomposition, Mexico should foresee its inclusion in schemes like this so Belize could become a relevant actor and partner in regional solutions.
Sovereignty and Deep Bilateral and Regional Cooperation as Two Sides of the Same Coin: Navigating the New Realities in the U.S.-Mexico Relationship to Mutual Advantage

Demetrios G. Papademetriou

Introduction: A Shock to American Politics and the Policy Status Quo

Thirty-two months into the Trump Presidency, most American elites are still trying to find their footing on how to respond effectively to the President’s endless barrage of initiatives—domestic and foreign. The fact that they, and much of the American public, are so offended by his personal behavior, inhibits sensible conversations about reconsidering certain components of the policy status quo, in such areas as immigration, trade, globalization and, more generally, “openness.”

The absence of policy introspection has had completely predictable results: surrendering “change initiatives” to the President and his (constantly changing) staff and exasperation—really, infuriation—with the Administration’s initiatives to the point of aversion to consider any merits these policies may have.

In addition, elite frustration has grown ever deeper as the world they knew—in fact, the world their predecessor elites fashioned and the US steered over the many decades since the end of WWII—has been crumbling, and the institutional and policy infrastructure that supported it is taken apart in one extraordinary policy pronouncement after another, typically through an endless series of Presidential tweets.
With the possible exception of trade, in no other policy area have these actions, and the manner (one of aggressiveness—neighboring-on-hostility) in which they are communicated, elicit greater resentment and divide the nation more than migration, and particularly migration from Mexico and Central America. A coarse and offensive campaign theme, but one calculated to disrupt, incite and energize different electoral communities from the very first moment Mr. Trump announced his candidacy for the US Presidency, attacking migration and immigrants from the region defined his quest and foreshadowed a refrain to which he would return time-and-again—and one that animates most reliably his political base.

Moreover, the tactic has had and continues to have the intended effect: disrupting the status quo and catching the President’s adversaries on their back foot and keeping them off balance. In fact, the more outrageous Mr. Trump’s remarks and policy proposals are, the more the President’s critics react in a completely predictable manner: defending the status quo and excoriating the president for the substance and manner of his “attacks” on immigrants.

That reaction, in turn, gives the President more ammunition with which to attack his detractors as wealthy, cosmopolitan and multicultural internationalists, that are reliably high-handed and indifferent about the effect high levels of immigration from Mexico and Central America have presumably had on those who had not benefited from openness and had not yet recovered from the ravages of the Great Recession of 2008. For Mr. Trump, the fact that most of that migration from the region is illegal makes it easier to portray his opponents as caring more for those that had broken and continue to break US immigration laws, than for the many US citizens and legal residents in large swaths of the US who were are still struggling to make ends meet.

Could there be a deeper philosophical and political fissure than this?

A Deeply Divided Country Unwilling to Confront Uncomfortable, and at times Disturbing, Realities

At the heart of this fissure, and the classic dialogue of the deaf it typically generates, lies the essence of many Americans’ intermittent romance with nativist populism and this President’s nationalist anthem of “Make America Great Again/America First.” It should not be surprising, then, that stemming illegal immigration from the region by building a wall (the President’s time-and-again political refrain and an

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1 The “influentials” inside and outside Washington, practically all NGOs, activist liberal judges in state and federal courts, and the governments of the many US States and cities that have charted a course of “near insurrection” against the Administration.

2 Globalization and trade have been typically interrelated targets for Mr. Trump.

3 A simplistic but poignant refrain that ignores the very complicated picture that research paints about such effects.
enduring favorite of his base) that “secures” the US Border with Mexico, and finding the authority and means to “close the loophole” of “frivolous” asylum claims, are the issues around which both US political parties have and will continue to shed much political blood.

There can be no dispute that the border has descended into chaos: the massive surge in apprehensions, which have been running higher than any year since 2007 (and more than double the 2018 rate), makes that clear. Much more important, however, is that migrants and their enablers have discovered the way to make the principal value of dense border controls, deterrence, almost irrelevant in controlling mass migration. Minors are brought all the way to the border and coached to present themselves to a US agent so that they can take advantage of the special protections for minors under an eleven-year-old law, the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA).

Migrants are “tutored” to be accompanied by a child and request asylum, effectively starting a process that will release them into the US until a court hearing on their request is scheduled—an event that takes several years. And in the ultimate mass antidote to border controls, coming in continuous waves so that they overwhelm the system and they are released into the US, once more, until a hearing can be scheduled. Clearly, these tactics couldn’t be any simpler or more effective; nor could the incentives for doing whatever is necessary to make it to the US border and ask for asylum be more perverse.

With this newest version of the “cat and mouse” game that has always been part of the border culture, the pressure on the Administration to stem the flow grew exponentially. And no measure of how broken the border and immigration politics in the US are is more telling than the language and narratives used by each side to describe the challenge. For Democrats, and particularly the ultra “progressives” that have hijacked the democratic party on this issue, and their open borders allies in the many activist communities, the situation at the border is a “humanitarian” crisis and somehow evidence of the utter failure of the President’s border policies.

For the President and his supporters, this is a genuine border and illegal immigration crisis that challenges US sovereignty to the core; it is also prima facie evidence that the rhetoric of his opponents in the US had emboldened would-be migrants from the Northern Triangle countries and beyond, and their facilitators (smugglers and activists alike) to “rush” the border. Their solution? The US Congress must “untie the President’s hands” by passing legislation allowing him the flexibility to reduce, dramatically, the likelihood of success by asylum applicants with questionable claims and thus take pressure off the border. As classic a case of talking past each other...
as any in a policy area in which the truth is always the victim.

Could the gulf between the two positions be any wider?

From Unilateralism to Regional “Cooperation”: How Power Asymmetry Works Today

Predictably, as the President’s political argument with his domestic critics grew, and the Administration flailed about for responses, grievous and intolerable mistakes were made—none more revolting than separating young children from their parents, followed at some distance by the apparently squalid conditions under which many border crossers are apparently held.

With the chaos at the border getting worse despite the constant upping of the enforcement ante, the backlog of pending cases before US immigration courts having reached one million, and the ever more distant prospect that the US Congress will untie the Administration’s hands and give it the flexibility to reduce the likelihood that asylum applicants would succeed, the President leaned hard on the region to help him build a cascading system of border controls that would in effect extend US borders to the base of the Northern Triangle nations and eventually to most of Central America.

Most foreign assistance to the region was cut because the Northern Triangle countries were not thought to be trying hard enough to somehow prevent their nationals from starting the long trek to the US in small and large groups (the so-called “caravans”) or otherwise allow their territory to be used as a channel for transiting migrants.

Furthermore, in a series of bilateral agreements, governments in the region have agreed to assist the US in numerous ways: Guatemala has accepted a designation as a Safe Third Country which allows the US to return non-Guatemalan migrants who passed through its territory on their way to the US to have their asylum claims heard there—an agreement that the Guatemalan Congress has not ratified yet.

El Salvador has agreed to an “Asylum Cooperation Agreement” that aims to accomplish the same outcome as the Guatemalan one without the safe third country designation; and the Honduras appears to be negotiating a similar accord. In return, the US is offering assistance with developing proper asylum determination systems and building their capacity to deliver it, and more interestingly, publicly unspecified promises of temporary work visas for nationals of each of these countries. Finally, and as is often the case with such deals, there are probably unwritten commitments that will not be known until later.

4 Nationals from each of the three countries would apparently be returned to the contiguous country to their north—through which they will have passed—and have their claim for asylum adjudicated there.

5 UNHCR, the UN Refugee agency, and IOM, the UN Migration Agency, have been contracted to assist these countries build the necessary systems.
It is Mexico, however, that as the central player in all this has come under intense pressure, so far unsuccessful, also to sign a Safe Third Country agreement with the US which would truly push out the US Southern Border to the Southern border of Mexico. Geography has meant that Mexico has had to contend with much more pressure, under threat of tariffs, to assist the US with controlling migrant flows from the region.

Specifically, and in a classic return to a familiar political terrain, Mexico has been pressured to do four things: (a) intercept Central Americans and other migrants at its southern border; (b) prevent those who nonetheless enter Mexico, and those facilitating their journey, from finding their way to the Mexico/US border; (c) “host” most of those who do make it to Mexico’s northern border to wait there until US authorities allow them to register their asylum claims through a “metering” process that allows only a few of them to do so at a time; and (d) once more, “host” those who have registered with US authorities until they are called to have their initial full hearings.

Putting One’s Own House in Order

In the meantime, the US Administration has been doing everything in its power to prevent migrants who cross into the US and ask for asylum from having a realistic chance, however small, to receive a positive determination.

Specifically, the standard for a preliminary determination whether they might succeed in their claim has been tightened from a “credible” to the much higher “reasonable” fear that they would be persecuted if they were returned to their countries. Together with the “metering” of new claimants and the expanding of the MPP along the entire US/Mexico border, these actions are already easing some of the chaos at the Border and the many challenges it has led to—from the acrimony about poor detention facilities to ever greater delays in hearings.

Finally, the Administration’s latest initiative, the setting up of tent courts so that hearings on removals and “withholding of deportations” can be expedited are expected to thin out the migrant population further and deter the lodging of more claims, frivolous or not.

Together with Mexico’s vigorous enforcement actions at and near its southern border, these initiatives are intended to have a very substantial effect on the pressure on the US Border and give US border authorities breathing room to get organized again and carry out their duties without the immense pressure, and mistakes, protracted emergencies typically cause.

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6 Presumably, reflecting the fact that US border authorities have been overwhelmed and the expectation that delays would discourage some migrants enough to accept IOM’s assistance to be returned to their homes.

7 Both of these last two actions are key components of the so-called MPP—the Migrant Protection Protocol program.

8 A standard that the US Supreme Court in a September 11, 2019, order has allowed to be applied pending completion of the review of its legality by lower courts.
While predictions about fast-changing facts on the ground are the very definition of analytical, let alone political, folly, the numbers have been decreasing dramatically: total apprehensions in August were about 51,000, 30 percent lower than July (about 72,000) and the second lowest number for the year so far (the February numbers were about 66,000).

Declaring “victory,” however, may not only prove premature given how adaptable migrants and their handlers typically are; it is also likely to be a pyrrhic one when one considers the costs. These include the “bullying” of countries in our neighborhood, some of which (particularly Mexico) have been reliable partners on things that matter a lot to the US; the effect it will certainly have in giving license to countries that are bearing the overwhelming proportion of the burden of protecting large proportions of the roughly 20.4 million refugees\(^8\) to push people back; and politically perhaps most consequentially for the Administration, the recoiling by average Americans about the undifferentiated way in which their country is treating asylum applicants, some of whom may indeed have lawful claims to protection.

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\(^8\)This is UNHCR’s count for 2018 and excludes the 5.5 million Palestinians who are always counted separately because they are covered by another UN Agency.
Much more important in the years ahead, however, may be that these policies do not prepare the US for the realities of tomorrow’s migration flows. These flows will only become larger, are found in every world region and are fast becoming the new norm. More to the point, they are all “mixed,” that is, they include persons who meet the requirements for protection of the UN Convention on Refugees and additional categories of protection that many states have willingly written into their lawbooks and have attained the status of international norms, at least among western democracies.

The overall lesson? When migration gets out of control, there are few, if any, winners.

Mirror Images: Living with Twenty-First Century Populism in North America

Enter Mexico. Ten months into the Lopez Obrador Presidency, several things have become clear, at least to observers on the US side of the common border. First among them is that Mr. Lopez Obrador is as focused on his base as Mr. Trump is on his and that both presidents seem to trust their “own instincts” more than those of some of their advisors. Furthermore, the Mexican President’s early morning press conference, during which he outlines the day’s priorities, may very well be the equivalent to Mr. Trump’s announcing what is foremost on his mind via his daily tweets.

Moreover, Mr. Lopez Obrador’s seeming disinterest in the broader realms of foreign affairs—beyond relationships and economic (and particularly development) cooperation with the Northern triangle countries—probably reflect his single-minded commitment to his vast base (his version of “Mexicans First”) and may not prove to be a passing whim. In that regard, this policy posture might not be all that different in substance, though not in style, than Mr. Trump’s apparent distaste for foreign adventures that can lead to new or deeper and costlier entanglements.

Finally, in both cases, political ideology seems to trump pragmatism, although the Mexican President shows some pragmatism when it is called for (such as the way in which he has handled US pressure) and in the US President’s case it is difficult to discern an ideology per se other than making decisions that will advance his prospects for reelection.

In pursuit of that goal, Mr. Trump has never deviated from the set of immigration core themes that have defined his Presidency—illegal immigration and building a border wall—though he has added to them moving away from the US system’s extraordinary reliance on family immigration that is unique among immigration countries.

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10 A classic attribute of successful populists with the typical autocratic bend that goes with the territory.
11 Typically, about two-thirds of permanent immigration.
In contrast, Mr. Lopez Obrador, when confronted with very large numbers of Central American migrants entering Mexico to get to the US border by any means available appears to have reflexively reverted to the familiar rhetoric of respecting the migrants’ human rights, a politically reliable refrain among Mexican politicians and many analysts going back dozens of years, but one also consistent with his ideology and a demonstration of empathy toward people fleeing poverty and insecurity.

What is more difficult to explain, is the extraordinary announcement that he had secured 40,000 jobs for them at the maquila sector on Mexico’s northern border. Some may see this announcement as similar in spirit to Mr. Trump’s talk during the electoral campaign and early in his presidency about all the manufacturing jobs he would somehow create or repatriate.\(^{12}\)

It is unclear whether this pronouncement has been a grand gesture of solidarity with people with a profile similar to that of his base, or simply an effort to avoid a quarrel with the US that might divert his attention from his agenda. What is clearer is that the initiative, if it indeed gets carried out, may presage political arguments with the US should slow and very slow economic and job growth in Mexico translate into larger illegal migration of Mexicans to the US.

The fact that Mexican apprehensions at the border have inched higher since 2017, when they stood at about 128,000, to about 152,000 in 2018 and 150,000 in the first 11 months of the 2019 US Fiscal Year, which ends on September 30th, is troubling, although it is worth bearing in mind that these numbers are a massive decrease from about 650,000 in 2008 and nearly half-a-million in 2009. More specifically, perhaps, these numbers are substantially lower than those in 2016; 191,000. When they are compared to the massive increase of Central American migrants, the Mexican numbers look even more modest.

In pushing Mexico to “share” in the responsibility for managing the common border,\(^{13}\) the US has in effect broken with the practice of the post-NAFTA era (and particularly the period since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the US) of constantly deepening the level of cooperation between the two countries in intercepting individuals known or suspected to have terrorist ties and/or ties with various “bad actors,”\(^{14}\) as well as trying to manage illegal immigration from Mexico and the region.\(^{15}\)

\(^{12}\) What makes Mr. Lopez Obrador’s statement particularly surprising is that it was made while Mexican economic growth has stalled and the steady employment gains by new entrants to the labor force, a dividend of Mexico’s demographic transition to near replacement fertility and slowly ageing population, may be in trouble.

\(^{13}\) A long-used and usefully supple term whose greatest value has been that it has meant slightly different things to each side. However, the Trump Administration has now defined it clearly and sharply.

\(^{14}\) Persons from outside the region, and particularly from certain countries of security concern to the US, as a result of the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks.

\(^{15}\) A task made easier by the Great Recession that destroyed millions of jobs, particularly in sectors of heavy concentrations by workers from the region.
Remarkably, this cooperation was hardly ever touted by either country. For the US, the numerical outcome of level of cooperation was never high enough while for Mexico, there was always enough buyer’s remorse about yielding to American pressure and violating its oft-repeated commitment to human rights.16

Of course, that was a totally different era, when migration stories by mainstream media were far less frequent, and well before the proliferation of multiple media forms and the cacophony of social media inundated every inch of the communication space and fueled an at times unhelpful partiality and predisposition in reporting and a predictable race among activists to sway media coverage to their advantage.17

Redefining Success: Finding the Sweet Spot of Cooperation that Meets Most of Each Country’s Priorities

So, what will the future hold in terms of meeting some of the most important priorities of both the US and Mexico, as well as of the Region? Clearly, the deepening cooperation between Mexico and the US, particularly the border and interior controls Mexico has instituted since June 2019, when it committed 20,000 national guardsmen and 5,000 policemen to the task, have had striking results. Taken together with the regional agreements the US has been entering into and the increasingly strident measures by the US Administration toward asylum claimants, they appear to be having a very substantial effect in deterring further mass migration to the US Border and thus reducing the political pressure on both the Mexican and US governments.

The September US Supreme Court order discussed earlier, together with the Court’s earlier decision allowing the Administration to divert $2.5 million from the Pentagon budget toward building Mr. Trump’s wall are likely to allow the US Government to gain greater control of the border while giving President Trump bragging rights that he “delivered” on two of his most prominent promises to his base.

Interestingly, if the US succeeds in “taming” the border crisis, it will also “save” Mr. Lopez Obrador from his earlier ideology-laden promises to migrants, which included offers to register and give legal temporary status to those who were interested in staying in Mexico and bring him more in line with Mexico’s position since the ratification of NAFTA: that migration should not be allowed to undermine the most important element of the bilateral relationship, namely, the economic and commercial one.

16 Even when the Administration offered testimony before the US Congress, and spoke of the increasingly organic cooperation between US and Mexican authorities on intelligence and enforcement matters large and small, their remarks hardly ever made headlines or had a lasting political effect.
17 A curse or blessing depending on one’s vantage point. The primary focus of migration stories during that earlier time typically dealt with the deep declines in apprehensions at the US Southern Border.
From a migration management perspective, of even greater value to Mexico may be that it will not become a major immigration country entirely the wrong way: through the back door, that is, through the decisions migrants make, rather than the front gate, in which government and society agree on who should be allowed to come to Mexico and the requirements they must meet in order to gain permanent status in and citizenship there. Failure to do so can fuel anxiety and create frictions and resentments that can play into the hands of politicians willing to exploit the issue for political gain, as well as contribute to continued tension with Washington.

But if real progress on is to be made on these very difficult issues, it is crucial to acknowledge a number of truths, however inconvenient or distressing they might be. First, it is far easier to be sympathetic toward unauthorized migrants when you have the luxury of operating a “turn-style” immigration system, that is, allow migrants to transit unimpeded through your country in the full knowledge that they are only interested in reaching another destination. When that destination is no longer accessible, and you become responsible for them, the policy reckonings become totally different. Second, Mexico is already a de facto safe third-country; this is what the sum-total of its cooperation with the US amounts to—from intercepting migrants at its Southern Border and preventing them from reaching its northern border, to offering temporary legal status to migrants from the region that apply for it.

Mr. Trump has had his border control win but if the consequence of Mexican cooperation is simply exporting the US border chaos to Mexico’s southern border, asking Mexican institutions to perform at a level that the US couldn’t handle—and do so with only a tiny fraction of the resources they need, growing xenophobia, and destabilizing our most important friend in the region, how long will that “win” endure?

Keeping score on who wins and who loses in that effort is far less important than cooperating with like-minded governments in addressing common challenges smartly and effectively. One can simply think of organic cooperation as a higher form of self-interest—plain and simple. Put even more simply, sovereignty and deep bilateral or regional cooperation should not be thought of as antithetical; instead, they should be seen as two sides of the same coin.

It is now also time for the US Congress to begin the arduous task it has been avoiding for far too long: doing its job in ways that demonstrate that it understands that who, why, how, and how many people try to get to US borders and beyond—will always evolve.

18 The lessons from Europe’s struggle to manage the reaction to unwanted mass migration should suffice to make this point.
19 This is the lesson that Greece and Italy learned the hard way during the recent EU migration crisis, and Mexico may already be on its way there.
20 As well as accepting the MPP program, and the automatic return of Mexican unaccompanied minors several years earlier.
21 To paraphrase German Chancellor Angela Merkle’s oft-repeated observation (and admonition), no single country can manage mass migration in all its complexities alone or only at the border.
As a result, controlling borders and illegal immigration effectively now and in the future requires strategies that encourage constant experimentation with and evaluation of new border management paradigms and make policy adaptation the highest priority and build the operational resilience that tomorrow’s mixed migration flows demand.\textsuperscript{22}

At the end of the day, if Congressional Democrats and well-intentioned critics of Mr. Trump’s border policies are as dismayed by the Administration’s behavior at the border and beyond as most surely are, they should pass legislation that demonstrates that they believe in the sovereign responsibility of the US to protect its borders and control illegal immigration, and fund the effort at the required levels.

They should also seriously reconsider, and narrow, the reach of legislation—and the courts—that have expanded the categories of persons and the circumstances under which migrants have a right to protection in the US; update the US permanent immigration system so that it strongly supports the competitiveness of US firms and, by extension, the broader US economy.

In addition, there would be a need to design and implement temporary worker programs that meet the demand for labor in sectors that have long been abandoned by US workers—and offer to invest deeply in US regions and US workers who have been left behind by globalization and trade liberalization.\textsuperscript{23}

Finally, it is imperative to agree on a set of tough but fair conditions under which the illegally resident population in our midst can receive legal status.\textsuperscript{24}

We know how to do these things. We also know how to advance US economic interests through smart immigration rules that protect US workers better while treating foreign workers who enter and work legally but temporarily with the dignity and respect they deserve.

A nation’s immigration policy, after all, must advance, first and foremost, a whole array of the society’s interests if it is to earn and keep the trust of the public—something that is now completely absent in the US. When that becomes the case, one can insist that true generosity toward those with legitimate claims to protection be again the north star of that policy.

Cooperation across the political aisle, however, must also be accompanied by bilateral and regional cooperation—a recognition that enforcement alone, however intense, will never be enough. Cooperation with friends in the region does not mean interests will be somehow align and power asymmetries will go away.

\textsuperscript{22} This is something that neither the US nor Mexican governments have shown either a particular propensity or interest in doing.

\textsuperscript{23} An offer that the President cannot refuse.

\textsuperscript{24} Starting with the DACA population and the longer-term holders of TPS (Temporary Protected Status) grants.
Nor should cooperation become purely transactional, whereby the one side makes demands and the other side just yields in return for some modest forms of compensation but does not make a serious effort to change the facts on the ground. To ensure that the inevitable trade-offs are as fair as they can be, Congressional leaders should sit down with the President, discuss, and agree on the investments in foreign policy capital and development assistance (directed especially on education, training, and personal security of all forms) that should be targeted to the region. And Congress should encourage and create incentives for this and subsequent administrations to demonstrate the patience to stay the course and accept that reducing unwanted migration will be a gradual process.25

Finally, much deeper cooperation across the political aisle on the broader border and migration issues can also sow the seeds for broader cooperation on other issues. Doable? Absolutely! Likely? Only if both political parties liberate themselves from the political shackles which their extremists have foisted upon them.

The biggest lesson yet, however, may be that cooperation, when respectful of each party’s legitimate priorities, yields much greater returns in controlling illegal migration from and through a region than unilateral actions that can actually destabilize a partner nation and thus defeat the entire purpose of cooperation.

25 A lesson our European friends learn every day as they struggle with the large-scale mixed migration flows of the past few years and prepare for those of the future.
Supremacist Hate, Elections and Cheapened Labor

Oscar Chacón

In early June this year, President Donald Trump threatened to impose punitive tariffs on Mexico in order to penalize it for an alleged failure to definitively contain the flow of Central American migrants seeking humanitarian protection in the United States.

With this unprecedented threat, the Trump administration sought to reaffirm Mexico’s role as an instrument of its own immigration policy, which the previous president, Barack Obama, assigned to former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto in the framework of what he called a humanitarian crisis in the summer of 2014, promptly leading to the implementation of the Mexican government’s Southern Border Plan. This agreement resulted in a dramatic turn in terms of the apprehension, detention and deportation of many people from Central America and other parts of the world traversing Mexican land in order to eventually reach the United States and settle there.

What Changed in 2017?

Despite the overwhelming trend in public opinion that believed Hillary Clinton would be president of the United States, it was Donald Trump who won the election and prompted a new dynamic regarding the treatment of foreigners residing in the country and the orientation of immigration policy.

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1 Adaptation of a paper that originally appears in issue 110 of Brujula Ciudadana. The original version is available at https://www.revistabrujula/b110-odio-supremaciablanco
Specifically, Donald Trump’s advisors were determined to not only expel those they considered undesirable but also reduce the arrival and settlement of similar individuals as much as possible. At the top of the “undesirable” list were those of Mexican or Latin American origin. However, the list also contains Africans, Arabs, Asians and any other national group that isn’t white and English-speaking. The political ideology behind this orientation is the racism that advocates the superiority and supremacy of the white, Anglo-Saxon race combined with the disdain for people seen as poor, filthy and sick.

The first measure taken by the Trump administration was banning the entry of people coming from countries whose population was Muslim. Despite massive protests and the fact that the ban was overturned by various lower courts, the government was mostly successful and got the Supreme Court to back a less inflammatory version, which reaffirmed the precept of presidential authority on issues like the national security of the United States.

However, the American government has increasingly focused on migration from Latin America, especially Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, whose migrant flows have increased throughout the last ten years. The Trump administration assumed Mexico would remain in its role as a proxy border and continuing, as it had since July 2014, to handle the arrest, detention and deportation of Central Americans.

It is very important to point out that the media’s depiction of growing numbers of people in transit toward the U.S. is no more than a fabrication by the Trump administration and its ideologues. Data from the Border Patrol itself shows these numbers at their lowest in the last forty years, at an average of around 450,000 arrests per year, compared to over 1.6 million in 1985 and 1999. This propaganda either deliberately supports the false narrative or is a blatant display of journalistic negligence.

**Why Did the Migration Containment Policy Fail?**

No measure implemented so far has directly, innovatively or efficiently addressing the factors that lead to the decision to emigrate. Besides, containment policies are unaware of the existence of an integrated labor market in the corridor that has increasingly linked Central America, Mexico and the U.S. in the past few decades. Rather than a novel, functional and humanitarian strategy, this policy has brought nothing but a human cost of death and punishment.

The logic of migration containment as the dominant content of American immigration policy is not new. It dates back to the immigration policy reform of 1986, which included among its main tenets the concept of reinforcing border control, even through
militarization, to discourage unauthorized border crossings. One effect of that approach was to push people seeking to cross the border unauthorized into much more dangerous, inhospitable regions of the long border between Mexico and the U.S., where they die after falling victim to the extreme heat or other risks.

Since the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City, the logic of containment was exponentially reinforced and the militaristic approach to border control was exacerbated.

**Collective Exoduses and the Arrival of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)**

Migration from Central America took a dramatic turn in late 2018. After experiencing various hardships along the way in the last 10 years, such as extortion, robbery, rape, kidnapping and even death, the situation has worsened now that it is combined with harsher circumstances in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, whose social and economic systems are exclusionary and where basic welfare is denied to increasing amounts of people. In addition,
growing patterns of political instability and abuse of power, along with escalating levels of violence and insecurity mostly by violent non-governmental actors (organized crime and gangs) are also present.

In this delicate context, Central Americans chose to migrate collectively in the form of caravans. The first, assembled in early October 2018, was followed by several others. This migrational modality does not actually constitute an increase in migrants, but merely the collective manifestation of the combined daily flow of 1,200-1,500 people leaving their country. This happened during the last days of Enrique Peña Nieto’s presidency and the triumph of AMLO.

The new Mexican administration initially responded by not hindering migrants, granting humanitarian transit permits and emphasizing the urgency of addressing the issues that caused the Central American exodus. This did not sit well with Donald Trump’s administration, which expected it to at least continue the previous government’s work. Confrontation with Trump was inevitable.

**Trump’s Imposition in Mexico and the Region**

As expected, the Trump administration began pushing for unilateral measures disguised as bilateral agreements with Mexico. Since the return of the apprehension, detention and deportation policy in Mexico’s southern border, which included forcing Central American asylum seekers to await results in Mexico and treating the state as a de facto safe third country for asylum-seeking effects, the American government was determined and imposing.

After the threat of punitive tariffs on Mexican exports to the U.S., the Mexican government hesitated even more when it came to different treatment for Central Americans and other citizens who wanted to cross the country. Mexico also ignored the internal dynamic generated by this threat within the U.S., where the Chamber of Commerce and other corporate interest groups questioned the administration’s wrong and dangerous use of tariffs as a way to exert pressure in other spheres of public and international policy. The Mexican government, through its Foreign Secretary, Marcelo Ebrard, signed an agreement accepting collaboration in migration issues aligned with the American domestic agenda, which consolidated and amplified the Obama administration’s 2014 strategy.

However, the Trump administration continued to weave its proxy border strategy through modifying its domestic policy by reinterpreting the asylum seeking process and through ridiculous safe third country agreements between the U.S. and Central American countries. In practical terms, this agreement already exists between the two countries, even if Mexico denies it. In the case of Guatemala, a country whose citizens flee abroad by the hundreds, where human
rights violations are still part of the national reality and where human rights advocates are increasingly prosecuted, the recent signing of an agreement like this is simply ridiculous. The only explanation is the Guatemalan president’s eagerness to win the favor of the Trump administration and therefore minimize the risk of future extradition resulting from the corruption that has prevailed in Guatemala in recent years, probably linked to organized crime. Unfortunately, Mexico’s submission to the racist, xenophobic and aporophobic logic of the Trump administration will make it easier for Central American governments to cooperate.

**Hate toward Foreigners as a Factor of Electoral Mobilization**

Regardless of other factors, the anti-Mexican and anti-Latino message has undeniably been most profitable for Donald Trump. From the day he announced his presidential run in 2015 to the official announcement of his reelection campaign in July, his disdain for immigrants and refugees in general, but particularly for these groups, has fueled electoral mobilization and kept President Trump’s most faithful followers motivated.

En route to the November 2020 election, Donald Trump’s campaign team has obviously defined the anti-Mexican and anti-Latino message as a key element especially directed at his white voters in economically oppressed, often rural, contexts. They represent most of the voters, in some cases, by far, in key states for a presidential election. This explains why the anti-foreigner message plays such a central role in Donald Trump’s reelection bid.

**The Labor Aspect of Migration**

Aside from the Trump administration’s stinging attack on immigrants and efforts to redefine immigration policy (apparently in order to reduce the number of people entering the U.S. with or without visas, especially from Latin America), the American workforce is undergoing significant changes.

First, baby boomers, born after World War II, are now retiring. Since January 1st, 2011, an average of 10,000 boomers every day turn 65, the average age at which Americans can choose to retire. This trend will prevail until 2030. Around 75 million people will have become of retirement age by then.

Second, American society has begun a process of demographic shrinking. Until the end of the last decade, the U.S. was characterized by decreasing birth rates (births per 1,000 women) among whites, compensated with rates above 3 especially among women of Asian and Latin American origin.

However, throughout the past decade, birth rates have dropped across all ethnic and racial groups. The
most recent data show a combined birth rate under 2, with 2.1 being the minimal replacement rate for a society according to most demographers.

Third, the involuntary unemployment rate, often known just as unemployment rate, is at its lowest in the last few decades. The U.S. Department of Labor’s report from July shows a 3.7% unemployment rate. This macro-economic report is combined with a slight improvement in salaries, which have been mostly static in the last 30 years.

All this suggests that both immigration policy and the treatment of foreigners residing in the country counter the dominant trend in the American workforce: its cheapening. Given the unquestionable weight of corporate interests in the United States and their voracious hunger for higher profit rates, this could be the beginning of a turning point in the role of immigration in labor. More specifically, the repressive campaign the Trump administration has embarked on against immigrant populations could be the prelude to a massive proposal on temporary employment visas for foreigners. It is important to prepare for this possible scenario and have proposals ready from the standpoints of rights and obligations. It is crucial to prevent a scenario like this, characterized by 21st-century slavery.

**Conclusions**

The losers after these recent changes have undoubtedly been those who continue to search for a safe and prosperous place to find a better life for themselves and their families. The dominant schemes regarding migration flows are devoid of common sense and basic ethical and moral principles that ought to place people’s wellbeing at the center of public policy.

Besides, there are no innovative, robust efforts to end the trend that has characterized the lives of most residents of Central American countries, Mexico and the United States: increasing wealth generation and concentration. This formula is already leading to public anti-foreigner expressions in Mexico, and even in Central America.

It is crucial to remember that no one emigrates without authorization because they want to. The only reason people need to flee their country is that the ruling class has failed to take on a brave, visionary role consistent with prioritizing the rights and dignity of its people, drafting national public policy linked to the international sphere that will actually make a safe, regulated and orderly migrational reality possible.
The Current State of the Southern Border
More than Just a Border

Marco A. Alcázar

Initial Perspective

A little over 10 years ago, a distinguished colleague of mine whose friendship I continue to be honored by and I were tasked with drafting a paper to identify two issues of the utmost relevance for the future of Mexico. We came to the following conclusions: corn production for human consumption and relations with Central America. I cite this now because there is more than just a border between our country and that region, comprised of seven countries, which I will now attempt to illustrate.

1. Limits, Political Divisions, Populations and Crossings

Recent events regarding migration have been covered practically every day in the media since last October, and most of the written and graphic information about them has fueled the notion that Mexico’s southern border is merely the Suchiate and the city of Tapachula. The idea that it lies in the middle of the jungle and it is impossible to know which state an individual is located in has also become widespread.

Given the importance of the border itself and the region as a whole for Mexico and its neighbors, Guatemala and Belize, it is indispensable to provide information to avoid the persistence of reduction and the idea mentioned above.

The boundary between Mexico and Guatemala stretches over 959.6 kilometers, 386 of which are along the Suchiate and Usumacinta rivers and 572.9 of which correspond to lines drawn by both governments in 1882.

It is important to stress that the geodesic lines, parallels and meridians in the Treaty on the Delimitation of the Frontier between Mexico and Guatemala were defined

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1 María Luisa González Manjarrez.
2 In the original Spanish paper] the author chooses to write the country’s name in its native version, Belize rather than Belice, as supported by the July 6th, 1993 International Boundary and Water Commission (Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas, CILA) between Mexico and Belize, signed by both countries.
3 Source: Mexican Section of CILA Mexico–Guatemala.
using the astronomical methods available at the time, and they are still in place today in accordance with the treaty.

Mexico has 22 border municipalities: 18 in Chiapas (one of them being Tapachula), 2 in Tabasco and 2 in Campeche; on the Guatemalan side, there are 24, spread along 5 departments: San Marcos (6), Huehuetenango (9), Quiché (1), Alta Verapaz (1) and Petén (7). The total population of the 46 municipalities on both sides is 1,420,339.4

The city of Tapachula is over 9 kilometers from the border in a straight line and 40 kilometers on the highway from the formal crossing between Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, and Tecún Umán, Guatemala.

There are 8 official crossings the two governments have agreed on: Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán (Dr. Adolfo Robles bridge), Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán (Engineer Luis Cabrera bridge), Talismán-El Carmen, Cd. Cuauhtémoc-La Mesilla, Carmen Xhan-Gracias a Dios; Nueva Orizaba-Ingenieros, Frontera Corozal-Bethel and El Ceibo (both sides).

Originally, in the late 19th century, a few monuments were constructed on key elevated points along the land border as markers. Between 1994 and 2007, after 13 years of arduous work, the demarcation using intermediate international monuments between Chiapas and the Guatemalan departments of San Marcos, Huehuetenango and Quiché was finished. It was done in order to ensure that wherever they were along the land border, people would be able to see at least two of them in opposite directions, and therefore unable to claim they did not know which side they were on.

Throughout those 13 years, the Mexican Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas, CILA) built 948 monuments, and the Guatemalan one built 649. Each and every one of them was checked and approved by the Commission and by both governments.

The formal commitment to respect a 10-meter-wide space along the border, 5 meters on each side, is a permanent practice. This gap can even be seen from satellites, and has thus allowed for the full exercise of authority within each country’s jurisdiction for the benefit of national sovereignty, erasing any possible doubt when crossing from one country to the other whether by land or by air. This may well be the world’s clearest boundary.

Mexico’s border with Belize is 288 kilometers long, 13.7 of which correspond to the Garbutt meridian and the rest to the Blue Creek river, the Hondo river, Chetumal Bay and the Boca Bacalar Chico canal. There are two formal crossings between Subteniente López and Santa Elena.

There are 3 municipalities on the Mexican side and 3 districts on the Belizean side. The total population of the border area is 351,276.6

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4 Sources: Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) and Guatemala’s National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE).
5 The Mexican side is written first, and then the Guatemalan side.
6 Sources: CILA Mexico-Belize, INEGI, Statistical Institute of Belize.
2. Border Transit

Although authorities from both countries are present at the eight aforementioned formal crossings, CILA Mexico-Guatemala, through rounds carried out by agents from both countries, identified 52 irregular vehicular crossings in 2014, which increased to 61 in 2018.

Through these irregular vehicular crossings, outside authority control, all kinds of vehicles cross over, including trucks carrying goods, livestock, wood, endemic species and varied merchandise. They may also carry people into Mexican territory bypassing our immigration laws, violating the country’s national sovereignty.

In the case of the Belizean border, CILA has located two informal crossings, one along the Blue Creek between La Unión and Blue Creek and another on the Garbutt Meridian between Pioneros del Río and Neudstadt.

It is estimated that up to 30 thousand Belizeans cross into Chetumal, Quintana Roo, to acquire merchandise and return home in a single weekend. This commercial dynamic is not studied between Guatemala and Mexico, although that number may be higher even by a daily count.

It is important to recall that as a result of the Guatemalan Civil War (1981–1983) 46 thousand Guatemalan refugees crossed the border, and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, COMAR), with the help of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), moved those who had set up about 90 campsites in Chiapas to regular settlements in Campeche and Quintana Roo.

According to undocumented estimates, a few thousand Salvadorans reached Mexico during those years and spread across the capital and west of the country without forming clearly identifiable nuclei. For historical- anthropological reasons, Salvadorans are more easily assimilated into Mexico than other Central Americans. Fun fact: the department of San Salvador in El Salvador has a municipality called “Mejicanos,” which, according to the 2007 official census, had 140,000 residents.

3. Mexican Action

3.1 So Far

It is necessary to offer data on border infrastructure in which the Mexican government has invested time, study and funds.

First, the Ingeniero Luis Cabrera bridge on the Suchiate river between Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán was completely built using the Mexican government’s technical and financial resources. Economically, it is extremely important to clearly state that over 90% of regular trade to Central and South America leaves Mexico through that bridge. Given the seismic potential and heavy storms in the area, the fact that it lacks binational care is preoccupying: Mexico alone handles its conservation, maintenance and protection.
This is not the only case where the Mexican government has relevantly contributed to its communication with neighboring states. The facilities and equipment on the Mexican side for fiscal and migration purposes at the Nueva Orizaba-Ingenieros formal crossing were completed in 2015, whereas the Guatemalan side has yet to define the corresponding projects.

A similar situation occurs at the El Ceibo formal crossing, where Guatemalan authorities continue to operate out of provisional facilities, courtesy of Mexico. It is also worth noting that the 30-kilometer paved road in Guatemala between El Ceibo and Las Margaritas, close to Flores and facilitating transit toward the Tikal archaeological area, was built by Mexico.

In the case of Belize, in order to solve the bottleneck at the Subteniente López-Santa Elena formal crossing, the Mexican side built a new bridge and a paved road between the two points.
3.2 Failed, Lacking and Possible

3.2.1 Operationally
As a result of the migrational situation that causes so much concern nowadays, the contrast between the aforementioned investments and the absence of operational capacity for managing the border area is worth mentioning.

Essentially, with the exception of decrees like the one in July 2014 that led to the creation of the Coordinating Office for Comprehensive Attention to Migration at the Southern Border (Coordinación para la Atención Integral de la Migración en la Frontera Sur), that and other regional governmental offices lacked and continued to lack sufficient resources to carry out their intended tasks.

3.2.2 Academia
A look at the programs in Mexico’s main academic centers reveals that, with the slight exception of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM), there are no courses or subjects dedicated to studying Central America. This is the case of the Metropolitan Autonomous University (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, UAM), the Mexico Autonomous Institute of Technology (Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, ITAM) and the Monterrey Institute of Technology (Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey). The main public universities in Chiapas, Tabasco Campeche and Quintana Roo don’t have them either.

As for the UNAM, there is a Latin American Studies graduate program which contains historical studies of Central America in the 19th century and of Revolution and Democracy in the region in the 20th century, as well as seminars on “multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity” in studies related to “Time and Space in Latin America: Factors, Legacies and Potentialities of Population Movements, History and Geography” and “Globalization and Migration Flows in Latin America,” but nothing specifically about Central America.

The Southern Border College (Colegio de la Frontera Sur, ECOSUR), with campuses in four border states, is the exception. It recently published, with the Gilberto Bosques Center for International Studies (Centro de Estudios Internacionales Gilberto Bosques, CEIGB) of the Senate an important collection of collaborations titled “Realities of the Southern Border” (Realidades de la frontera sur).

At any rate, it is still remarkable that the authorities of the College of Mexico (Colegio de México, COLMEX) claim that “with the new migration flow, Mexico is facing an unprecedented situation.” It would be quite an achievement for the COLMEX to have, among its other prestigious study centers, one for Latin American studies with a branch dedicated to Central America.

It would also be interesting to know if any of the many Central American institutions sporting the title of university or any of its 130 campuses has a program for Mexico or Mexican studies.

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7 Realidades de la frontera sur: Compendio de colaboraciones de ECOSUR con el CEIGB [Realities of the Southern Border: Collection of Collaborations by ECOSUR and the CEIGB]. December 2018-June 2019.
8 (Reforma, September 8th, 2019).
3.2.3 Infrastructure

50 kilometers away from both the international crossing between Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán and the urban area of Tapachula is Puerto Chiapas, operated by the corresponding Comprehensive Port Authority (Autoridad Portuaria Integral, S.A. de C.V.), which is part of the Mexican port system under the Secretariat of Communications and Transportation (Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes) and its General Coordination of Ports and Merchant Marine (Coordinación General de Puertos y Marina Mercante).

The current administration has estimated the need of public investment for solving the problems faced by the facilities in Puerto Chiapas in order to make it the base port for reactivating the merchant marine program in the southern Pacific littoral and identified perspectives for attracting heavy private investment.

In order to get an idea of the tasks that need to be carried out and lay the groundwork for the financial self-sufficiency of the Puerto Chiapas API, a few examples suffice: rehabilitating facilities damaged by the 2017 earthquake, emergent maintenance dredging, restructuring and adjusting the cruise pier, protection work for pier No. 1, in short, general maintenance of API facilities and courtyards. The corresponding budgets have already been drafted. The initial amount that is to be invested is close to 200 million pesos.

Regarding private investment initiatives, prominent ones include: broadening the capacity for banana exportation, building and operating ducts for transporting petroleum products in order to provide a trustworthy supply for Pemex using a secure pier for unloading tankers, setting up a fishing pier, partially granting rights and obligations (in accordance with the law) for managing various fluids including both hydrocarbons and petrochemicals and the capacity to export palm oil from the seven extracting plants currently operating in the region. It could even make exporting livestock (specifically cows) to Asia feasible. Private investment may be of around 850 or 900 million dollars.\textsuperscript{9}

A functional Puerto Chiapas could, in principle, allow for a systemic connection to the ports of Quetzal (Guatemala), Acajutla (El Salvador), San Juan del Sur (Nicaragua) and Caldera (Costa Rica), without ruling out passage through the Panama Canal toward other destinations.

The possibility of part of the funds the Mexican government has offered Central America being used to strengthen port infrastructure as mentioned above could lead to an attractive synergy.

If it is done in a paced, collaborative way by the government and the private sector, it would be an economic catalyst for much of the border area on the Mexican side and for a greater, more efficient integration of commercial—and even tourism—flows, with the additional benefit of diverting some of the cargo traffic that is currently

\textsuperscript{9} Source: General Coordination of Ports and Merchant Marine, Secretariat of Communications and Transportation.
concentrated on the Ingeniero Luis Cabrera bridge and simplifying customs processes that are necessary for passage from one country to the other.

4. In conclusion

It is clear that the scope of the current migrational situation, initially encouraged by the this administration, has taken the authorities—as well as an ill-informed public opinion—by surprise. Academia shares their ignorance regarding the characteristics of the border, general events in Mesoamerica and, of course, the globalization of migrational processes.

The information these notes offer maybe too exhaustive, but its purpose is to provide elements for the reader to be able to develop a clear notion of the characteristics of a region that is home to almost 1.8 million people in three different countries, a region that is of the utmost importance for our domestic and regional interests given the social and economic processes that can and do take place within it.

September 2019
During the last year and a half, the border between Mexico and Guatemala has been the object of particular attention due to the new transnational migrational flows, given their unprecedented size and organization. These flows have sparked various public policy responses, from facilitating transit to militarizing the border, and have had a significant impact not only regionally but also—and above all—at the local level in border municipalities.

This contribution intends to discuss the local effect of the new migration flows and the political responses they have elicited. The text is based on field observations and interviews with key actors in Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Tapachula, Chiapas in August 2019, and is based on four interconnected discussions: the local dimension, the migrational emergency, government policies and their effects on Tapachula, the heart of the cross-border region formed by the Soconusco, Chiapas and western Guatemala.

**The Local Level**

The main axes of cross-border life in the Soconusco and western Guatemala are commerce and the labor market. Regarding the former, much of commercial activity takes place in Tapachula. Food, beverages, clothing, shoes and household and personal hygiene items are the main goods for sale, and many of them are exported to
Guatemala thanks to the copious amounts of Guatemalan visitors who, bring them into their country in their private automobiles or rented school buses,¹ usually through the formal vehicular crossing between Talismán and El Carmen.

The other branch of cross-border commerce is characterized by informality. The people of Tecún Umán on the Guatemalan side and Ciudad Hidalgo on the Mexican side engage in small-scale contraband, crossing the Suchiate river in both directions on precarious wooden rafts. Although it is difficult to quantify the total value of this trade, it is acknowledged that the local economy greatly depends on it.²

In both cases, the Regional Visitor Card (Tarjeta de Visitante Regional, TVR) plays a key role. It is given by the Mexican government to Guatemalans who come into the border states for up to 7 days, regularizing the migrational status of tourists and border residents and therefore helping invigorate cross border life and economy.

As for the cross border labor market it is mainly structured around the participation of temporary agricultural workers from Guatemala in coffee farms and mango, papaya and banana plantations, mainly in the Soconusco. Additionally, there are female household employees from San Marcos who cross the border into Tapachula every day, men employed in construction work or carrying heavy loads and street vendors of both genders who cross over to the Mexican side of the border for work.³

In order to regularize temporary agricultural workers who have an employment contract, the Mexican government offers the Visiting Border Worker Card (Tarjeta de Visitante Trabajador Fronterizo, TVTF), which is valid for one year. It is, however, convenient to point out that many temporary agricultural workers cross the river into Mexico with no documents and others use the TVR because they don’t have a contract, just like many household employees, carriers and construction workers.

**Migrational Emergency**

Elected in support of his anti-immigrant project, Donald Trump was sworn in as president of the United States in January 2017. In April of that same year, the migrant via crucis, a Central American migrant march whose aim was to raise awareness of the risks and abuses faced by migrants headed for the United States, left the Tecún Umán-Ciudad Hidalgo border crossing, just as it had in 2011.

Once it reached Mexico City, for the first time, one of the groups in the march kept walking toward Tijuana, where

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1 Interview with Hernán Betanzos, vice-president of the Board of Directors, National Chamber of Commerce, Services and Tourism (Cámara Nacional de Comercio, Servicios y Turismo, CANACO), Tapachula. Tapachula, August 23rd, 2019.

2 Ibid.

about 100 people crossed over to the United States and requested asylum. Caravans as a modus operandi of transnational migration where thus inaugurated, based on mass organization, international awareness and the increasingly explicit purpose of entering the United States.

The first caravan was followed by others in October 2017 and March and October 2018; the latter had amassed over 7,000 people by the time it reached the border with Mexico and got massive amounts of media attention, since it became one of the central points of the Republican Party and president Trump’s campaign in the midterm elections held in November.

Between October and December 2018, there were four smaller caravans, and in January 2019, under a new Mexican government, two groups that had about 2,500 migrants between them arrived. According to the Secretariat of the Interior the amount of migrants that entered Mexico between January and March 2019 rose to close to 300,000.

**Policies**

At first, the American and Mexican governments reacted very differently to the challenges posed by the migrant caravans. Whereas the former adopted a “zero tolerance” policy to irregular immigration, the Mexican government maintained its traditional stance of support for the migrant population, although under increasing amounts of pressure. Therefore, in response to the great caravan of October 2018, president Peña Nieto’s administration tightened police control at the southern border and launched the “You Are Home” (Estás en tu casa) program, which offered temporary employment and access to shelter and healthcare for migrants who wanted to be part of it.

On December 1st, 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was sworn in as Mexico’s president. During his campaign, candidate López Obrador had proposed formalizing Central American migrants and employing them in various development projects he had planned to undertake in the southeast. The chance came with the January caravan: in order to formalize the newcomers, the Mexican government announced the creation of the Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons (Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias, TVRH) which allowed its holder to work and be paid a salary. Between January 17th and February 11th, 2019, the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INAMI) handed out 13,270 TVRHs.

Since December 2018, the American government had announced the implementation of Migrant Protection Protocols, a program through which “certain foreign

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5 Ibid, p. 9.
6 Mathieu Tourliere, “No hubo una ‘caravana madre, pero sí madrecitas’: Olga Sánchez Cordero” [‘There Was No Mother Caravan, but There Were Little Mothers’], Proceso, April 23rd, 2019.
8 INAMI, “Finaliza programa emergente de emisión de Tarjetas de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias” [Emergent Program to Grant Visitor Cards for Humanitarian Reasons Ends], February 12th, 2019.
individuals entering or seeking admission to the U.S. from Mexico - illegally or without proper documentation\(^8\) could be sent back to Mexico while they waited for their immigration proceedings to be completed. Despite the Mexican government’s emphatic refusal, Mexico was de facto becoming a safe third country.

In late May 2019, President Trump announced the imposition of a general 5% tariff on all Mexican exports, which would gradually increase to a maximum of 25% unless Mexico managed to contain the arrival of Central American migrants to the southern border of the United States. The Mexican government responded by committing to stop the migrant flow by reinforcing its security controls, mainly by deploying the newly created National Guard to the southern border. Mexico thus replaced its welcoming policy toward Central American migration with one of containment, suiting the interests of the United States.

**Local Effects**

The National Guard was deployed on the southern border on June 10th, 2019. At the time this paper is written, there are 45 checkpoints where the INAMI and the police or the National Guard work together.\(^9\)

Between January and July this year, 128,485 people—10,000 fewer than in all of 2018—were presented to the Mexican migration authority. 56,305 of them were detained in Chiapas and 34,708 (27% of the country’s total) in Tapachula alone.\(^10\) The rise in the number of detentions and of asylum seekers in Mexico resulted in an overflowing of the migration and asylum systems.

The inability to manage the formalization and asylum requests of the migrant population not only increases their vulnerability, but also generates social tensions at the local level. The lines of up to 600 migrants around the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, COMAR) in Tapachula, the outbursts of violence that have taken place at the Siglo XXI migrant station when it has been overcrowded and the frequent displays of migrants outside that station have led to important sectors of Tapachulan society “having had enough”\(^12\) and engaging in xenophobic and even racist displays.\(^13\)

A certain perception of insecurity attributed to the presence of migrants in Tapachula has arisen, promoted by some local media. According to a representative of the city’s Chamber of Commerce, that perception makes shop owners, for instance, close their shops earlier;\(^14\) however, statistics show that crime not only has not risen during the last year, but has actually decreased.\(^15\)

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\(^9\) Interview with an INAMI official, Tapachula, August 23rd, 2019.
\(^11\) Interview with an INAMI official, cit.
\(^12\) Interview with Kristin Riis Halvorsen, chief of UNHCR in Tapachula. Tapachula, August 23rd, 2019.
\(^13\) Interview with Hernán Betanzos, cit.
\(^14\) See Semáforo Delictivo, Chiapas. Available at chiapas.semaforo.com.mx
The migration emergency also impacted the cross-border labor market. Since March 2019, the INAMI decided to use the plastic of TVRs for TVRHs and, until further notice, to suspend the renovation and first issuance of TVRs for Guatemalan citizens. This affected many border workers who used to cross into Mexico with a TVR and now, due to the impossibility of entering Mexico, have lost their jobs.

Local commerce and cross border may be the most impacted sectors by the application of the migration policies drafted in central Mexico. On the one hand, informal workers like drivers, waiters and street vendors who work on both sides of the Suchiate have witnessed a drop in their activity—and their income—since the National Guard was posted on the Mexican side of the river on July 3rd, 2019. Even though they were instructed to only detain rafts carrying people, not merchandise, the presence of this militarized police force around the

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16 Mynor Toc, “México suspende renovación y trámite de primera Tarjeta de Visitante Regional (TVR) a guatemaltecos en Chiapas” [Mexico Suspends Renovation and Issuance of first Regional Visitor Card (TVR) for Guatemalans in Chiapas], Prensa Libre, August 9th, 2019.
17 Interview with a Secretariat of Foreign Affairs official, Tuxtla gutiérrez, August 22nd, 2019.
river discourages both those who intend to cross into Mexico without documents and those who wish to carry goods into or out of the country.

On the other hand, although some social sectors resent the presence of migrants in the city, small local businesses have benefited from them. This was the case with the caravans, and now with Cuban migrants, who arrive with dollars and spend them in Tapachula. A similar phenomenon occurs with asylum seekers who consume local goods and services with the funds given to them by the UNHCR during their admission process.¹⁸

Lastly, cross-border commerce and tourism have been negatively affected by various factors related to the migrational situation in the region and the responses it has elicited from the governments involved. First, the image of insecurity constructed around the presence of the migrant population in Tapachula has affected the attitude of Guatemalan tourists: progressively fewer have come to the city in the last few months. Second, existing obstacles for the renovation of the TVR have also affected Guatemalan tourists and, therefore, the tourism and services sector in the Soconusco, which greatly depends on the Guatemalan influx.

### In conclusion

These new migrant flows have had a significant impact on all levels: international, national and local. The policies implemented by the Mexican government to address them since March 2018 have considerably varied across time and have not always had the desired effect: at a local level, cross-border life, especially in Tapachula, has been affected significantly by the measures dictated from the capital. On the one hand, these policies have pressured local migration and asylum services without having given them the necessary resources to face the emergency; on the other, they have upset the economic activity that depends on cross-border comings and goings, jeopardizing both the migrants and the residents of the border area.

¹⁸Interviews with Humberto Salcedo, director of CANACO Tapachula August 23rd, 2019 and Kristin Riis Halvorsen, cit.
In the context of the humanitarian crisis due to the mass exodus of people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras traversing Mexico on their way to the United States, there is talk of addressing the roots of the issue. This text analyzes the structural power factors sustaining the brutal inequality and systemic violence that lead to forced migration and prevent these countries from being more habitable for their own citizens.

1. Development: The Antidote to Forced Migration?

Development as an antidote to forced migration is the thesis put forth by the Mexican government to address the structural causes that make people abandon their homes in the Mesoamerican region, which includes southern and southeastern Mexico (MX), El Salvador (SV), Guatemala (GT) and Honduras (HN).¹

For this purpose, on his first day in office—December 1st, 2018—President Andrés Manuel López Obrador asked the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC—Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL) to draft a proposal. On May 20th, 2019, at Palacio Nacional, the ECLAC presented a Diagnosis, Analysis and Recommendations document for a new form of development⁹ which implied devising new strategies to reduce inequality in the framework of a great environmental boost.

The ECLAC’s proposal does not directly aim to reduce migration, but to increase welfare. At any rate, migration is expected to be increasingly formal, rather than mostly informal or undocumented.

That document ought to be complemented with implementation in each country. The Mexican government itself acknowledges that, as has been the case during the past few decades, the containment and discouragement strategy has proven ineffective against forced migration. It therefore seeks to address the structural reasons for which people leave their homes.

However, the governments of all four countries have been gravely unable to diagnose their respective economies. The Esquipulas II process launched a new scheme of political coexistence but did not alter the economic model. The challenge, as pointed out by the ECLAC, mostly regards the growth model and the development strategy.

At the root of the Central American exodus lie a brutally extractive economic model and a states besieged by de facto authorities. All three countries are among the poorest in Latin America, and yet are home to hundreds of millionaires. In 2015 the consulting firm Wealth-X claimed that in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador there were 610 ultra-rich people whose accumulated wealth reached 80 billion dollars.³ Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran migrant workers in the United States send nine, six and seven billion dollars’ worth of remittances home respectively, totaling 22 billion dollars, which far exceeds the amount received through foreign aid (see tables 1 and 2).

According to the director of nomada.gt, “14 family corporations control almost half of Guatemala’s GDP.”⁴ Similarly, in broad sectors of El Salvador, Honduras and even Mexico, development initiatives depend on issues of power, inclusion and exclusion. The three Central American countries and Mexico have significant free trade agreements with the United States, so capital promotes trade liberalization but restricts the mobility of migrant workers. With disturbing frequency, successive American

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administrations (led by both Republican and Democratic presidents) “supported a ‘selfish property-owning minority’ and an ‘indifferent middle class intransigently protecting their privileges’ and ignored the ‘limitless misery’ of a majority that often ‘lives on the margin of subsistence.’”

In this context, the problem isn’t the lack of money to change the economic, political and social landscape in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras: it is, above all, the refusal to change the power structure. Brutal inequality, deep-rooted racism, unpunished corruption and systematic violence are the prevailing power structure. The privileged individuals that benefit from it have no incentive to accept, let alone initiate, any change in the status quo.

### 2. The Social Appropriation of Development and Migrational Governance

Both the Human Development Index (HDI) and the indicators corresponding to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda present a dreadful picture of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and, in some cases, even Mexico.

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| **Table 1: Net Amount Received as Official Development Aid (millions of dollars)** |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| Guatemala | 4,524 | 4,524 | 5,379 | 5,838 | 6,573 | 7,471 | 8,449 | 9,491 |
| Honduras | 2,811 | 2,811 | 3,098 | 3,370 | 3,668 | 3,864 | 4,323 | 4,777 |
| El Salvador | 3,644 | 3,644 | 3,966 | 4,160 | 4,257 | 4,562 | 4,996 | 5,388 |

**Source:** World Bank

| **Table 2: Personal Remittances Received (millions of dollars)** |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| Guatemala | 378 | 304 | 496 | 279 | 411 | 265 | 366 | n.a. |
| Honduras | 618 | 566 | 625 | 606 | 540 | 412 | 441 | n.a. |
| El Salvador | 277 | 219 | 169 | 98 | 89 | 128 | 151 | n.a. |

**Source:** World Bank
It is pointless to expect development in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to be driven exclusively by international cooperation while the local elites treat their countries like their private estate, evading taxes and besieging the state for their personal and collective benefit. Addressing the root of systematic violence implies acknowledging that the current power structure is a historical construction and changing it requires political will.

According to Rodríguez Pellecer, “the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG), at least under Iván Velásquez, accomplished an extraordinary task: nobody caught taking part in illicit activities, no matter how powerful, would be above the law.”

As for immigration policy, the current offensive on migrants and the corresponding transformation of Mexico southern border into an extension of the American one are not new phenomena. AMLO’s administration stirred up a little hope early on when it announced that it would steer from the containment, detention and deputation carried...
out since 2014 by Enrique Peña Nieto’s government to a human rights perspective. It was a short-lived spring. In the words of Eileen Truax, “Ever since the Mérida Initiative came into effect in 2008, the United States gave 3 billion dollars for the fight against organized crime on Mexico’s southern border. 10 years later, crime is still as organized as it was then, and most of that money was invested in attempts to curb the flow of Central American migrants into the United States. In 2014, after the ‘wave’ of unaccompanied migrant children traveling toward the U.S., additional funds came in under the name Southern Border Program and the dynamic remained unaltered.”

The way for each of the four countries to absorb the Comprehensive Development Plan (Pla de Desarrollo Integral, PDI) depends, of course, on their varying political geometry. AMLO’s government has chosen to “export” his trademark programs, Youths Building the Future (Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro) and Sowing Life (Sembrando Vida) to El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, presenting up to 30 million dollars to Presidents Nayib Bukele, Juan Orlando Hernandez and, soon, President-elect Alejandro Giammattei, now that he took office on January 14th, 2020.

Questions have arisen regarding the pertinence of “exporting” these programs, whose efficacy and results have not even been proven or evaluated in this country, amid increasing concerns about the proper use of those funds, despite the claim that they are not given to the president but to the beneficiaries of the programs. It is decidedly ironic that any transparency is expected in the context of the very recent expulsion of the CICIG from Guatemala and the myriad obstacles the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras, MACCIH) encountered.

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Thirty years after the end of the Central American civil wars Most of the population cannot live in peace: their society is upset by the turmoil of various forms of violence, which grows less episodic and isolated and more an expression of predatory behavior and plunder. In contrast, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines human development as a process that places people at the center so that they can take full advantage of their potential and enjoy the freedom to lead a productive and creative life in accordance with their needs and interests.

Growth and development in the Mexican southeast and in Central America make the transition from extractive, oligopolistic rent economies to an economy driven by productive efforts that generate economic and social value an imperative. It is crucial to consider the projects of producers and local community organizations consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Two kinds of projects stand out due to their multiplier effect at the local level: access to clean water and the education of girls in low-income areas.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The economic and political model that prevails in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras is not sustainable. Its precarious fiscal structure does not allow for equitable public policies: it generates greater inequality and is cemented in the predation of nature. It does not consider a sustainable energetic matrix. The massive endeavor of achieving sustainable development has to be undertaken and practiced from within society itself.

The PDI proposed by the ECLAC claims to be different from previous proposals because it seeks to construct a common development space between El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico so that migration can be an option and not an obligation. In other words, integrating human mobility into equal, sustainable development resulting in increased investment, redistribution and sustainability.

The ECLAC has fulfilled its mission: to provide the strategy for a new form of development. It is up to our countries and governments to understand that different results (positive ones, in this case) are impossible to obtain if they insist on keeping the status quo.

Mexico urgently needs to make its own agenda in accordance with the national interest, specific policies for emigration, return, immigration, transit and refuge, as well as proper articulation with Central America in terms of population, labor and regional development.

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*The author is grateful to Andrea Marín Serrano and Julia Zanella for designing the tables, infographics and graphs, and for their help with research.*
WHY INVEST IN THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS IN GUATEMALA, HONDURAS AND EL SALVADOR?

**Transmission of Values and Principles**
More educated girls are more likely to raise healthy children when they grow up.

**One More Year of Secondary Education**
Girls who are more educated are less prone to suffer domestic violence.

**Why Don’t Girls Go to School?**
- Lack of secondary education coverage
- Families invest in their male children
- Household chores
- Gender violence

**Educational Situation of Girls**
Average years of schooling:
- Guatemala: 4-6 years
- El Salvador: 8.4 years
- Honduras: 86% of boys and 78.8% of girls finish primary school

**Institutional Projects in Central America**

**La Luz de las Niñas**
A program by Red Fe y Alegría promotes access to education and the eradication of gender violence across 15 countries including El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

**Proyecto Justicia para Juventud y Género**
Seeks to help young victims of violence, including sexual violence.

**United Nations Development Program**
Helps draft public policy to eradicate gender violence.

**USAID**
Invests in:
- Irrigation and storage systems
- Warning systems for drought seasons

**OXFAM**
- Supports Dry Corridor communities in El Salvador
- Plants trees to improve water quality
- Helps leaders pass laws to protect the water

**IDB**
- 300,000 people in El Salvador
- 24,000 in Guatemala
- Beginning infrastructure processes in Honduras

**Why Invest in Potable Water for Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador?**

**Every Dollar Invested in Water Generates**
- Economic returns: 3-34 USD

**Reduces**
- Child mortality
- School dropout rate
- Gastrointestinal infections

**El Salvador**
- 22% of Salvadorans do not have running water
- 49% of water is beneath national and international standards for potable water
- 95% of the population gets water through local suppliers

**Guatemala**
- In 2009, 34% of households still lacked potable water
- 16% of the water that is distributed is potable and 5% of sewage systems have some kind of residual water treatment

**Honduras**
- Close to 800,000 Hondurans in rural areas still do not have improved water services
- 1.6 million do not have improved sanitation systems

**Institutional Projects**
Proposes rainwater harvesting systems in Dry Corridor communities for the Comprehensive Development Plan (PDI).
Mexican Private Investment in Central America: Contributing to Development

*Mauricio Reyes*

The private sector plays a key role in the development of countries and regions. It is also a highly relevant actor in the international system, since it strengthens bilateral links between different nations and contributes to the achievement of multilateral objectives.

Mexican companies are very present in Central America. Official data from late 2018 show that the total investment of the Mexican private sector in the region exceeded 10 billion dollars. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC - Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL), Central American countries received foreign investment for almost 12.3 billion dollars in 2018, 51% of it in Panama. Available information indicates that in recent years, Mexico was the 2nd most significant investor in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama; the 3rd in Honduras and the 4th in Costa Rica and El Salvador.¹

In Central America, Mexican companies have various ways of generating economic value: creating jobs, setting up production chains, building infrastructure, etc.
increasing productivity and through technological innovation. Significant physical investment in the agricultural and mining sectors, factories, distribution centers, commercial establishments, roads, ports and communications has been consolidated.

Prominent examples of investment include industries such as beverages, food, cement and construction, as well as telecommunications, financial, entertainment and commercial services. Mexico is present through relevant groups such as América Móvil, FEMSA, Alfa, Bimbo, CEMEX, Grupo Salinas, Cinépolis, GRUMA, Herdez, Lala, Proeza, Jumex, Grupo Carso, Mabe, Mexichem, Envases Universales, KIO Networks and Sukarne, among others. Many Mexican small and medium businesses are present as well.

One of the characteristics of Mexican investment, compared to that from the rest of the world, is that it’s directly linked to the daily functioning of the local economy; i.e. Mexican companies that export to the United States do so from Mexico, and they came to Central America lured by the internal economic activity of each of those countries. The main factors that contributed to the settlement of Mexican capital include cross-border value chains, skilled labor and, of course, the economic integration that allows the entire isthmus to function as one region, not just six sovereign nations.

The generation of economic value goes beyond direct investment. It includes creating and consolidating commodity chains with local supply networks, financing clients and suppliers, technological investment for a wide range of products, Participation in the publicity market and attention to commercial clients small shops, big stores and, of course, millions of consumers. It is safe to say that most of the Central American population is in contact with goods and services offered by Mexican companies practically every day.

Unfortunately, there is not enough information to determine the precise number of jobs directly created by Mexican investment in Central America. However, with the help of a few official reports, the annual reports of public companies for the Mexican Stock Exchange and information from the press, it is possible to estimate it at around 100,000 jobs.

Job creation, both direct and indirect, is one of the most relevant aspects of Mexican investment in the region, considering that, according to the CEPAL, the most important causes for emigration from the Northern Triangle to the United States are unemployment, economic crisis, low income and bad working conditions. Depending on the country, between 73% and 95% of those surveyed mentioned economic issues—way above security issues—as a reason for emigration.²

The private sector plays an important role in working toward the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development drafted by the United Nations in 2015. In that sense, beyond its economic input, the Mexican

private sector also contributes to the social development of the countries in Central America through educational, artistic and cultural initiatives, as well as environmental protection, sports, healthcare and assistance for vulnerable sectors of the population, among many others.

The consolidation of more prosperous countries south of our border, with well-paid jobs and strong value chains, contributes to the objectives and interests of Mexican foreign policy. In an age still defined by globalization, Mexican companies participate in the cross-border flow of money, goods and services, human resources and ideas. Within the conceptual framework outlined by Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations.³

This is also the case with the social responsibility activities of Mexican companies based on globally accepted sustainability standards, which may well be considered part of the international cooperation agenda for Mexican development activities in Central America.

The Mexican private sector’s support for foreign policy doesn’t end there. Through its presence in Central America, it helps consolidate Mexican soft power in the region through economic, social, and cultural influence in a broad sense, and in people’s daily lives. For instance, consider the number of families that depend on a company that transmits Mexican values and principles and whose organization and management are associated with its Mexican origin.

The contributions of Mexican companies to strengthening the social fabric can now be complemented by the experience they acquired with the Youths Building the Future (Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro) program. Practically every Mexican company present in Central America participated in this program in Mexico, and they now have the experience, knowledge and methodology necessary to hire apprentices and thus contribute to enriching the country’s human capital. This program could become an exportable experience across the southern border if a joint venture with the Mexican government could be devised.

Broadly speaking, the history of Mexican investments in Central America has been successful. The fact that the private sector has worked closely with the Mexican government for decades, regardless of its party affiliation, has certainly helped. This positive relationship has been upheld under president López Obrador, no doubt with partially thanks to the previous experience of some senior officials in the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs who have dealt with corporate groups in the past. There was also a lattice of legal bilateral and multilateral agreements that makes Mexican investments more trustworthy.

However, given the complex nature of the international environment, Mexican companies—like those from the rest of the world—require greater certainty, especially for significant, long-term investments.

Condoleezza Rice and Amy Zegart identified ten types of political risks for multinational companies: geopolitical, internal conflict, laws/regulations/policies, breaches of contract, corruption, extra-territorial reach, natural resource manipulation, social activism, terrorism and cyber threats.4

Either way, these risks are all real for Mexican companies in Central America (and in Mexico too, by the way). Although some countries in the region have become less problematic for business, according to the World Bank’s Doing Business parameters, challenges still exist. In some cases, the issue of political stability stands out as a factor that can sometimes result in a lack of legal certainty.

Another difficulty lies in public safety: in some places, just like in Mexico, highway robbery has come become a great risk, especially considering most of the cargo is moved by land.

It would therefore be highly desirable to strengthen some infrastructure aspects especially to guarantee water and electricity services and consolidate internet connections, as well as modernizing ports, airports and railroads. It is encouraging that the Comprehensive Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Integral, PDI) that the current Mexican administration has undertaken with the Northern Triangle countries includes electricity connections, a regional digital market and infrastructure projects such as a gas duct and a railroad.

As for competitiveness, it would be great if companies were able to receive their supply in less time, by strengthening local suppliers. It is also necessary for local suppliers to be certified with internationally accepted documents. Some Mexican companies will need to permanently train their local partners, just like they do in Mexico; promoting talent and more skilled labor will result in greater investment in the area.

Lastly, one of the greatest challenges we are facing from Mexico is the scarcity of information on Mexican investment in the region. Not every company—not even all the ones reporting to the Mexican Stock Exchange—are clear about the disaggregated number of their Central American employees, the volume of their investment, the capacity of their facilities or their actions of social responsibility. This is a task that both the public sector (the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat of Economy) and the private sector (companies and organizations like the Mexican Business Council for Foreign Trade, Investment and Technology or Consejo Empresarial Mexicano de Comercio Exterior, Inversión y Tecnología, COMCE) still have a lot of work to do. That information would greatly contribute to increasing the efficacy of our foreign policy.

About the authors

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He holds a law degree and has worked in the Mexican government for almost twenty-seven years. He has extensive experience in negotiations with migration, intelligence and justice agencies in the United States, Central America and the Caribbean. He participated in the design and execution of national security policies as the secretary general of the Center for Investigation and National Security (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN).

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Previously, he was the general director of International Economic Affairs for the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit (1981-1990), and in that capacity he served as advisor to the president of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) for integration issues and as executive director of the World Bank International Development Association. He also acted as an international official of the Trade Policy Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Office of the United Nations in Mexico.
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He has been guest lecturer at the universities of Pennsylvania, Chicago, UCLA, Princeton (in the United States), Cayetano Heredia (Peru), Bielfeld (Germany); Warsaw (Poland) and the CNRS (France). He currently writes for the opinion section of the newspaper titled La Jornada in Mexico.

During the last 30 years he has studied the phenomenon of migration between Mexico and the United States and has written several publications about it his most recent books, both as author and co-author, include: Clandestinos, Migración de México Estados Unidos en los albores del siglo XXI [Clandestine: Migration from Mexico to the United States at the Dawn of the 21st Century] (2003), Mexicanos en Chicago: Diario de campo de Robert Redfield [Mexicans in Chicago: Robert Redfield’s Field Journal] (2008), Detrás de la Trama [Beyond Smoke and Mirrors] (2009), Políticas migratorias entre México y Estados Unidos [Migration Policy between Mexico and the United States] (2009) and La migración México Estados Unidos. Historia minima [Mexico–United States Migration. A Brief History] (2016).

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He has published over 270 books, articles, monographs and research reports on a broad range of topics related to migration; he has given lectures on every aspect of immigration and immigrant integration policy, and he also advises foundations and other grant organizations, civil society groups and senior government and political party officials in a dozen countries (including several in the European Union).

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Mexico and Central America: A Delayed Encounter

The surprise arrival of massive migrant contingents (known as “caravans”) to the border between Guatemala and Mexico constituted a watershed in the history of Central American migration to the United States through Mexican territory. This text is published by the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI) in order to contribute to the discussion in Mexico, in the United States and in Central America itself. The contribution of Central American social activists and academics with their local perspectives enhances and complements their Mexican counterparts’ reflections and proposals. Now is the time to undertake concrete measures for this delayed encounter.