

Facing New Migration Realities

U.S.-Mexico Relations and Shared Interests

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Executive Summary

A new reality has set in across the Western Hemisphere since 2020 as migrant families, unaccompanied children, and adults from an increasingly diverse array of origin countries have embarked on journeys through the region. The United States, in particular, has faced significant challenges in managing its borders, but transit countries along migration routes and other existing and emerging destination countries have similarly faced new migration challenges and a need to fundamentally transform their policy responses. Many governments have responded to this new reality by building a sense of shared responsibility and deepening their collaboration on migration management, albeit at different levels given their uneven institutional capacities and resources.

Whether and how the policies and hemispheric cooperation that have emerged will continue are now in the hands of the new administrations of U.S. President Donald Trump and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum. Since taking office in January 2025, the Trump administration has been rewriting the U.S. relationship with Mexico, as well as with other partners across the Americas. The Biden administration's focus on collaboration, which privileged a mixture of jointly negotiated migration controls, legal pathways, and selected returns, has been supplanted by

a strategy based on large-scale deportations and tariff threats to compel Mexico to take even greater steps to stop unauthorized migration and drug trafficking.

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But despite the changed priorities and style, the basic truth remains that both governments fundamentally need each other to accomplish their policy objectives, whether termed border control and migration management or national security. No country has been more critical to U.S. border enforcement efforts than Mexico, which has recorded more migrant encounters in its territory than the U.S. Border Patrol has at the southwest border every month since May 2024. Mexican policies have been central catalysts for sustained reductions in unauthorized migration at the U.S.-Mexico border that began in 2024 and have continued under the countries' new administrations. Understanding the complexity of shifting migration patterns, institutional capacity in both countries, and other shared challenges is there-

fore crucial in the longer term to bilateral, and likely hemispheric, negotiations and goals.

Drawing on interviews and two roundtables with U.S. and Mexican policy stakeholders, researchers, and leaders of international and civil-society organizations in 2024, this policy brief rounds out prior Migration Policy Institute work on U.S. border enforcement by providing an account of recent shifts in unauthorized migration and humanitarian protection trends, and the role the U.S.-Mexico relationship has played—and will continue to play—in responding to these new migration realities. To overcome future challenges in migration management, it contends that Mexico and the United States need to work together to: 1) establish a transparent infrastructure for border security and protection screening at the Mexico-Guatemala border; 2) break the grip of cross-national migrant smuggling organizations; and 3) strengthen labor pathways between Mexico and the United States.

Given their geographic proximity and shared policy interests, the United States and Mexico are inseparable. Long-term management of migration requires working in good faith across both sides of the border and recognizing the successes of bilateral collaboration in recent years, which have illustrated how indispensable Mexican migration enforcement and protection operations are to U.S. policy aims and how vital unwavering U.S. support is for those operations. As the new administrations in Mexico City and Washington, DC set their courses for the period ahead, they would do well to advance their respective national interests by incorporating strategies that address the deeper complexities of irregular movement, consider the lessons from prior hemispheric collaboration and leadership models, and promote migration through channels that are legal, safe, and orderly.

1 Introduction

Migration patterns in the Western Hemisphere have changed dramatically in just a few years as large numbers of migrants from dozens of countries across the Americas and around the world have transited through multiple countries, many in hopes of reaching the United States. Until U.S. fiscal year (FY) 2020, about 90 percent of unauthorized migrant arrivals at the U.S.-Mexico border were from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador. By contrast, migrants from these nationalities accounted for only 49 percent of unauthorized border arrivals in FY 2023 and 66 percent in the first six months of FY 2025.¹ As a result, border management challenges across the hemisphere have fundamentally changed.

For the first time, almost all countries in the hemisphere are facing migration management challenges, whether hosting new arrivals or managing transit through their territory.

Notably, not all migrants have headed to or reached the United States. In fact, the immigrant population within Latin America and the Caribbean increased from 14.3 million in 2020 to 17.5 million in 2024, mostly due to the displacement of large numbers of Venezuelans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Cubans.² Millions of others have migrated for economic opportunities, family reunification, and other reasons. As a result, and for the first time, almost all countries in the hemisphere are facing migration management challenges, whether hosting new arrivals or managing transit through their territory. Perhaps the biggest lesson from this period of change has been that no country, including the United States, can effectively manage large-scale migration and humanitarian protection needs on its own.³

Until the reelection of Donald Trump as president of the United States, these new realities had bolstered governments' interest in jointly addressing migration matters. The clearest example of the recognized need for greater collaboration was the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, a set of principles for cooperatively managing migration and borders and fostering safe, orderly, humane, and regular migration that was signed by 22 countries across the hemisphere in 2022. Though the declaration is still in effect, President Trump has taken a markedly different approach that is already shifting regional relations, one centered on tariff threats to compel other countries, especially Mexico, to heighten their efforts to stop irregular migration and the flow of fentanyl.

No country is more critical for U.S. migration management than Mexico. The former administrations of U.S. President Joe Biden and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador worked together toward a system in which migrants who reach their countries' shared border would do so through lawful means. Their efforts led to dramatic and sustained downturns in unauthorized crossings of the U.S.-Mexico border in 2024. The future of U.S.-Mexico migration cooperation, and to some extent broader regional efforts, now rests on negotiations between the Trump administration and the administration of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum.

This policy brief describes shifts in migration patterns and policy responses across the hemisphere in recent years that led to significant changes in how the United States and Mexico addressed unauthorized migration and humanitarian protection. It builds on earlier research by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) on the history of the U.S. government's efforts to improve southwest border security in the modern era and on emerging border challenges and operational responses.⁴ The analysis in this brief was informed by in-depth interviews and two MPI roundtable discussions conducted in 2024 with U.S. and

Mexican policymakers, researchers, and representatives of international and civil-society organizations in Mexico and the United States. The brief concludes by identifying several critical challenges that lie ahead for the U.S.-Mexico relationship on migration.

2 Shifting Migration Patterns, Changing Responses

Unauthorized crossings of the U.S.-Mexico border took a dramatic downward turn in 2024 that has continued into early 2025. This was in large part a result of heightened Mexican enforcement beginning in January 2024, buttressed by prior U.S.-Mexico collaboration, as well as new U.S. asylum restrictions issued in June 2024 that made migrants who entered the country irregularly between ports of entry ineligible for asylum, with some exceptions.⁵ Monthly unauthorized crossings fell from 250,000 in December 2023—the highest monthly figure on record—to 47,000 by December 2024, the lowest number since July 2020, during the last year of the first Trump administration.⁶

The underlying rationale for introducing these policies was disincentivizing unauthorized arrivals by making it harder for people to cross the border spontaneously between ports of entry, while incentivizing lawful arrivals by establishing orderly processes for seeking humanitarian protection and expanding legal pathways for migration and mobility. These efforts were paired with investments in good governance and livelihoods in countries of significant emigration, which aimed over time to lessen some of the forces driving people to leave their homes. A clear lesson from this period has been that, given its drivers, migration will persist, but it can be managed and shaped to ensure more effective border security and control.

A. *The Context*

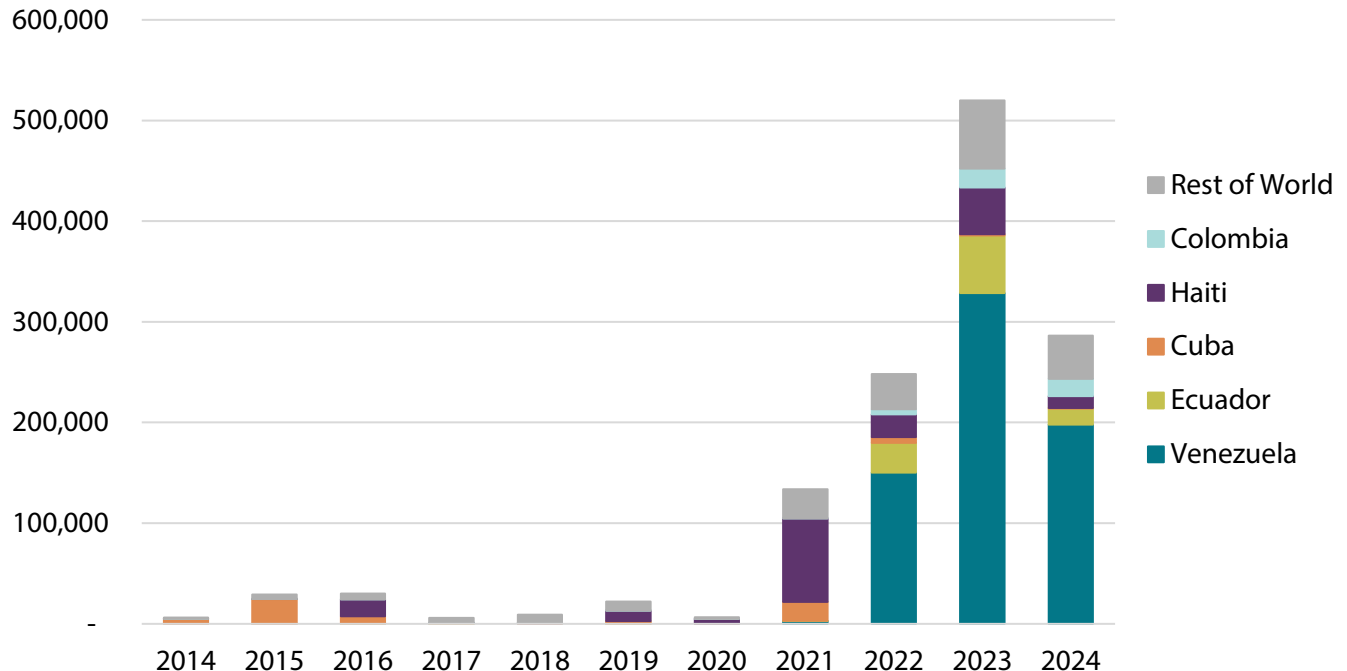
For most of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, most migrants who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border were Mexican citizens, with smaller numbers of Central Americans and others who could get to Mexico to cross into the United States. Starting in 2012, the number of Central Americans increased significantly, with a particularly large number of unaccompanied minors crossing in 2014–15 and with larger numbers of families (as well as adults and unaccompanied minors) starting in late 2018 and continuing until today.⁷

Since late 2020, migration patterns through the region have changed further, with growing numbers of migrants coming from much farther away, often

making journeys that span multiple countries. Haitians living in South America and later Venezuelans were among the first groups to cross in large numbers through the Darién Gap—a treacherous 60-mile stretch of jungle linking Colombia to Panama—and head north seeking economic opportunities and safety. Significant numbers of migrants from other countries soon followed. By 2023, large-scale smuggler networks traversed the route with a record-setting 520,000 migrant crossings (see Figure 1). The number of children crossing through the jungle nearly tripled, from 40,000 in 2022 to 113,000 in 2023.⁸ More recently, as migrant crossings in the Darién have fallen, new routes through Nicaragua appear to be emerging, with more migrants arriving directly in the Central American country before heading north.

FIGURE 1

Number of Migrant Crossings Recorded at the Darién Gap, by Country of Origin, 2014–24



Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulations of data from Migración Panama, “Estadísticas—Tránsito Irregular por Darién,” accessed January 30, 2025.

B. U.S.-Mexico Responses

The U.S.-Mexico relationship on migration matters is longstanding and has evolved with shifting migration patterns. This has been evident as Mexico has transitioned from being largely a country of emigration to becoming a transit and, gradually, a migrant destination country. A series of agreements and ad hoc measures have cemented U.S.-Mexico collaboration on migration management since the early 2010s, primarily aimed at reducing unauthorized migration through Mexican territory.⁹

With the sudden growth and diversification of these flows, U.S.-Mexico cooperation has widened dramatically. Recent bilateral cooperation has included: increasing Mexico's enforcement operations along its southern border, highways, and rail lines while simultaneously expanding legal pathways to the United States for specific nationality groups to reduce irregular transit through Mexico; allowing U.S. authorities to return to Mexico migrants from countries with which the U.S. government does not have repatriation agreements; expanding asylum and complementary protection in Mexico; creating greater order at the U.S. border by encouraging migrants to present themselves at official entry points while restricting access to asylum for those who cross between ports of entry; and collaborating on economic development and assistance programs in Mexico and Central America to mitigate the drivers of irregular migration.

Among these efforts, several represent especially notable new areas of coordination and complementary measures. In October 2022, Mexican authorities agreed to receive up to 30,000 expulsions of Venezuelan irregular migrants from the United States in return for the U.S. government opening a pathway for up to 30,000 Venezuelans with U.S. resident sponsors to arrive legally in the United States each month. In January 2023, this agreement was expanded to include Cubans, Haitians, and Nicara-

guans. This Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, Venezuelan (CHNV) parole process did not involve an individual determination of protection needs, but it was presumed that conditions in these four countries created such needs for many of their nationals. And because the U.S. government's strained diplomatic relations with these countries made returning their nationals near impossible when encountered at the border, the process served both humanitarian and enforcement aims.¹⁰ In May 2023, when the U.S. government ended the Title 42 health emergency authority used to expel migrants arriving irregularly at the border, Mexican authorities agreed to continue to receive returns and, for the first time, also formal removals of these migrants, contingent on the continuation of the CHNV sponsorship pathway.¹¹

Mexican authorities increased highway and railroad checkpoints and other operations throughout 2023, especially in southern Mexico.

The United States and Mexico also stepped up and coordinated wide-ranging enforcement operations. As the Biden administration imposed additional consequences to deter irregular migrants from crossing the countries' shared border, including the post-Title 42 Circumvention of Lawful Pathways (CLP) rule that curtailed access to the U.S. asylum system for migrants crossing the border between ports of entry, the López Obrador administration significantly increased enforcement controls across Mexico, with the assistance of the Mexican National Guard and, in some cases, the military.¹² Mexican authorities increased highway and railroad checkpoints and other operations throughout 2023, especially in southern Mexico, resulting in steady increases in migrant apprehensions and the relocation of thousands of irregular migrants from northern border cities to southern Mexico (see Section 2.C. for details).¹³

Significant growth in asylum requests in Mexico also raised bilateral interest in strengthening the institutional capacity and oversight of Mexico's Commission for Refugees (COMAR). Mexico received the third-largest number of requests in the world in 2023, after only the United States and Germany but with a fraction of their institutional resources.¹⁴ Though the Mexican government more than doubled COMAR's budget between 2019 and 2023, the agency's operations continued to depend significantly on funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose primary funder has long been the United States.¹⁵ Seeking to reduce fraudulent asylum claims filed in order to obtain and use humanitarian visas to transit to the U.S. border, Mexico's Interior Ministry, which oversees COMAR, restricted its issuance of these visas in 2024.¹⁶ As a result of processing delays and these policy changes, the number of asylum requests filed in Mexico fell sharply in 2024, but the country is still likely to remain among the top recipients of asylum claims in 2025.¹⁷

C. Mexico's Relocation Strategy

For years, Mexican authorities have moved irregular migrants from cities where large numbers are concentrated to reduce public anxiety about migration and to better match migrants to administrative processing capacity. Sometimes these have been planned processes, but more often they have been ad hoc responses. However, the scale of government relocation operations since 2023 stands out and signals the core role they have come to play in Mexico's migration management strategy.

News stories have suggested that by repeatedly pushing migrants away from the U.S.-Mexico border, often without proper documentation, authorities have sought to contain migrants in southern Mexico and incentivize them to return voluntarily to their countries of origin.¹⁸ There is, however, another likely factor behind the growth of relocation operations

as well: recent legislative and judicial changes that have significantly reshaped Mexico's detention capacity.

A 2021 reform of Mexico's migration law prohibits the detention of children and accompanying adults in immigration facilities. Instead, they must be transferred to government-run shelters while courts determine the best interests of the child.¹⁹ Beyond this vulnerable population, Mexican detention centers have limited capacity (they could detain an estimated 5,000 migrants per day at most in 2023), and a 2023 Supreme Court decision ruled that migrants cannot be detained for more than 36 hours.²⁰

These factors make it nearly impossible for Mexican authorities to detain the majority of irregular migrants they encounter. This is especially true for those who come from countries with which Mexico lacks repatriation agreements and who would therefore need to be detained for longer than the permitted 36-hour period while Mexican authorities negotiate their return. Because of their limited resources, infrastructure, and repatriation agreements with countries outside of Central America, Mexican authorities carried out just 55,000 migrant repatriations in 2023 (87 percent to Central America)—a fraction of the 782,000 encounters with irregular migrants recorded that year.²¹ Thus, the relocation strategy in part reflects Mexico's limited ability to detain and repatriate many non-Central Americans who transit through Mexico and those who are returned from the United States.

D. The 2024 Turnaround

While Mexican and U.S. authorities had been expanding migration control operations since October 2022, these efforts took on a new level of intensity and priority after December 2023, when U.S. border encounters reached a new peak. Following urgent discussions between senior officials of both countries over how to handle spikes in irregular migra-

FIGURE 2

Number of Migrant Encounters by U.S. Border Patrol between Ports of Entry at the U.S.-Mexico Border, 2020–24

Sources: MPI tabulations of data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Homeland Security Statistics, “[SW Border USBP Encounters by Top 100 Citizenship: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2025 YTD \(November 2024\)](#),” updated January 16, 2025; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “[Southwest Land Border Encounters](#),” updated February 18, 2025.

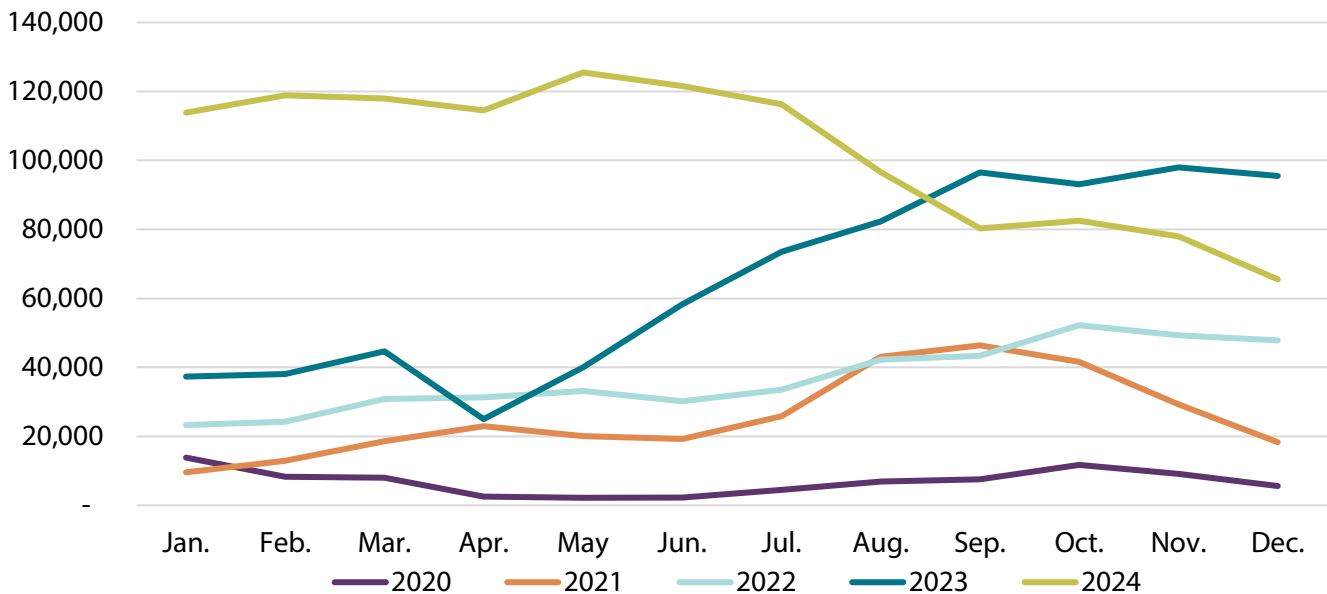
tion, Mexico scaled up its enforcement, especially the large-scale transport of migrants to locations in southern Mexico to impede their northward journeys and incentivize them to return to their home countries. Correspondingly, monthly unauthorized migrant encounters between U.S. ports of entry have fallen or stayed constant every month since February 2024 (see Figure 2). Thus, Mexican enforcement became a major factor in reducing migrant crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border.²²

To accomplish this, the Mexican government established multiple check points in northern Mexico, especially along the Texas border, and deployed agents from the Mexican National Institute of Migration (INM), the National Guard, and the Army to surveil isolated border zones without fencing, such as the one in Jacume, Baja California.²³ In 2024, INM reported more than 1.2 million migrant encounters (an average of 103,000 each month)—more than the 782,000 encounters it recorded in 2023 (see

Figure 3). In fact, Mexican authorities have encountered more migrants than U.S. authorities every month since May 2024, marking a historic change for Mexican agencies that operate with a fraction of the budget of their U.S. counterparts.

In 2024, Venezuelans accounted for more than one-fourth of Mexican authorities’ encounters with irregular migrants, surpassing the combined number of encounters of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans, the nationalities that have traditionally transited through Mexico. Over the same period, INM repatriated only 21,000 migrants, nearly all from northern Central America,²⁴ due to its limited institutional capacity, resources, and repatriation agreements—factors that have also long limited migrant removals from the United States. This suggests that most of the migrants authorities encountered were being released from custody, transferred to government shelters, or relocated to southern Mexico.

FIGURE 3

Number of Migrant Encounters by Mexican Immigration Authorities, 2020–24

Source: MPI tabulations of data from the Mexican Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB), “Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias, 2014–2024,” accessed April 16, 2025.

At the same time, to encourage migrants to seek lawful pathways to the United States rather than transiting irregularly through Mexican territory, Mexico began offering bus transportation in September 2024 to migrants in southern Mexico who had confirmed appointments through the CBP One app to present themselves at a U.S. border entry point and be screened and admitted to the United States, where they could then pursue an asylum claim. The Mexican busing initiative, designed to ensure those with appointments could safely reach the border, was established alongside the U.S. expansion of CBP One appointment eligibility for non-Mexican nationals to two states in southern Mexico (originally, migrants had to be in a northern city or Mexico City to make an appointment).²⁵ However, despite this expansion in eligibility and Mexico’s transportation initiative, the daily number of CBP One appointments remained at about 1,500 and reports suggest that appointment wait times spanned several months.²⁶

The U.S. government, for its part, sought to reduce border crossings by further raising the consequenc-

es for entering the country without authorization. While the 2023 CLP rule made such migrants largely ineligible for asylum, a new rule issued in June 2024 suspended asylum claim processing when unauthorized crossings surpassed a certain threshold and made the migrants involved subject to a higher standard of screening for other forms of protection as well.²⁷ Like the CLP rule, this new rule faced litigation challenges.

While demonstrating how international cooperation can produce more effective border enforcement, many of these border control measures have been fragile and harsh. Maintaining them will represent a significant challenge, relying on sustained resource commitments, capacity-building, long-term collaboration, policy innovations beyond enforcement measures, and political support from the two new government administrations.

Moreover, enforcement alone rarely succeeds in the long term unless potential migrants have legal alternatives to irregular migration, which requires build-

ing out a mixture of accessible pathways to lawfully reach the United States, Mexico, and other countries, especially those where significant labor demand exists.²⁸ Pathways that are accessible to people who come from countries where there are serious protection needs are particularly critical, so that such individuals have options to seek safety and opportunities without having to first undertake lengthy and dangerous irregular journeys.

3 Steps Toward Regional Migration Management

Beyond their bilateral cooperation, the United States and Mexico have also played central roles in designing and fostering collaborative migration management strategies across the hemisphere in recent years. This has been possible, in large part, because large-scale migration has come to affect almost every country in the Americas since 2015, in one way or another, creating both common interests and greater political will to work together.

A prime example of this shift was the signing of the Los Angeles Declaration in 2022. The declaration was forged in the context of both large-scale migration toward the United States and displacement crises from Venezuela, Haiti, and Nicaragua that saw the number of immigrants living in other Latin American and Caribbean countries almost double between 2010 and 2022.²⁹ Small countries, such as Panama and Costa Rica, experienced record levels of transit migration in recent years and implemented both services to address migrants' basic needs and policies seeking to discourage and control irregular crossings.³⁰ Similarly, Honduras and Guatemala—long countries of emigration—faced significant transit migration pressures, with approximately 545,000 migrants in transit in Honduras in 2023, nearly triple the 189,000 migrants in 2022.³¹ And in Colombia, the population of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, which had been increasing since 2018, rose from 1.8

million in 2020 to 2.8 million in 2024.³² These countries have varying levels of institutional experience with migration management, and the declaration marked a significant step toward addressing shared challenges cooperatively.

The 22 participating governments agreed to foster safe, orderly, humane, and regular migration through four pillars of action:

- ▶ promoting stability and assistance for communities hosting large displaced populations;
- ▶ expanding lawful pathways for migration and international protection;
- ▶ enhancing humane migration management, including border controls, returns, and coordination of visa policies; and
- ▶ coordinating emergency responses when displacement crises and sudden large-scale migration occur.³³

These pillars reflect the growing understanding that a suite of interlocking measures—effective border enforcement, expanded legal pathways, and functional humanitarian protection systems—is necessary to advancing on a range of issues that matter for signatory countries' futures. The pressures governments face and the resources they have to address them are certainly not the same, but their thinking became more aligned than it had been in prior years.

4 Future Migration Management Challenges

In comparison, since entering office in January 2025, Trump's approach to the region and to migration management has been decidedly unilateral. Controlling immigration is at the top of his adminis-

tration's agenda, and he has acted swiftly to erase Biden-era policies, pursue mass deportations, and threaten tariffs and visa restrictions on countries that do not cooperate to curb irregular migration to the United States.

Whatever the outcome of U.S.-Mexico negotiations over tariffs and their implications for migration policy and actions, it is in both countries' interest to address the following three deep-seated, corollary needs over the longer term.

A. Establish Transparent Enforcement and Protection Infrastructure at and beyond the Mexico-Guatemala Border

In May 2024, the Mexican government launched the Mexican Model of Human Mobility. It is the country's first policy strategy to comprehensively address the complexities of migration from a hemispheric perspective while focusing on the structural drivers of emigration.³⁴ The Sheinbaum administration has endorsed it going forward.³⁵

Key among potential efforts under this new policy strategy are bolstering controls at the Mexico-Guatemala border, implementing more effective regularization and integration measures for migrants seeking to stay in Mexico, and enhancing government initiatives to reach and protect Mexicans abroad. Part of the strategy is also to establish two Multi-Service Inclusion and Development Centers in southern Mexico to assist migrants and refugees and to work with regional governments to address the underlying causes of migration.³⁶ Many of these efforts would serve U.S. as well as Mexican policy goals, and U.S.-Mexico collaboration should thus support the operationalization of this model.

Develop and Modernize Mexico-Guatemala Border Infrastructure, Policies, and Procedures

With consistent support from the U.S. government, a high priority for the Mexican and Guatemalan governments should be to build a shared border infrastructure that can promote lawful travel, screen individuals seeking admission to Mexico on humanitarian protection and labor market grounds, and deter irregular crossings. Augmenting border management in this way necessitates investments in infrastructure and resources at existing and new border entry points and along key transit routes. For example, Mexican and Guatemalan discussions have focused on improving customs inspections and security between the eight existing ports of entry and, more recently, proposed building industrial areas and extending train networks that can offer employment to local and migrant communities on both sides of the border.³⁷ Additionally, technology, technical training, and professionalization of border operations are crucial to conducting migration controls effectively, especially along borders where difficult terrain complicates patrol and supervision. These efforts to modernize Mexico's southern border infrastructure and improve lawful travel can simultaneously boost economic development, infrastructure, and safety in border communities by fueling new jobs and providing additional security to local markets.³⁸

As at the U.S.-Mexico border, there is a pressing need at the Mexico-Guatemala border for increased institutional capacity and humane conditions to detain and repatriate migrants who do not qualify for protection. Additional training and resources in southern Mexico would bolster the government's ability to fairly and transparently process and detain non-Mexican migrants for the 36 or fewer hours permitted by law, while improving the services the government provides to those who cannot legally be detained (i.e., minors and their accompanying

adults) and those it relocates to southern Mexico. The Mexican government has an opportunity to modernize its institutions and approaches in this regard, to make operations transparent and put them on a stable, sustainable footing, at a time when the U.S. government should be doing the same.

The U.S. and Mexican governments could also strengthen collaboration on returns to countries where one or the other government does not have the capacity to carry out returns (e.g., Venezuela for the United States, India for Mexico). They could also work together to improve the conditions for detention and return from both countries. This includes working with governments of origin countries to establish humane repatriation agreements to receive and reliably reintegrate returnees, including by confirming migrants' citizenship, approving repatriation flights, and informing migrants, while still in U.S. or Mexican custody, about the reception and reintegration process and services available in their country of origin.

Fortify and Expand the Mexican Asylum System

Mexico is among the top three countries of asylum in the hemisphere, along with the United States and Costa Rica.³⁹ The Mexican asylum system is well-regarded and operates in accordance with international norms and standards. It also has broader protection eligibility than the U.S. system in that, as a signatory to the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, Mexico can provide protection to those fleeing generalized violence and internal conflict.

However, as in the United States, recent displacement crises have overwhelmed case processing in Mexico and contributed to long delays.⁴⁰ Significant investment from UNHCR has notably improved the Mexican asylum system's operations in recent years, but potential U.S. funding cuts to UNHCR programming in Mexico would be severely detrimental to the

recent institutional capacity gains. Even at current funding levels, sustaining case processing rates will be challenging without additional and significant domestic or international support. For these reasons, reported reductions by the Mexican government to COMAR's budget for 2025 could further strain the system's ability to produce timely protection decisions.⁴¹ In contrast, additional Mexican and U.S. investments in COMAR's institutional capacity would improve asylum access for individuals seeking to lawfully live and work in Mexico, thereby reducing irregular transit through Mexico and arrivals at the U.S.-Mexico border.

B. Break the Grip of Cross-National Migrant Smuggling Organizations

The aspect of border control that is truly focused on national security in the strict sense of the term is the fight against cross-national criminal networks, cartels, and criminal enterprises behind the smuggling and trafficking activities that propel large-scale irregular migration.⁴² Human traffickers and smugglers have adapted their business practices, leveraged inconsistencies in regional policies, and used gaps in government-provided information about migration and asylum policies to exploit migrants' vulnerabilities and desperation. International surveillance of these enterprises and rapid information-sharing can equip governments to establish criminal prosecution cases and extradite bad actors.

Existing international taskforce investigations and operations have targeted high-level smugglers and their assets with some success, and individual countries have increased the criminal penalties for smuggling. At the center of these is Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA), a U.S. interagency operation started in June 2021 to combat human smuggling and trafficking coming from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. By June 2024, JTFA had contributed to more

than 300 domestic and international arrests, hundreds of U.S. convictions and defendants sentenced, and multiple indictments and precedent-setting extraditions of leaders.⁴³ Under its next phase, the scope of JTFA has been expanded to the Darién Gap, with collaboration from the governments of Colombia and Panama.⁴⁴

More recently, as part of broader U.S.-Mexico negotiations, the Sheinbaum administration extradited 29 convicted cartel kingpins to the United States for prosecution, signaling a possible new chapter in overcoming the impunity and influence of cartel violence and human smuggling in Mexico and neighboring countries.⁴⁵ And given the Trump administration's focus on reducing trafficking of fentanyl and other drugs, this may further strengthen Mexican and U.S. efforts to combat drug cartels.

By expanding mapping of how smuggling operations work across multiple countries, which has to date been limited, both governments would improve their ability to identify and prosecute corrupt government actors and others who facilitate smuggling and trafficking operations, as well as raise their institutional priority and resources dedicated to international law enforcement cooperation. Meeting such needs would enable more consistent planning to disrupt transnational criminal organizations.

In determining their next steps, the Mexican and U.S. governments should adopt follow-the-money strategies that have proven effective in combatting terrorism: identifying, targeting, and dismantling transnational criminal organizations by disrupting their funding.⁴⁶ Such measures can be especially effective in reducing the reach and operations of transnational crime enterprises, including those that exploit the desperation of migrant victims.

C. *Strengthen Labor Pathways between Mexico and the United States*

For decades, the U.S. Congress has failed to act on much-needed immigration policy reforms. Yet to adequately address border security challenges, its active participation is sorely needed. Statutory changes are especially critical because a core determinant of unauthorized migration pressures at the U.S.-Mexico border is the pull of the U.S. labor market. Simplifying and expanding employment-based visas could help the United States meet specific labor needs while reducing economic pressures that drive unauthorized migration from Mexico.

In the short term, for example, multistakeholder efforts to increase the use of H-2A visas for seasonal work and, in collaboration with the U.S. Congress, exempt returning workers from the H-2B visa cap would greatly expand the availability of opportunities to enter the United States legally during periods of tight labor markets. In fact, Mexican unauthorized migration appears to have decreased gradually in recent years as more Mexicans have received H-2 visas for seasonal work in the United States.⁴⁷ Additionally, Congress could identify priority sectors, such as agriculture, health care, care work, and construction, where there are significant unmet labor needs and insufficient visas available. It may also make sense to allow state governments, as well as employers, to strategically propose industries that are seeing worker supply fall short of labor needs or that are critical to local and state economies—information that could help inform priorities for employment-based visas.

A primary focus in Mexico's Model of Human Mobility is the well-being of Mexican citizens living in the United States.⁴⁸ As a result, policies that create an orderly process at the countries' shared border, legal pathways for Mexicans considering moving north,

and integration support for Mexicans in the United States are a win-win for both countries. Cooperation in these areas would generate economic benefits for people in both the United States and Mexico.

5 Conclusion

Recent changes in regional migration trends, as well as those that will emerge in the coming years, pose pressing migration policy and management challenges for the Trump and Sheinbaum administrations, both at and well beyond their countries' shared border. As a result, dramatically different, more encompassing policies and strategies are needed, including ones that bring together governments from across the hemisphere and center their shared responsibility over border controls and migration management.

U.S.-Mexico collaboration since 2020 has brought about significant achievements and offers lessons that can help point the way. While many of the efforts launched in recent years were focused primarily on immigration enforcement and were subject to capacity and other structural limitations, they can nonetheless inform regional policy discussions in the future. The Biden and López Obrador administrations demonstrated the will and ability to pursue actions that reflect shared interests, that paralleled multilateral commitments made in the Los Angeles Declaration and in other forums, and that led to sustained reductions in unauthorized migration at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Trump administration has, so far, charted a very different course, repeatedly demanding additional collaboration from Mexico as well as other key ally governments in the hemisphere. It has sought to carry out mass deportations with little or no consultation with immigrants' origin countries and threatened to impose stiff tariffs on those that do not stop irregular transit migration or refuse to receive their

nationals. And it is unclear whether the Mexican government, and other Latin American governments, will be able to maintain existing cooperation levels in the face of growing U.S. pressure and escalating demands, especially if irregular migration spikes again in the future. Similarly, it remains to be seen whether new forms of engagement with the United States will develop over time and whether Latin American governments will fill funding gaps for programs aimed at reducing irregular migration that depended on now frozen or cut U.S. assistance.

What is clear is that long-term management of migration requires working in good faith on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and, increasingly, with governments across the hemisphere. This includes recognizing the successes of bilateral collaboration in recent years, which have illustrated how indispensable Mexican migration enforcement and protection operations are to U.S. policy aims and how vital unwavering U.S. support is for those operations. Because of its broader diplomatic ties in the hemisphere, Mexico's leadership could also help advance policy development across the Americas and action on issues that may otherwise be absent among regional migration policymaking and priorities. But relying on Mexico alone is insufficient without simultaneous U.S. efforts to improve its own approach to migration management so that human mobility in the hemisphere happens through channels that are legal, safe, and orderly and that work for destination countries, migrants, and origin countries alike.

What is clear is that long-term management of migration requires working in good faith on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and, increasingly, with governments across the hemisphere.

Endnotes

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