LÓPEZ OBRADOR'S INITIAL POLICIES TOWARD CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.

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Introduction

Recent events in Mexico and Central America call for reevaluating immigration policy as it affects U.S.-Mexico relations. The first event is the upsurge of mass migration from Central America in the form of migrant caravans in 2018. The second event is Andrés Manuel López Obrador's ascension to the Mexican presidency in December 2018. The migrant caravans may represent a shift in the evolution of unauthorized immigration to the U.S. The sheer volume of people on the move, the publicity surrounding these events, and the political context in which they occur (i.e., they represent a very visible challenge to President Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies, and they can be used as a political gimmick in the upcoming presidential election in the U.S.) have initiated a new phase in migration policy in both the U.S. and Mexico.

In response to these shifts in immigration patterns, President López Obrador had to react quickly to a situation that could become a sensitive issue within Mexico; at the same time, he had to respond to U.S. demands for curtailing the caravans. Because Mexico's southern border is the gateway to Central American migration, including the caravans, and because López Obrador has clearly indicated that the region is important for his social and economic development plans, the southern border has increasingly gained attention both domestically and internationally. This paper discusses López Obrador's underlying philosophy toward these issues, as well as the changes that are taking place in terms of Mexico's migration policy. It also evaluates Central American migration as a shared policy issue for Mexico and the U.S., with particular attention to the outcomes of the caravans, the solutions López Obrador implemented to address the root causes of migration, and the U.S. reactions to these initiatives.

Development in Mexico's Southern Border Region

López Obrador has made it clear that developing southern Mexico has the highest priority in his agenda. Heavy investment in the area will go to major infrastructure and social projects, which will hopefully help foster development and curtail migration. This emphasis on developing Mexico's southern border region is closely tied to three main initiatives: fostering local forestry (*Programa Sembrando Vida*, or Planting Life); the construction of a trans-peninsular train (the *Tren Maya*, or Maya Train) to transport tourists, local passengers, and cargo; and the implementation of a *Plan de Desarrollo Integral: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico* (Comprehensive Development Plan: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico).[1] These changes are designed to create jobs and incentivize potential migrants to remain in the area.

In particular, the Maya Train has garnered significant domestic and international attention. This railroad is the administration's flagship project for southern Mexico and one of the top seven priorities of López Obrador's administration.[2] Covering about 1000 miles of track, the train goes through large expanses of Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Campeche, and to a lesser extent Tabasco and Chiapas. This initiative revives an existing plan to connect all major archaeological sites in the Maya area of southern Mexico. In February 2019,[3] the

president declared that request for bids on the initial works of the project will start two months later but they did not happen. Concerns abound: neither an environmental impact assessment or a master plan of the entire project have been made available as of this writing. Several sectors have also raised other worries about the Maya Train. Despite the positive results of a nationwide public consultation about it in November 2018,[4] there are dissenting opinions among some indigenous communities, environmentalist groups, and at least one national business association.[5] In spite of the challenges lying ahead, the president is determined to make the project a reality at any cost.

Key Changes in Migration Policy in Mexico's Southern Border Region

To deal with the ongoing migration issues in the southern border area, López Obrador emphasizes economic improvement and the protection of human rights over other approaches when it comes to solving migration issues. To that end, he has developed a two-pronged strategy: 1) to avert Mexicans' drive to migrate, whether internally or abroad, via the three development projects in southern Mexico described above; and 2) to offer jobs to Central American migrants.

Past administrations have supported and implemented containment and restrictive practices over other solutions to curtail immigration. In contrast, Lopez Obrador's foremost approach rests on the protection of human rights. It remains to be seen whether López Obrador reverses this historic trend and makes good on his word, particularly in the face of the current position of the Trump administration, which is a staunch supporter of a security-first-and-only method. The Trump administration, as I will discuss, is unwilling to redefine unauthorized migration in other terms. The migrant caravan of mid-January 2019 presented an opportunity for the new Mexican administration on how to handle the situation. But first, some context on Central American migration is in order.

Migration from Central America as a Shared U.S.-Mexico Policy Issue

History

Migration from Central American nations to the U.S. is a fairly recent phenomenon. Central Americans began emigrating north in large numbers beginning in the 1970s, mostly due to local political conflict.[6] Old (e.g., poverty) and new (e.g., violence) factors continue to drive this phenomenon. Efforts to halt or reduce the flow of migrants in the U.S. and Mexico have resulted in some unsuccessful and adverse outcomes for both migrants and the countries themselves when analyzed from a long-term perspective.

The effects of stringent and restrictive immigration regulations in the U.S. after the enactment of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996), the tougher policies following the September 11, 2001 events, Mexico's Southern Border Program (2014-2015), and Trump's current anti-immigrant agenda have had profound effects in both countries. First, the deterrence and curtailing of migration through policy design and by force have not worked; whether it is more barriers and restrictions,

exclusion, or increasing border enforcement measures, people keep on heading to the U.S. Second, deportations have created problems in the countries of origin. Most analysts concur that the extradition of street gang members in the 1990s sowed the seed for the emergence of Maras in Central America.[7] These criminal groups are the most visible perpetrators of the violence that is driving thousands of Salvadorians and Hondurans, the displaced populations that make up many of today's migrants, to Mexico and the U.S. Deportations have also split up families in the U.S. and Central America, with deported parents having been forced to leave behind their U.S.-born children. In many instances, parents often attempt to rejoin their families, fueling ongoing migration to the U.S.

Third, migrants are encountering a more perilous, costlier, and lengthier passage on their way north. Fourth, structural restrictions (e.g., enforcement operations), forced displacement (due to threats, extortion, and/or attempts at forced recruitment into *Maras*), and insecurity along the route, among other barriers, have caused some migrants stay put or find themselves immobilized along the way. People may therefore seek international protection status in Mexico, apply for a permit to stay due to humanitarian reasons, or make a claim for refugee status. This trend has grown in Mexico in recent years. The sum of applications filed for refugee status from Hondurans, El Salvadorians, and Guatemalans went from 1,296 in 2013 to 14,596 in 2017.[8]

Finally, a different means of trying to reach the U.S. has emerged in the form of migrant caravans, most prominently in late 2018 and early 2019. These caravans have garnered a lot of attention because they have clearly demonstrated the impediments Central Americans face in their efforts to reach the U.S. To understand what drives this form of mass migration, it is first important to understand the root causes in the countries of origin.

Present Conditions at the Source Countries that Exacerbate Migration

Up until 2010, the majority of unauthorized migrants trying to get to the U.S. were mostly adult males from Mexico. In a recent testimony before Congress, former U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen pointed out that today's migrant population is made up of about 60% children and families, and 60% of migrants are largely coming from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.[9] A legacy of underdevelopment and increased levels of insecurity fuel this migration to the U.S. The most recent UN Human Development Index (HDI) statistics (Figures 1 through 4) provide some insight into socioeconomic conditions in these nations and the problems they face.

Figure 1. Selected Basic Socioeconomic Indicators

	Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Mexico
Human Development Index (value for 2017) [A]	0.617	0.650	0.674	0.774
Life Expectancy at Birth [A]	73.8	73.7	73.8	77.3
National Poverty Line, 2006-2017* [B]	60.9	59.3	38.2	43.6
Childhood malnutrition (Stunting, moderate or severe, percentage of the population under 5 years of age)	22.6	46.7	13.6	12.4

Source: *Human Development Indices and Indicators. 2018 Statistical Update*.[10] Adapted from: [A] Table 1, pp. 23-24; [B] Table 6, p. 42.
Note: Based on most recent data available during the period specified.

Figure 2. Selected Education Indicators

		Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Mexico
Mean years of schooling, 2017 (years) [A]	Female	6.6	6.4	6.7	8.4
	Male	6.5	6.5	7.3	8.9
Population with at least some secondary education, 2010-2017** (percentage, ages 25 and older) [B]	Female	36.8	33.5	42.2	57.8
	Male	38.4	37.2	47.9	61.0
Youth Literacy rate, 2006-16** (percentage, ages 15 and older)		89.0	81.3	88.0	94.5

Source: *Human Development Indices and Indicators. 2018 Statistical Update*. Adapted from: [A] Table 4, p. 35, 36; [B] Table 5, p. 39, 40.
Note: **Based on more recent data available during the period specified.

Figure 3. Employment Indicators

	Employment [A][11]				Vulnerable Employment[iii] [B]	Unemployment [A]		
	Employment to pop. ratio[i]	Labor force participation rate[i]	Employment in agriculture[ii]	Employment in services[ii]		Total[iv]	Youth[v]	Youth not in school or employed[vi]
Honduras	65.1	68.1	28.5	50.3	34.7	4.5	8.2	27.8
Guatemala	60.3	62.0	29.4	49.6	35.7	2.7	5.8	27.3
El Salvador	58.6	61.4	18.8	60.0	27.2	4.5	9.9	29.2
Mexico	59.2	61.3	13.1	61.1	36.1	3.5	6.9	18.7

Source: *Human Development Indices and Indicators. 2018 Statistical Update*. Adapted from [A] Table 11, p. 63-64; [B] Dashboard 1, p. 84-85.
Notes: [1] 2017 data, percentage, ages 15 and older; [ii] 2017 data, percentage of total employment; [iii] 2017 data, percentage of total employment, estimates by the International Labor Organization; [iv] 2017 data, percentage of labor force; [v] 2017 data, percentage, ages 15 to 24; [vi] 2012-2017 data, percentage, ages 15 to 24.

Figure 4. Selected Indicators of Human Security

		Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Mexico
Homicide rate, 2011-16 (per 100,000 people) [A]		56.5	27.3	82.8	19.3
Justification of wife beating***, 2010-16 (percentage, ages 15-49) [A]	Female	12	11	8	5
	Male	10	7	n.d.	n.d.
Violence against women, intimate partner, 2005-18 (percentage of female population, ages 15 and older) [B]		21.6	18.0	26.3	14.1

Source: *Human Development Indices and Indicators. 2018 Statistical Update*. Adapted from: [A] Table 12, p. 67-68. [B] Dashboard 3, pp. 94-95, Based on most recent years available for the period specified. Notes: *** Definition: "Percentage of women and men ages 15–49 who consider a husband to be justified in hitting or beating his wife for at least one of the following reasons: if his wife burns the food, argues with him, goes out without telling him, neglects the children or refuses sexual relations."

The HDI is made up of numerous variables, including perceptions of well-being, women's empowerment, and environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. The combination of these variables results in a ranked list of countries. Out of 189 nations rated in the HDI, El Salvador ranks 121, Guatemala 127, and Honduras 133. In contrast to these countries, Mexico is ranked 74 in the HDI and has better scores for the indicators in Figures 1-4. However, economic conditions alone cannot explain why people leave their country. There may be other underlying drivers motivating people to migrate and flee, such as aggression against women, organized crime, violence, and attacks, extortions, and kidnappings by Maras.[12]

Precarious economic conditions, insecurity, weak institutions, corruption, and other social and economic ills reflect the underdevelopment in Central American countries; many people seek to leave these bleak conditions through migration. The problems plaguing Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have turned into an issue for Mexico due to the mass migration of people through the southern border. In addition to the pressure that the U.S. exerts on Mexico to halt the migrant caravans, Mexican authorities are concerned about the number of Central American migrants who may eventually decide to stay in the country without proper authorization. People whose original intention is to reach the U.S. may also settle temporarily or permanently, and with or without authorization.

Migrant Caravans as a Matter of Public Policy

The earliest version of a migrant caravan appeared in 2011; the event began as a march that originated at the Tecún Uman (Guatemala)-Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico) border crossing, with migrants converging there and walking together into Mexico's interior.[13] The march symbolized a Catholic ceremony known as the Stations of the Cross (*vía crucis* in Spanish), reflecting the suffering that Christ had to bear on his way to being crucified. This ritual is part of the Easter week observances. Thereafter, the march became known as the Easter/Stations of the Cross caravan, as did subsequent caravans. Hence, migrants, often accompanied by activists, traveled through Mexico as a way to denounce the abuses they

suffered during their journey. Apparently, this first proto-caravan had an intended destination of Oaxaca,[14] with migrants continuing their trip to the U.S.-Mexico border on their own volition. In subsequent years, the migrant caravans departed from the same border crossing, as well as points nearby on the Guatemala border. For instance, in April 2014 the Stations of the Cross march began at El Naranjo, a village in Guatemala some 14 miles from the El Ceibo port of entry into Mexico. According to a first-hand witness account, the initial count of people in this march was 400; when the caravan arrived in Mexico City, the number had doubled.[15] Three years later, in April 2017, an Easter Caravan assembled between 200 and 300 people; one small group entered Mexico through Tabasco and other migrants through Chiapas, traveling by car and on foot. The first group reached Mexico City, and the second ended in Tijuana.[16] One source asserts that 108 people initiated a claim for asylum at the U.S.[17]

Supporters of the most recent caravans, notably the NGO *Pueblo sin Fronteras*, claim that the goal of the mass movement is to call attention to the dangerous conditions in Central America resulting from political repression and gang violence, and to validate the rights of people to migrate and seek asylum.[18] In October 2017, another caravan departed from Tapachula, Mexico, and arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border one month later. On that occasion, a total of 44 migrants turned themselves in at the San Ysidro port of entry to claim asylum status in the U.S.; reportedly the entire group included more than 400 people.[19] Others gave up on the idea of entering the U.S. and opted to remain in Mexico; the head of a migrant shelter in Tijuana told a reporter that one-third of this caravan had decided to stay in the city.[20]

On March 25, 2018, people gathered in Tapachula, Mexico, once more to join the Stations of the Cross Caravan. This caravan attracted near 1,000 individuals, and its original intended destination was Mexico City, according to organizer Ireneo Mujica.[21] However, many people decided to move onward. By April 27, 2018, the march had slimmed down to about 370 individuals and had reached the U.S.-Mexico border.[22] Trump's reaction to this iteration of the Easter Caravan increased public awareness of the event. A few days after learning about the caravan, Trump threatened to send military personnel to the border[23] and to cease U.S. participation in the new United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.[24] He also claimed that the caravan threatened U.S. national security, which provided justification for his proposed border wall. In contrast to Trump's divisive rhetoric, the Mexican government issued a statement with a more sympathetic tone. In a joint statement, the offices of the secretary of the interior and the secretary of foreign affairs declared on April 2, 2018:

> Mexico's migration policy is a sovereign one, through which it seeks to ensure legal, safe and orderly migration with full respect for people's rights. Under no circumstance does the Mexican government promote irregular migration. In this context, the Mexican government believes the "Via Crucis" migrant caravan is a public demonstration that seeks to call attention to migration and the importance of respecting the rights of Central American migrants who in many cases are forced to leave their countries in search of better opportunities or with the intention of getting international protection [including] refugee status.[25]

In accordance with its proclaimed intentions, the government offered refugee status to those caravan members who applied for it.[26] There were migrants who took this offer and others who declined it.

A new, larger caravan formed in October 2018. Unlike previous caravans, the intended destination of this march was the U.S.-Mexico border. Like prior caravans, the majority of its members came from Honduras, where a group of approximately 1,600 people assembled. By the time it got to the Guatemala-Mexico border, the size of the gathering had grown to at least 7,000 people.[27] After passing through Mexico City, a splinter group made up of members of the LGBTQI community headed to Tijuana and arrived there on November 12.[28] The Mexican government's response to the situation included both harsh and humanitarian actions. On the one hand, it sent more police forces to manage the situation at the border, leading to altercations that may have escalated into abuse.[29] On the other hand, and in an attempt to dissuade marchers from moving forward to Mexico's northern border, the government implemented a program to manage the situation.

The "You are at Home" strategy offered temporary employment to those migrants who sought refugee status. People received a start-up aid package of Mx$2,262 and assurances of medical assistance and access to housing. The permit allowed claimants to remain in Chiapas and Oaxaca only.[30] On November 15, Alfredo Navarrete Prida, Mexico's secretary of the interior, informed the press that around 1,500 people had voluntarily decided to go back to their country of origin.[31] According to a local newspaper, 2,697 people had registered for the "You are at Home" program, and 546 had received their first payment by mid-November.[32] Some migrants rejected participation in the program because they saw it as a way to make them stay in southern Mexico and because they feared retaliation from the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* agents (immigration authorities), a group that has a long history of being corrupt and abusive toward migrants.[33]

From October to December 2018, four smaller caravans formed. About 3,000 of these migrants stayed in Tijuana and another 500 in Mexicali. Nearly 1,200 tried to enter the U.S., and a similar number had returned to their country of origin. Finally, almost 3,700 requested refugee status and humanitarian protection in Mexico.[34] Those who went to Tijuana organized themselves to request asylum in the U.S. Migrants created a list of their own to register applicants for asylum with U.S. immigration officials. Reportedly close to 5,000 people were on the list toward the end of November 2018. The log also included people from different countries, not only Central Americans.[35]

Policies to Address the Migration Issue in Mexico

López Obrador had included a plan to curtail immigration on Mexico's southern border in his pre-election *Proyecto de Nación* plan, but the novelty of the massive caravans took his administration by surprise. López Obrador ultimately put forward a solution that opted for social and economic development over a policing approach; in theory, this represents an important shift in the way migration policy has been conceived by previous Mexican administrations. In the early months of the new Mexican administration, this approach also partially met U.S. demands for more stringent containment. In contrast, the U.S. administration took a different approach to address the immediate problems posed by the caravans. On December 20, 2018, the U.S. government declared its intention to implement a plan in which asylum seekers had to wait in Mexico before they could be admitted into the U.S. for an asylum hearing before the immigration courts. What informally became knowns as "Remain in Mexico," an idea that the Trump administration had entertained for months, turned into the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP).[36]

Shortly following the announcement of the MPP, a caravan formed in mid-January 2019. This caravan tested the ability of the López Obrador administration to deal with the immigration problem. Arguably, authorities handled the situation in accordance with a progressive approach that emphasized a respect for human rights. On January 17, the Mexican government initiated an emergency program to deliver visitor cards to incoming migrants on humanitarian grounds.[37] Six days later, a government source put the number of applicants at 8,727, including 6,483 Hondurans, 1,037 El Salvadorians, 1,011 Guatemalans, 183 Nicaraguans, 3 Angolans, 2 Brazilians, and 2 Cubans.[38] Mexico's emergency program ended on January 28, 2019. Government sources indicate that authorities had issued 13,270 visitor cards in Chiapas, Mexico City, and the city of Coahuila between December 2018 and February 2019,[39] and had "facilitated access to some people into local labor markets."[40]

In addition, the January caravan is also significant because some of its participants were the first to be returned from the U.S. to Mexico through the MMP. On January 25, 2019, the U.S. government announced that it would return 20 Central Americans to Mexico through the San Ysidro gate. These people had applied for asylum in the U.S. and apparently held a Mexican visitor card for humanitarian reasons. On that same day, Roberto Velasco Alvarez, spokesperson from Mexico's foreign relations office, indicated in a press conference that the Mexican government did not accept the de-facto policy of safe third country that the U.S. was about to implement unilaterally.[41] On January 29, a Honduran citizen became the first asylum seeker to be sent to Mexico.[42]

The Mexican government reacted to the implementation of MPP, once again, in a cautious way. On March 3, a joint statement from the secretary of foreign affairs and the secretary of the interior read:

> The government of Mexico reaffirms that there is a binding agreement with the United States Government to respond to the growing numbers of people, mainly families from Central America, who wish to go to Mexico and the United States in search development opportunities and protection. In the face of the unilateral

decision taken by the government of the United States to implement article 235 (b)(2)(c) of its Immigration and Nationality Act, Mexico chooses to support migrants. For humanitarian reasons, and temporarily, the government of Mexico authorizes the admittance of some asylum seekers from the United States while they await an audience before the [immigration] authority… to deport these people will imply denying to them the right to asylum that the government of Mexico subscribes to and upholds…the government of Mexico has established specific criteria for [accepting] the return of certain people who entered the United States seeking asylum, such as not admitting non-accompanied minors into our country, and not allowing the separation of families.[43]

In addition, the MPP faced its first hurdles from within the U.S.; in April a court in California blocked the new policy and deferred its implementation.[44] Whether or not the U.S. government will eventually succeed in overcoming the legal obstacles to the MPP, the directive raises a lot of concerns. Given the huge backlog in the U.S. immigration system, how long will people have to wait in Mexico until their situations are resolved? How are they going to obtain legal counsel? How will they support themselves in Mexico during their wait? One foreseeable outcome is that anyone removed "temporarily" to Mexico may end up, for all practical purposes, stranded there due to application review times and subsequent delays entering the U.S.

Despite the legal challenged that the MPP has faced, the policy continued in effect as of this writing; by late June 2019, the National Institute of Migration Issues (INM) claimed that more than 16,000 Central Americans had entered Mexico as part of the MPP.[45] In what appears to be an effort to deflect the consequences of receiving and hosting so many people, López Obrador declared that the government would sign an agreement with *maquila* companies to offer employment to as many as 40,000 migrants in northern Mexico.[46] Despite its good intentions, this initiative may not work based on prior failed experiences,[47] as well as the fact that Central Americans show no interest in working in Mexico. It is too early to foresee the long-term consequences of the MPP, yet the controversial, one-sided program will remain a contentious issue between both governments as asylum-seekers continue to reach the U.S.-Mexico border in large numbers.

The U.S. government has also threatened to inflict more stringent actions to stop the influx of migrants flocking to the U.S.-Mexico border. There has been talk of sealing the border, as reflected in Trump's tweet on March 29, 2019.[48] He temporarily backed down on this idea and instead threatened to impose tariffs on Mexican goods. On May 30, Trump announced that a 5% tariff would be imposed on all Mexican imports into the U.S., effective June 10, 2019, unless Mexico took steps to curb Central American migrants from reaching the border.[49] Trump called off his threat after negotiations between high-level officials of both countries took place. Mexico agreed to take new measures—including deploying the national guard to the country's southern border and allowing the U.S. to implement the MPP at all terrestrial U.S. ports of entry—to stem the flow of migrants.[50] Included in the deal, yet a point of lesser significance, was a reiteration of the need for the Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP).

The Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP)

As previously mentioned, Lopez Obrador's administration came up with a blueprint to solve the migration issue before taking office; this plan envisioned a long-term, ambitious roadmap to address the root causes of the problem. Specifically, the *Proyecto de Nación* included formal agreements to hire Central American workers in Mexico via temporary employment schemes.[51] However, the caravans and mounting pressure from the Trump administration compelled the newly inaugurated Mexican government to act. As a result, the government expedited development of the CDP.

Right after López Obrador's inauguration as president on December 1, 2018, he convened with the presidents of Guatemala and Honduras, along with the vice president of El Salvador, to announce the creation of a comprehensive plan to foster development in these Central American nations, thereby deterring immigration. The leaders all signed a declaration ("political statement") to symbolically approve the CDP; keywords in the document include safe governance and a regional perspective, all of it "led by the principle of shared, yet differential, responsibility."[52] Soon thereafter, López Obrador appointed the Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLAC), a UN agency, to draft the actual contents of the plan.

Four core goals underlie the foundations of the CDP: address the multiple causes that trigger migration, protect migrants' human rights, provide legal documentation to migrants, and assist returning migrants. A program of economic development geared towards stopping emigration, a social welfare initiative, a governance platform to address migration-related issues, and actions to address the forced displacement due to climate change are the key components within the CDP.

At the same time, the López Obrador administration sought the political and economic backing of the U.S. to materialize the CDP. To this end, during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's attendance at the inauguration of López Obrador, the CDP was part of the agenda the two discussed.[53] Lopez Obrador's lobbying seemed to have encountered an initially positive reception. On December 18, 2018, the U.S. department of state announced the tacit acceptance of the CDP via a strategy for northern Central America and southern Mexico, "[one] committed to promoting a safer and more prosperous Central America by enhancing security, governance, and economic prosperity that can create greater opportunities and benefits for the people of the region and help us jointly address the shared challenges of migration, narcotics trafficking, and the activities of trans-national criminal organizations."[54] Accordingly, the U.S. government pledged "$5.8 billion through public and private investment to promote institutional reforms and development" in the region.[55] Using the same rhetoric deployed in past attempts to address problems in this area, the U.S. identified three lines of action: security, governance, and prosperity. In the statement, it is clear that the U.S. government acknowledges that prosperity in Mexico is important for regional stability. It promised, through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), "to invest and mobilize $2 billion in additional funds for projects in southern Mexico that are viable and attract private sector investment."[56]

Despite these promises, the recent U.S. government record for funding of similar initiatives in Central America is concerning. First, the U.S. allocation of foreign spending has been undergoing important, yet unclear, changes. The Trump administration's budget request for aid to Central America in FY2019 suffered a steep cut from prior years. It is 30% lower than the assistance allocated for FY2018.[57] The request cuts across all types of aid but, most significantly, "it would shift the balance of the remaining aid toward security and rule-of-law efforts and away from governance and economic growth programs."[58] This package also comes with stricter restrictions than in the past; 75% of all aid is to be released when recipient governments meet certain requirements. On the one hand, there is a decline in overall assistance provided by the U.S; on the other hand, there is the recent offer of US$5 billion to Central America to complement the Mexican government's plan to create jobs in the region. Let it be noted that most of the U.S. funding goes to the current U.S. Strategy for Central America, a complementary policy to the Alliance for Prosperity Plan promoted since 2014 by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[59] The Alliance for Prosperity Plan was meant to counter the main reasons driving migration, but the migrant caravans demonstrated the limited effectiveness of this plan. El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala invested around $7.7 billion in the Alliance for Prosperity Plan during 2016-2018.[60]

Furthermore, Trump's recent declarations concerning a slash in aid to these countries are not surprising given the escalation of his rhetoric about migration in general. Trump's allies and critics alike think that such cuts will prove counterproductive. [61] Instead of serving as a way to force Central American governments to act, such decreases in aid may foster more migration, and most experts agree that suspending or cutting resources to beleaguered Central American economies are insufficient to stop emigration.[62] In addition, and unlike Mexico's take on the matter, the primacy of security over other issues is the most worrying aspect in the U.S. approach to immigration. This is the message that the Trump administration stresses repeatedly with Central American authorities. For instance, former U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Nielsen traveled to San Salvador on February 20, 2019, to attend a meeting featuring the security ministers of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador; the agenda included issues that Nielsen and her counterparts had been discussing for some time, such as measures to "bolster border security, target human smuggling and trafficking organizations, prevent the formation of new migrant caravans, and address the root causes of the migration crisis."[63] In a hearing before the U.S. Congress on March 6, Nielsen asserted that such meetings are part of constant communication with Mexican and Central American officials to address "the migration crisis at the source."[64] In light of current U.S. interests and policies, and regardless of the avowed commitment on the part of U.S. authorities to support the CDP, it remains to be seen what the U.S. will actually do.

Despite these concerns over U.S. spending cuts and the Trump administrations rhetoric, the plans to develop the CDP's agenda continued swiftly. In a December 18 announcement concerning bilateral cooperation plans between the U.S. and Mexican governments to fund the CDP, Marcelo Ebrad, Mexico's secretary of foreign affairs, suggested creating a "prosperity zone" to foster development in southern Mexico and northern Central America. He added that Mexico plans to invest US$25 billion in the region over the next five years.[65] As indicated, since the inception of the plan, Mexico's government has secured

the cooperation of the ECLAC to help with the technical aspects of the initiative.[66] The Mexican government has also kept asserting the need for U.S. financial support for the CDP; when Jared Kushner, Trump's senior advisor, visited Mexico City on March 20, 2019, López Obrador insisted on the need to reach an agreement to secure U.S. investment in southern Mexico and northern Central America to prevent emigration.[67] In summary, up until late June 2019 the López Obrador administration had leaned toward a development-first, human rights-based approach to solve immigration issues, in contrast to the security-first perspective used by the U.S. government. The official disclosure of the CDP took place during Lopez Obrador's customary morning conference on May 20, 2019.

A month after the public announcement of the CDP, López Obrador began to made good on his promise to move ahead with the initiative by pledging a direct transfer of US$30 million to El Salvador;[68] the resources are intended for a reforestation program, similar to one already under way in Mexico. The program's goal is to generate employment in the area in the hope that stable jobs will deter people from migrating. The pledge was made on June 20, 2019, during the official visit to Chiapas of Nayib Bukele, the recently elected president of El Salvador.[69]

In addition, other schemes had already been at work before the presentation of the CDP. Mexican authorities invited Mexican corporations to participate in the plan as part of its intended goal of fostering prosperity.[70] On March 5, 2019, Secretary Ebrad announced on his Twitter account the he had presented the program to a group of representatives from 13 firms from the telephone, airline, banking, dairy, steel, and cement sectors.[71] If this is any indication of the trend that the CDP is to follow, then the program seems more like a strategy to facilitate further involvement of Mexico's big capital into Central American markets rather than a new way to alleviate the conditions of underdevelopment that fuel migration.

Outlook

There are a number of challenges ahead for the new Mexican administration. Internally, López Obrador aims at strengthening the economy of the southern border region to accomplish two things at the same time. One is to raise the quality of life by fostering development so that this region reaches levels of well-being similar to northern Mexico. López Obrador assumes that this transformation will deter Mexicans' need to emigrate. A number of development projects, such as the Maya Train, are the driving forces intended to bring about this transformation. The second aim is that, once these initiatives have boosted the regional economy, a flourishing job market in the south will be strong enough to absorb foreign laborers. It remains to be seen whether these plans will work.

The job market growth in the southern border region becomes especially crucial in the face of Central America's troubled socioeconomic situation. As long as the overall underdevelopment and insecurity do not improve in Mexico's southern neighbors, their problems remain Mexico's problems. It is in everyone's interests that these regions develop in order to solve a number of social and economic issues, including immigration and

security. In particular, security has turned into an international area of concern due to potentially disorderly situations at the Mexico-Guatemala border. For the Mexican government, the possibility that caravans may get out of control and break the peace is a security concern. The caravans' passages at the border have been marred by only minor incidents of violence. In fact, the handling of such massive mobilizations has been ultimately adequate. For Trump, the migration caravans are considered a hazard because of the alleged presence, so far unproved, of terrorists in their midst.

It is clear that Washington does not see eye to eye with Mexico City on how to deal with the immigration issue. Trump and his administration insist on applying a security approach first and foremost. As a result, a discordant dialog has emerged between the two governments. This disconnect is further demonstrated by the MPP. Mexico may believe that the implementation of the MPP has turned into a way of transferring part of the U.S. migration problem to Mexico; it is a point of contention when considering that the Mexican government has only hesitantly agreed to the protocols. Trump's threat of slashing aid to Central America, raising tariffs on imports from Mexico, or closing the border make finding a lasting solution for all parties even more difficult. Mexico has yielded to pressure from the U.S. government to apply restrictive means of curbing migration, yet it continues to assert a different, more humanitarian approach. It remains to be seen if and when the Trump administration effectively fulfills its commitment to underwrite CDP.

Mexico's response to the caravans has shown that the country embraces a mildly progressive policy when it comes to addressing immigration issues until recently. Through the combination of restrictive and humanitarian measures, the country managed to partially delink the directives of the U.S. from its own migration agenda. Yet, as Trump's rhetoric escalated, Mexico had to toughen its immigration policies. The assumption that migration poses a threat to national security has been part of the failed approach to immigration in the past, yet it keeps surfacing as a primary concern in the U.S. when discussing this controversial issue. As a result, Mexico is in a difficult position to advance an agenda that is not aligned with the security-first policy of the U.S. Thus, containment methods (e.g., national guard at the southern border, acceptance of asylum seekers in the U.S. who wait in Mexico for a hearing, and other policies) prevail over the economic approach (e.g., the effective implementation of CDP) for the time being.

Recommendations

1. Trump's relentless crackdown attitude undermines Mexico's efforts to solve the migration issue. To move forward, the U.S. administration should work to find a common ground with Mexico and Central America in order to solve these problems. It is clear that immigration is a shared concern, yet responsibility befalls differently on all involved parties; the Trump administration can do more than imposing unilateral, restrictive, steps. At the very least, it has, the moral obligation of absorbing the cost that Mexico has to bear due to the (reluctant) hosting of many applicants that seek asylum in the U.S.

2. Unlike the current thinking of the Trump administration, the international community clearly understands that the burden of solving immigration issues cannot fall on Mexico only. To this end, countries such as Germany and Spain have pledged support for the CDP, according to Secretary Ebrad. [72] At present, the CDP may not be the best and only solution for the situation at hand, but it is a better alternative than the containment and exclusionary policies. Furthermore, and in contrast to the prevailing U.S. responses, the CDP includes a long-term roadmap to durable change. As the main party afflicted by the situation, the U.S. should provide financial support for the CDP in order to directly address immigration-related issues.

3. If the U.S. halts assistance to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, it will be counterproductive and spur more immigration from those nations, rather than stop it. This may produce more instability instead of the opposite. Given the prior failures of Central American governments to advance internal reforms aimed at solving their migration problems, pressuring them to effect change may not be an easy task. However, success will not be achieved through punitive action. The U.S. and Mexico have the opportunity to make a fresh start with the incoming administrations in El Salvador and Guatemala,[73] and work toward finding new, effective strategies to halt migration, such as enacting the CDP. Honduras is currently enmeshed in a serious political crisis, so the challenges and outlook for finding solutions within the country are bleaker.

4. Mexico also needs to take further steps to completely delink U.S. immigration and asylum policy from its own. At the present time, Mexico combines securitization with humanitarian and development approaches. Under pressure from the U.S., the former course of action currently prevails. However, it is recommended that the Mexican government returns to a non-securitized approach to deal with immigration, such as opening jobs in the maquila industry and other economic sectors that may lure migrants by offering better salaries.

5. The Mexican government also needs to be more creative when it comes to fostering regional integration and development in its southern region and neighboring Central American countries, as well as in the implementation of the CDP. For example, Mexico´s Agency for Cooperation and Development could play a leading role through innovative bilateral programs, regional mechanisms, and other initiatives in northern Central America. A motion has already been approved in congress to this effect.[74] In addition, while the CDP is an example of a "top-down" scheme, more "from the ground-up" initiatives are needed. The promotion and support of small-and medium-size enterprises in communities of origin, funded with remittances and supplemented with CDP funding, can be a viable alternative to the large-scale business model proposed in the CDP. This could arguably generate prosperity through a trickle-down effect.

Endnotes

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[63] U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Secretary Kirstjen M. Nielsen to Travel to San Salvador, El Salvador," February 19, 2019, https://sv.usembassy.gov/secretary-nielsen-to-travel-to-el-salvador/.

[64] *The Way Forward on Border Security*, 6.; On February 28, Mexico's Secretary of the Interior Sánchez Cordero met with Nielsen to talks about Mexico's new migration agenda. However, no official communication from either government came out as to any agreements they may have reached.

[65] The U.S. government will channel a total of US$2.8 billion to Central America through OPIC; Secretary of Foreign Affairs [Mexico], "Declaración entre México y Estados Unidos sobre los Principios de Desarrollo Económico y Cooperación en el sur de México y Centroamérica," Blog, December 18, 2018, https://www.gob.mx/sre/articulos/declaracion-entre-mexico-y-estados-unidos-sobre-los-principios-de-desarrollo-economico-y-cooperacion-en-el-sur-de-mexico-y-centroamerica-185399?idiom=es.

[66] See: Secretariat of Foreign Affairs [Mexico], "La política migratoria de México."

[67] "Versión estenográfica de la conferencia de prensa del presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador," AMLO, March 20, 2019, https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2019/03/20/version-estenografica-de-la-conferencia-de-prensa-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-16/.

[68] "Versión estenográfica. 'Sembrando Vida', Plan de Desarrollo para la Migración, en Tapachula, Chiapas" AMLO, June 20, 2019, https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2019/06/20/version-estenografica-sembrando-vida-plan-de-desarrollo-para-la-migracion-en-tapachula-chiapas/.

[69] The reforestation program is called *Sembrando Vida* (Planting Life): https://www.gob.mx/bienestar/acciones-y-programas/programa-sembrando-vida.

[70] The Secretary of Foreign Affairs is to have a prominent role in this plan. At a confirmation hearing before the Mexican Senate, the undersecretary for Latin America and the Caribbean, Maximiliano Reyes Zuñiga, presented as part of his work plan an initiative to develop southern Mexico and northern Central America. See: Senado de la República [Mexico], "Dictamen de la comisión de relaciones exteriores del senado de la república, por el que se ratifica el nombramiento que el ciudadano presidente de la república hace a favor del ciudadano Maximiliano Reyes Zúñiga, como subsecretario para américa latina y el caribe," January 16, 2019, http://infosen.senado.gob.mx/sgsp/gaceta/64/1/2019-01-16-1/assets/documentos/Dic_CRE_Nombramiento_C_Maximiliano_Reyes.pdf.

[71] Isabella González, "Presenta SRE plan migratorio a empresas," *Reforma,* March 5, 2019, https://www.reforma.com/aplicacioneslibre/articulo/default.aspx?id=1624336&md5=fae9f8cc63ac938fef4bed430aa95dd0&ta=0dfdbac11765226904c16cb9ad1b2efe.

[72] Secretariat of Foreign Affairs [Mexico] "El secretario de Relaciones Exteriores anuncia en Naciones Unidas el lanzamiento del Plan de Desarrollo Integral con Centroamérica" June 19, 2019, https://www.gob.mx/sre/es/articulos/el-secretario-de-relaciones-exteriores-anuncia-en-naciones-unidas-el-lanzamiento-del-plan-de-desarrollo-integral-con-centroamerica?idiom=es.

[73] Nayib Bukele came into power as president of El Salvador on June 1, 2019. In Guatemala, the new president will come into office as of January 1, 2020.

[74] Congreso de la Unión [Mexico], "Proposition 1. Por el que se exhorta a la SRE, a construir acciones por la vía diplomática para promover diversas alternativas con perspectivas de derechos humanos a favor de los migrantes centroamericanos," January 9, 2019,

http://sitl.diputados.gob.mx/LXIV_leg/proposicioneslxiv.php?comt=56&edot=T&pert=2.