

Migration as a Mexico-United States binational issue

Antonio Payán

Rice University /

Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez

ORCID: 0000-0002-4684-6998

Background

IN JUNE 2012, A NOVEL PHENOMENON SURPRISED EVERYONE—a caravan of several thousand migrants marching toward the U.S.-Mexico border. Since then, the “caravanization” of migration, that is large numbers of migrants that include single individuals, family units, and even unaccompanied minors, from multiple nationalities, has been a feature of the immigration landscape. As individuals swarmed in Latin America, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, to march toward developed countries—especially the European Union and the United States, countries like Mexico, Turkey, and Morocco have become an obligated passageway.

This in turn has brought about tense relations between transit and destination countries. Developed countries expected transit countries to stem the flow of migrants toward their borders. Over time, this pressure turned into negotiations of various explicit and unspoken agreements. The European Union pressed a “safe third country” agreement on Turkey and Spain negotiated an agreement with Morocco, both designed to contain transmigration. In both cases, funding has been provided to stem the flow of migrants.

The United States and Mexico did not engage in a formal third-country agreement, but it is well known that there is an unspoken agreement to cooperate on reducing transmigration toward the U.S.-Mexico border. This cooperation has not always gone smoothly and both countries have used the issue as leverage over the other.



Massive, irregular, and disorderly migration has, in fact, been the most important irritant in binational relations.

Mass migration as an irritant in binational relations

The issues that cross the U.S.-Mexico relationship are many, but for the last twelve years, none has been as salient as transmigration. However, neither the United States nor Mexico have seen the issue of mass, irregular and sometimes disorderly migration as a platform to establish new and creative ways to cooperate with each other or to extend cooperation on other issues. During the Donald J. Trump administration, the U.S. then-president threatened Mexico with 5% tariffs on trade monthly, up to 25%, if the Mexican government did not stop the flow of migrants. The numbers dropped dramatically after that, indicating that the Mexican government clearly saw it in its interest to cooperate with Mr. Trump. In 2021, after Joseph R. Biden became president of the United States, the number of transmigrants rose again—partly due to tactical and message mistakes of the Biden administration, but also to Mexico’s president López Obrador’s desire to leverage the issue of migration to deal with the new administration in Washington.

It took Mr. Biden a couple of years to get the issue of migration right, and by 2024, two specific points had turned the numbers around, one was a diplomatic visit to Mexico City by Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas,

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and White House Homeland Security Advisor Liz Sherwood-Randall. The second was a series of drastic and very restrictive measures that the Biden administration announced in May 2024. Since then, the numbers have dramatically dropped, although they are not zero. Although none of the two governments were very explicit about the details of the January 2024 agreement, Mexico became a *de facto* enforcer of U.S. migration policy, implementing measures to prevent potential migrants from entering Mexico, detaining thousands of migrants along the migration route, and summarily deporting many migrants straight out of Mexico before they reached the border.

Recent trends

Binational cooperation on migration has paid off—at least regarding U.S. interests. Only approximately 56,000 migrant encounters were recorded by U.S. border authorities in July 2024, the lowest numbers since the fall of 2020, and the numbers are on a downward trend. Fewer Venezuelans, Cubans, and Haitians are arriving in Mexico today, and even fewer are showing up at ports of entry at the border. Only about one thousand Venezuelans entered the U.S. in July 2024. Drops in migrants were reported not just across nationalities, including Guatemalans and Mexicans, but also among individuals and family units, although unaccompanied minors continue to arrive at the same



levels. Nearly all ports of entry reported lower numbers of encounters as well, indicating that the policy is working all along the border.

Cooperation on immigration

Clearly, the numbers are not zero, and they can go up and down wildly sometimes. Moreover, despite the more severe measures implemented by both the U.S. and Mexico, the basic structural conditions have not changed. Venezuela is amid huge political turmoil, after the fraudulent elections of July 2024. This may push more of its citizens out of the country. The dictatorships in Cuba and Nicaragua continue to impose repressive measures on their citizens, which may also force many of them to flee. Economic and security conditions have not improved in Central America and appear to be deteriorating in Mexico as well, which may influence many to seek to move in the future. Much of what can be accomplished will also depend on the tug-of-war between Washington and Mexico City, which is about to get more complicated as the U.S. pursues a more aggressive agenda against Mexico's criminal organizations and the treaty-mandated 2026 review and revision of the United States-Mexico-Canada trade agreement that begins to take shape. The temptation will be to link migration cooperation —among other items— to the review and revision of the agreement.

The coming administrations: Sheinbaum and...

Divining the future is impossible, but the issue of mass, irregular, and even disorderly migration is likely to be a mainstay of the next administrations in both Mexico City and Washington DC. It is also hard to guess how each will use the issue to gain leverage on other issues. Even so, both governments will have to deal with the issue and the phenomenon will continue to determine much of the cooperation between the two countries, and likely remain a major irritant in the binational relationship.

What is clear is that it is in the benefit of both countries to cooperate closely on the issue of migration and continue to implement current policies —and perhaps even harden them— in order to clear the agenda for other important issues that will affect cooperation on investment, trade, organized crime and drug trafficking, and the general North American agenda in a world that seems more chaotic and uncertain. Moreover, sooner rather than later, the U.S. will have to address its immigration system, and Mexico should seek a privileged position in it —a clear example is the TN Visa, which privileges Mexican (and Canadian) workers over many others. This would be very advantageous for the Mexico's development. Thus, viewing the issue of immigration as something to be leveraged against the other partner to extract zero-sum type concession from the other is likely to make things worse, not better, in what is already a complicated bilateral agenda.

