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Will Biden's Central American Plan Slow Migration (or Speed It Up)?



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Joe Biden entered the White House with some inspiring yet contradictory positions on immigration and Central America. He promised to reverse Donald Trump's draconian anti-immigrant policies while, through his "[Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America](#)," restoring "U.S. leadership in the region" that he claimed Trump had abandoned. For Central Americans, though, such "leadership" has an ominous ring.

Although the second half of his plan's name does, in fact, echo that of left-wing, grassroots organizations like the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador ([CISPES](#)), its content highlights a version of security and prosperity in that region that's

more Cold War-like than CISPES-like. Instead of solidarity (or even partnership) with Central America, Biden's plan actually promotes an old economic development model that has long benefited U.S. corporations. It also aims to impose a distinctly militarized version of "security" on the people of that region. In addition, it focuses on enlisting Central American governments and, in particular, their militaries to contain migration through the use of repression.

Linking Immigration and Foreign Policy

The clearest statement of the president's Central America goals appears in his "U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021," sent to Congress on January 20th. That proposal offers a sweeping set of changes aimed at eliminating President Trump's racist exclusions, restoring rights to asylum, and opening a path to legal status and citizenship for the immigrant population. After the anti-immigrant barrage of the last four years, that proposal seems worth celebrating. It follows in the footsteps of previous bipartisan "comprehensive" compromises like the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and a failed 2013 immigration bill, both of which included a path to citizenship for many undocumented people, while dedicating significant resources to border "security."

Read closely, a significant portion of Biden's immigration proposal focuses on the premise that addressing the root causes of Central America's problems will reduce the flow of immigrants to the U.S. border. In its own words, the Biden plan promises to promote "the rule of law, security, and economic development in Central America" in order to "address the key factors" contributing to emigration. Buried in its fuzzy language, however, are long-standing bipartisan Washington goals that should sound familiar to those who have been paying attention in these years.

Their essence: that millions of dollars in "aid" money should be poured into upgrading local military and police forces in order to protect an economic model based on private investment and the export of profits. Above all, the privileges of foreign investors must not be threatened. As it happens, this is the very model that Washington has imposed on the countries of Central America over the past century, one that's left its lands corrupt, violent, and impoverished, and so continued to uproot Central Americans and send them fleeing toward the United States.

Crucial to Biden's plan, as to those of his predecessors, is another key element: to coerce Mexico and Guatemala into serving as proxies for the wall only partially built along the southern border of the U.S. and proudly promoted by presidents from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump.

While the economic model lurking behind Biden’s plan may be old indeed, the attempt to outsource U.S. immigration enforcement to Mexican and Central American military and police forces has proven to be a distinctly twenty-first-century twist on border policy.

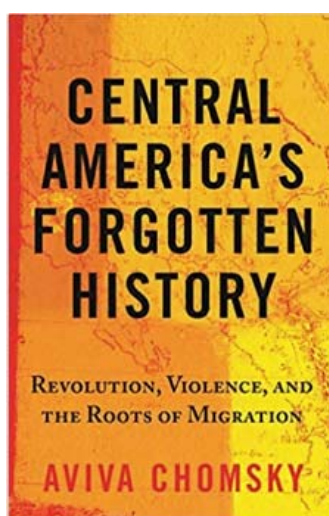
Outsourcing the Border (from Bush to Biden)

The idea that immigration policy could be outsourced began long before Donald Trump notoriously threatened, in mid-2019, to impose tariffs on Mexican goods to pressure that country’s new president into agreeing to his demand to collaborate with Washington’s anti-immigrant agenda. That included, of course, Trump’s controversial “remain in Mexico” policy that has continued to strand tens of thousands of asylum-seekers there.

Meanwhile, for almost two decades the United States has been bullying (and funding) military and police forces to its south to enforce its immigration priorities, effectively turning other countries’ borders into extensions of the U.S. one. In the process, Mexico’s forces have regularly been deployed on that country’s southern border, and Guatemala’s on its border with Honduras, all to violently enforce Washington’s immigration policies.

Such outsourcing was, in part, a response to the successes of the immigrant rights movement in this country. U.S. leaders hoped to evade legal scrutiny and protest at home by making Mexico and Central America implement the uglier aspects of their policies.

It all began with the Mérida Initiative in 2007, a George W. Bush-initiated plan that would direct billions of dollars to military equipment, aid, and infrastructure in Mexico (with smaller amounts going to Central America). One of its four pillars was the creation of “a



21st century border” by pushing Mexico to militarize its southern border. By 2013, Washington had funded 12 new military bases along that border with Guatemala and a 100-mile “security cordon” north of it.

In response to what was seen as a child-migrant crisis in the summer of 2014 (sound familiar?), President Barack Obama further pressured Mexico to initiate a new Southern Border Program. Since then, tens of millions of dollars a year have gone toward the militarization of that border and Mexico was soon detaining tens of thousands of migrants monthly. Not surprisingly, deportations and human-rights violations against Central American migrants shot up dramatically there. “Our border today in effect is Mexico’s border with Honduras and Guatemala,” exulted Obama’s former border czar Alan Bersin in 2019. A local activist was less sanguine, protesting that the program “turned the border region into a war zone.”

President Trump blustered and bullied Mexico and various Central American countries far more openly than the previous two presidents while taking such policies to new levels. Under his orders, Mexico formed a new, militarized National Guard and deployed 12,000 of its members to the Guatemalan border, even as funding from Washington helped create high-technology infrastructure along Mexico’s southern border, rivaling that on the U.S. border.

Trump called for reducing aid to Central America. Yet under his watch, most of the \$3.6 billion appropriated by Congress continued to flow there, about half of it aimed at strengthening local military and police units. Trump did, however, temporarily withhold civilian aid funds to coerce Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador into signing “safe third country” agreements that would allow the United States to deport people with valid asylum claims to those very countries.

Trump also demanded that Guatemala increase security along its southern border “to stem the flow of irregular migration” and “deploy officials from U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to advise and mentor host nation police, border security, immigration, and customs counterparts.” Once the Central American countries conceded to Trump’s demands, aid was restored.

This February, President Biden suspended those safe third country agreements, but is clearly otherwise ready to continue to outsource border enforcement to Mexico and Central America.

The Other Side of Militarization: “Economic Development”

As Democratic and Republican administrations alike outsourced a militarized response to immigration, they also sought to sell their agendas with promises of economic-development aid to Central America. However, they consistently promoted the very kind

of assistance that historically brought violence and poverty to the region — and so led directly to today’s migrant crisis.

The model Washington continues to promote is based on the idea that, if Central American governments can woo foreign investors with improved infrastructure, tax breaks, and weak environmental and labor laws, the “free market” will deliver the investment, jobs, and economic growth that (in theory) will keep people from wanting to migrate in the first place. Over and over again in Central America’s tormented history, however, exactly the opposite has happened. Foreign investment flowed in, eager to take advantage of the region’s fertile lands, natural resources, and cheap labor. This form of development — whether in support of banana and coffee plantations in the nineteenth century or sugar, cotton, and cattle operations after World War II — brought Central America to its revolutions of the 1980s and its north-bound mass migration of today.

As a model, it relies on militarized governments to dispossess peasant farmers, freeing the land for foreign investors. Similarly, force and terror are brought to bear to maintain a cheap and powerless working class, allowing investors to pay little and reap fantastic profits. Such operations, in turn, have brought deforestation to the countryside, while their cheap exports to the United States and elsewhere have helped foster the high-consumption lifestyles that have only accelerated climate change — bringing ever fiercer weather, including the rising sea levels, more intense storms, droughts, and floods that have further undermined the livelihoods of the Central American poor.

Starting in the 1970s, many of those poor workers and peasants pushed for land reform and investment in basic rights like food, health, and education instead of simply further enriching foreign and local elites. When peaceful protest was met with violence, revolution followed, although only in Nicaragua did it triumph.

Washington spent the 1980s attempting to crush Nicaragua’s successful revolution and the revolutionary movements against the right-wing military governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. The peace treaties of the 1990s ended the armed conflicts, but never addressed the fundamental social and economic divides that underlay them. In fact, the end of those conflicts only opened the regional floodgates for massive new foreign investment and export booms. These involved, among other things, the spread of maquiladora export-processing plants and the growing of new export-oriented “non-traditional” fruits and vegetables, as well as a boom in extractive industries like gold, nickel, and petroleum, not to speak of the creation of new infrastructure for mass tourism.

In the 1980s, refugees first began fleeing north, especially from El Salvador and Guatemala, then riven by war, repression, and the violence of local paramilitary and death squads. The veneer of peace in the 1990s in no way brought an end to poverty, repression, and violence. Both public and private armed forces provided “security” — but only to elites and the new urban and rural megaprojects they sponsored.

If a government did threaten investors’ profits in any way, as when El Salvador declared a moratorium on mining licenses, the U.S.-sponsored Central America Free Trade Agreement enabled foreign corporations to sue and force it to submit to binding arbitration by a World Bank body. In the Obama years, when the elected, reformist president of Honduras tried to enact labor and environmental improvements, Washington gave the nod to a coup there and celebrated when the new president proudly declared the country “open for business” with a package of laws favoring foreign investors.

Journalist David Bacon termed that country’s new direction a “poverty-wage economic model” that only fostered the rise of gangs, drug trafficking, and violence. Protest was met with fierce repression, even as U.S. military aid flowed in. Prior to the coup, Hondurans had barely figured among Central American migrants to the United States. Since 2009, its citizens have often come to predominate among those forced to flee their homes and head north.

President Obama’s 2014 Alliance for Prosperity offered a new round of aid for investor-driven economic development. Journalist Dawn Paley characterized that Alliance as in “large part a plan to build new infrastructure that will benefit transnational corporations,” including “tax breaks for corporate investors and new pipelines, highways, and power lines to speed resource extraction and streamline the process of import, assembly, and export at low-wage maquilas.” One major project was a new gas pipeline to facilitate exports of U.S. natural gas to Central America.

It was Obama who oversaw Washington’s recognition of the coup in Honduras. It was Trump who looked the other way when Guatemala in 2019 and Honduras in 2020 expelled international anti-corruption commissions. And it was Trump who agreed to downplay the mounting corruption and drug trafficking charges against his friend, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, as long as he promoted an investor-friendly economy and agreed to collaborate with the U.S. president’s anti-immigrant agenda.

The January 2021 Caravan Marks the Arrival of the Biden Years

All signs point to the Biden years continuing what’s become the Washington norm in Central America: outsourcing immigration policy, militarizing security there, and

promoting a model of development that claims to deter migration while actually fueling it. In fact, President Biden's proposal designates \$4 billion over four years for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to distribute. Such disbursement, however, would be conditioned on progress toward Washington-approved goals like "improv[ing] border security," "inform[ing]... citizens of the dangers of the journey to the southwest border of the United States," and "resolv[ing] disputes involving the confiscation of real property of United States entities." Significant resources would also be directed to further developing "smart" border technology in that region and to Border Patrol operations in Central America.

A preview of how this is likely to work came just as Biden took office in January 2021.

One predictable result of Washington's outsourcing of immigration control is that the migrant journey from Central America has become ever more costly and perilous. As a result, some migrants have begun gathering in large public "caravans" for protection. Their aim: to reach the U.S. border safely, turn themselves in to the border patrol, and request asylum. In late January 2021, a caravan of some 7,500 Hondurans arrived at the Guatemalan border in hopes that the new president in Washington would, as promised, reverse Trump's controversial remain-in-Mexico policy of apparently endless internment in crowded, inadequate camps just short of the U.S.

They hadn't known that Biden would, in fact, continue his predecessors' outsourcing of immigration policy to Mexico and Central America. As it happened, 2,000 tear-gas and baton-wielding Guatemalan police and soldiers (armed, trained, and supported by the United States) massed at the Guatemala-Honduras border to drive them back.

One former Trump official (retained by President Biden) tweeted that Guatemala had "carr[ied] out its responsibilities appropriately and lawfully." The Mexican government, too, praised Guatemala as it massed thousands of its troops on its own southern border. And Juan González, Biden's National Security Council director for the Western Hemisphere lauded Guatemala's "management of the migrant flow."

In mid-March, President Biden appeared to link a positive response to Mexico's request for some of Washington's surplus Covid-19 vaccine to further commitments to cracking down on migrants. One demand: that Mexico suspend its own laws guaranteeing humane detention conditions for families with young children. Neither country had the capacity to provide such conditions for the large number of families detained at the border in early 2021, but the Biden administration preferred to press Mexico to ignore its own laws, so

that it could deport more of those families and keep the problem out of sight of the U.S. public.

In late January 2021, CISPES joined a large coalition of peace, solidarity, and labor organizations that called upon the Biden administration to rethink its Central American plans. “The intersecting crises that millions in Central America face are the result of decades of brutal state repression of democratic movements by right-wing regimes and the implementation of economic models designed to benefit local oligarchs and transnational corporations,” CISPES wrote. “Far too often, the United States has been a major force behind these policies, which have impoverished the majority of the population and devastated the environment.”

The coalition called on Biden to reject Washington’s longstanding commitment to militarized security linked to the creation and reinforcement of investor-friendly extractive economies in Central America. “Confronting displacement demands a total rethinking of U.S. foreign policy,” CISPES urged. As of mid-March, the president had not responded in any fashion to the plea. My advice: don’t hold your breath waiting for such a response.

This essay was distributed by [TomDispatch](#).