

Fortress North America: Theorizing a Regional Approach to Migration Management

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Introduction: North America as an immigration system

In North America and elsewhere, the institutionalization of openness to trade and financial flows in bilateral, regional, and international agreements contrasts with the limits on people's free movement (Dadush 2017, Castañeda and Shemesh 2020). Despite NAFTA and the USMCA, the absence of comprehensive migration discussions within the North American agenda, and the near-absence of regional institutions to manage migration, is noteworthy (see Toro this volume). This contrasts with the inclusion of substantial immigration agreements as part of Mercosur and the Schengen Area in Europe. This regional variation seems puzzling when considering that the free movement of people could be seen as a public good (Dadush 2017:119). More regional and international cooperation on migration could produce total economic gains and help ameliorate short-term distributional effects both for immigrant-sending countries subsidizing labor reproduction and for the immigrant-receiving counties, where short-term social expenditures for local governments may increase earlier than the eventual fiscal benefits for federal governments. However, one does not need to be a specialist

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in migration or international politics to know that the free movement of people across borders is not viewed as a positive by most states and a significant share of public opinion.

At the time NAFTA was negotiated, the principal source of irregular migration to the United States consisted of Mexican laborers, and some architects of the agreement posited that it would boost the Mexican economy and diminish migration. Because migration was considered a controversial topic, however, no regional migration regime was introduced, beyond provisions facilitating the temporary entry of business visitors and investors. Formal regional institutions defined North America as trilateral in scope and economic in nature. However, while those formal institutions remain largely unchanged, the dynamics of migration suggest there is a broader North American regional system of quite a different sort. Over the past decade, migration through the U.S.-Mexico border consisted of increasing shares of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans.² While there has been no North American equivalent of the Schengen in terms of free movement of people within member states, we argue that there are common goals, which the U.S., Canada, and Mexico pursue through indirect forms of regional cooperation. Nevertheless, rather than being a regionalist project, this cooperation has been nationalistic and illiberal. The North American migration system that has emerged is fundamentally restrictionist, both externally and internally (Camacho-Beltran 2019). Furthermore, the goals are hegemonically defined by the United States.

The tensions over migration in North America are emblematic of an enduring paradox of political liberalism dating to the European Enlightenment: the ostensible internal openness of liberal states is often built upon the explicit exclusion of external others — immigrants,

² In fiscal year 2019, more than 2/3 of apprehended migrants were from Northern Central America. However, the past two years have seen increasing shares of Mexican migrants as well as migrants from elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere and beyond. In April 2022 alone, for example, more than 20,000 Ukrainians were processed at the Southwest land border, almost all in San Diego.

particularly those of color (Castañeda 2019) and internal minorities — women, minors, enslaved peoples and their descendants. Du Bois ([1915] 2014) wrote about the democracy paradox, in which the expansion of civil and social rights within Europe was coupled with European colonialism. FitzGerald and Cook-Martin (2014) write about how the most liberal and democratic countries—like the U.S.— were the first to establish racist and eugenicist immigration policies. Such illiberal practices often contradicted proclaimed liberal norms. Therefore, it would be naïve to assume that all regional coordination and collaboration must be guided by human rights and liberal principles or encoded in formal international agreements. Despite likely interpretive biases among liberal internationalist and functionalist scholars who focus on regionalism, there is no fundamental reason to think that regional cooperation and collaboration need be “liberal” either externally or internally. States within a region do not meet as equals, as the hegemonic dynamics in North America clearly show (see Toro this volume).

When possible, states prefer to let Central Americans migrate to another country in the region. A useful analogy for our argument can be provided by how immigrant destinations within the U.S. have changed in the last decades. Sociologist Ivan Light argued (2006) that Los Angeles, an old Mexican-immigrant destination, started enforcing policies and undergoing dynamics that reduced immigration (housing and warehouse ordinances made housing more expensive and house-sharing more difficult) and “deflected” much of these immigrant flows to “new destinations” within the United States (Massey 2008, Marrow 2011). In the same ways, the increasing number of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers rejected by the United States may find themselves settling in Canada or Mexico. Like squeezing a balloon, the application of pressure in one area directs the air to other areas.

This chapter seeks to identify both consistency and variations among the North American states limiting the arrival of asylum seekers and immigrants, principally but not exclusively those from Northern Central America (NCA). NCA includes Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and is analogous to the term, Northern Triangle, which is often used by U.S. Defense and Homeland Security officials to talk about national security. We argue that, considered together, Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. asylum policies constitute a limited, but identifiable, regional migration system. On the most basic level, an examination of how the United States, Mexico, and Canada have responded to Central American migration allows for a rich description that uncovers the unique historical, geopolitical, sociological, and legal factors that shape migration policy in each country. As described more fully in Section III below, this examination yields interesting similarities, including shared responses to key historical moments and similar narratives about the “worthiness” (or lack thereof) of Central American migrants. This contrasts with other times, including during the 1980s, when the countries’ posture towards Central American refugees and migrants diverged.

Beyond these noteworthy similarities and differences, the topic of Central American migration invites a deeper analysis of how the countries’ migration policies have created an interdependent system through a blend of explicit cooperation, domestic policy dynamics, and the underlying demographic, social, and geographic structures that tie the countries and peoples of North America together. Our analysis suggests that, on the whole, the policies of the three countries are designed to limit access to migrants and asylum-seekers, and in particular, to discourage strongly overland migration and asylum requests at the border. In this regard, all three countries have, in practice, embraced the broader global trend of the externalization of border controls (see Fitzgerald 2019). Our term for the region’s interdependent approach to

migration management is “Fortress North America,” in the same way that the emergence of continental exclusion policies has led to the moniker “Fortress Europe.” The North American system is less intentionally constructed as a supranational, regional system than the European system, and as with other aspects of regionalism addressed in this book, it is institutionally thin. Insofar as it exists as a cooperative system, coordination has been more *ad hoc* in nature, has fluctuated depending on the particular administration in office, and has been powerfully shaped by U.S. hegemony, Mexico’s relative dependency, and Canada’s subtle use of its geographic position. Most often, immigration authorities in the three countries work to keep Central American and other migrants away from North America. To understand the dynamics that underlie this system, we draw upon theories of migration policy diffusion and interdependence. These bodies of theory, which we expand and refine for the North American context, help explain both shared exclusionary approaches as well as country-specific variations.

Theoretical background: competitive and cooperative interdependence in migration systems

We frame our analysis of the emergence of Fortress North America with attention to the interplay between competitive and cooperative dynamics of the countries’ largely restrictionist migration policy goals, which themselves have been influenced, to varying degrees, by internal political considerations, structural factors, and explicit and implicit racial bias. Scholars are increasingly analyzing the role of policy in shaping migration dynamics (e.g., de Haas, et al. 2019; Fitzgerald 2019; Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin 2014; Zolberg 2008). Although Bhagwati (2003) argued that borders are “beyond control,” Hein de Haas and colleagues (2019: 887) find that restrictive immigration policies do have a small negative impact on immigration rates.

However, consistent with research on the effects of U.S. border enforcement policy (e.g., Massey, et al. 2015; Cornelius 2005), they find that the effectiveness of immigration restrictions is undermined by immigrants' actions and that the policies' unintended consequences make their effect on net migration "ambiguous" (de Haas, et al. 2019: 907).

What is unambiguous is that countries view immigration—particularly irregular migration—as a "problem" that they need to control (Benton-Cohen 2018). As Ghezelbash argues, contemporary states essentially have the same goal: to keep "unwanted irregular migrants and asylum seekers away from their territories" (2018b). The prerogative of exclusion is the key driver of migration governance at the domestic, regional, and global levels. We find that to a large degree Mexico, the U.S., and even Canada, each share this goal. They also share some constraints, including their domestic immigration laws and obligations under international law, including those set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol.

There are variations across the three countries regarding which classes of noncitizens are "unwanted." At the very least, it seems that the constraints imposed by international and domestic law, and the shared norms that undergird these laws, are being tested given the current global context, where nationalism and enhanced border controls are becoming the norm undergirding idealized mono-ethnic nation-states (Castañeda 2020).

There are two principal mechanisms through which international and domestic laws constrain states from keeping "undesirables" from immigrating or seeking asylum: legal constraints and liberal normative expectations. Legally, governments that seek to curtail irregular migration and limit access to asylum can be constrained domestically by courts and legislation, even if they are not concerned with international image and legitimacy. Empirical analyses of migration and asylum policy also show how states "circumvent normative constraints" by

shifting “the level at which policy is elaborated and implemented,” often to the supranational level (Guiraudon and Lahav 2000: 164; also see FitzGerald 2019: 49). Domestic implementation and interpretations of international law vary and might also explain different policy outcomes. Nonetheless, diffusion theory suggests that similar policy outcomes may be linked to a common cause, especially insofar as ad hoc regional policy coordination emerges in response to a perceived crisis (Geddes 2021).

States may deepen their interdependence around migration policy through explicit cooperation towards a common goal or an implicit competition where two or more states seek to achieve the same migration-related goal. Ghezelbash suggests that competitive pressures among neighboring states to deter unwanted migrants will cause a “race to the bottom” toward more restrictive deterrence policies. Echoing Ghezelbash (2015, 2018), Gammeltoft-Hansen and colleagues discuss the recent emergence of “cooperative deterrence” policies (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2015), and a broader “deterrence paradigm” (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017). Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway (2015) characterize the refugee policies of wealthy states as duplicitous in that they seek to deter would-be refugees from reaching their territory without formally rejecting or withdrawing from their international treaty obligations under the Refugee Convention. However, these policies are also likely to run afoul of international and domestic law, and courts may constrain states’ most restrictionist impulses.

A counterargument suggests that some elected officials may respond to a neighbor’s restrictionist policies with a more pro-immigrant approach because this fits with the state's identity, say, as being hospitable to those in need. The state also may wish to distinguish itself from a neighboring state. However, in the current context, migrant-friendly rhetoric is often paired with fundamentally restrictive approaches (Vollmer 2016). Such a humanitarian and

welcoming image is valued by Canada, though its protected geographic location, buffered by both the U.S. and Mexico, make it easier to perform humanitarianism while making it very difficult for irregular migrants to reach its territory. Mexico, in its 2011 migration reform and the rhetoric of several recent presidents, has sought to distinguish itself from the U.S. as being welcoming to migrants and as acting in compliance with international law and norms; however, in practice, the country has become a “vertical frontier for the United States” (FitzGerald 2019: 1240). Conversely, geopolitical objectives and domestic political imperatives may drive policies that truly are more welcoming, as was often the case during the Cold War.

To square the sometimes-contradictory goals of maintaining commitments to international and domestic laws while keeping “undesirable” immigrants and asylum seekers out, states have engaged in the politics of *non-entré*—that is, sidestepping their treaty obligations and the duty of non-refoulement by not allowing asylum seekers to reach their territories in the first place (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2015: 241). They argue that states care about and are constrained by refugee law today principally insofar as they retain a symbolic commitment to its core principles. They care about this in part because this projection of support is important to ensure that developing countries—which house the lion’s share of refugees—continue to respect refugee law (p. 240). This informal compact between developed and developing states may be unraveling.

Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway identify a typology of seven categories of *non-entré* policy: 1) diplomatic; 2) direct financial incentives; 3) equipment, machinery, and training; 4) deployment of immigration authorities to work in destination or transit countries directly; 5) enforcement operations in origin or transit countries; 6) direct migration control role in origin or transit countries; and 7) enforcement by international organizations, such as the E.U. migration

agency Frontex. These types are not mutually exclusive and states typically employ them in some combination.

Gammeltoft-Hansen and his colleagues outline solid legal arguments to challenge the propriety of the “deterrence paradigm.” Notwithstanding, they argue that these policies and practices are proliferating and becoming the dominant ones to handle refugees, limiting the role of international law. What might be more critical is the extent to which international laws are interpreted, institutionalized, and implemented in each state. Whereas norms and laws have been defined and advanced at the global level—including the Refugee Convention and Protocol, the Global Compact on Migration, and the Global Compact on Refugees—states often act individually and collectively in regional contexts to enact migration governance.

North American states attempt to limit Central American asylum seekers and migrants from traveling through and settling in their respective countries. The construct “Fortress North America” suggests that each country prioritizes the first goal articulated by Ghezelbash: to limit and select its immigrants. For all three, today, this generally means limiting the overland entry of Central American migrants. Despite rhetorical differences and seeming tensions on this issue, all three countries’ actual practices are consistent with this goal. We further argue that a combination of interrelated factors explains variations in how each state seeks to achieve this goal and how this, in turn, shapes their cooperation to do so. These factors include: 1) the internal relationship among the three North American states, and the use of migration policy as a tool for cooperation (e.g., bilateral agreements), negotiation/coercion, and for drawing competitive contrasts; 2) the global image each country seeks to project regarding its humanitarian commitments and adherence to international law, and the variations in these commitments across administrations; 3) structural economic, social, and geographic determinants of migration flows,

including the presence of established migration pathways or networks; and 4) racist conceptions and pressure from restrictionist and nativist groups. It is necessary to analyze simultaneously these interdependent policy contexts – all of which support a broader goal of limiting overland asylum seekers and migrants from Central America and other countries.

Central American migration to North America: modern history and present-day dynamics

The countries of Northern Central America (NCA) have suffered from endemic violence and social exclusion, persistent problems that have intensified over the past decade. The well-founded belief among the populations is that their political elites lack the will and capacity to ensure minimal security and wellbeing, helping generate extraordinary pressures to emigrate. The resulting waves of irregular movement of migrants and asylum seekers have been framed as a crisis by the U.S. and Mexican governments, and the countries' principal immigration policy goal has been to deter the unregulated influx. At the same time, Canada has been geographically buffered from the irregular flow of Central American migrants by Mexico and the United States. This has made it much easier for Canada to reconcile the potentially competing goals of projecting a humanitarian image and complying with international law while keeping unwanted irregular migrants and asylum seekers away. This section analyzes these contemporary migration dynamics, associated crisis narratives, and domestic and regional policy responses within a broader historical context.

United States: A Legacy of Exclusion and Legal Liminality

Immigration processes in the U.S. have become longer, more expensive, and arduous for applicants since September 11, 2001, with policy rhetoric focused on deterrence and self-

deportation, depending on the administration in power. A long history of exclusion (Castañeda 2019) and deportation (Kanstroom 2012; Golash-Boza 2015) has created a whole ecosystem around detaining, jailing, and deporting immigrants that Adam Goodman (2020) calls “the deportation machine.”

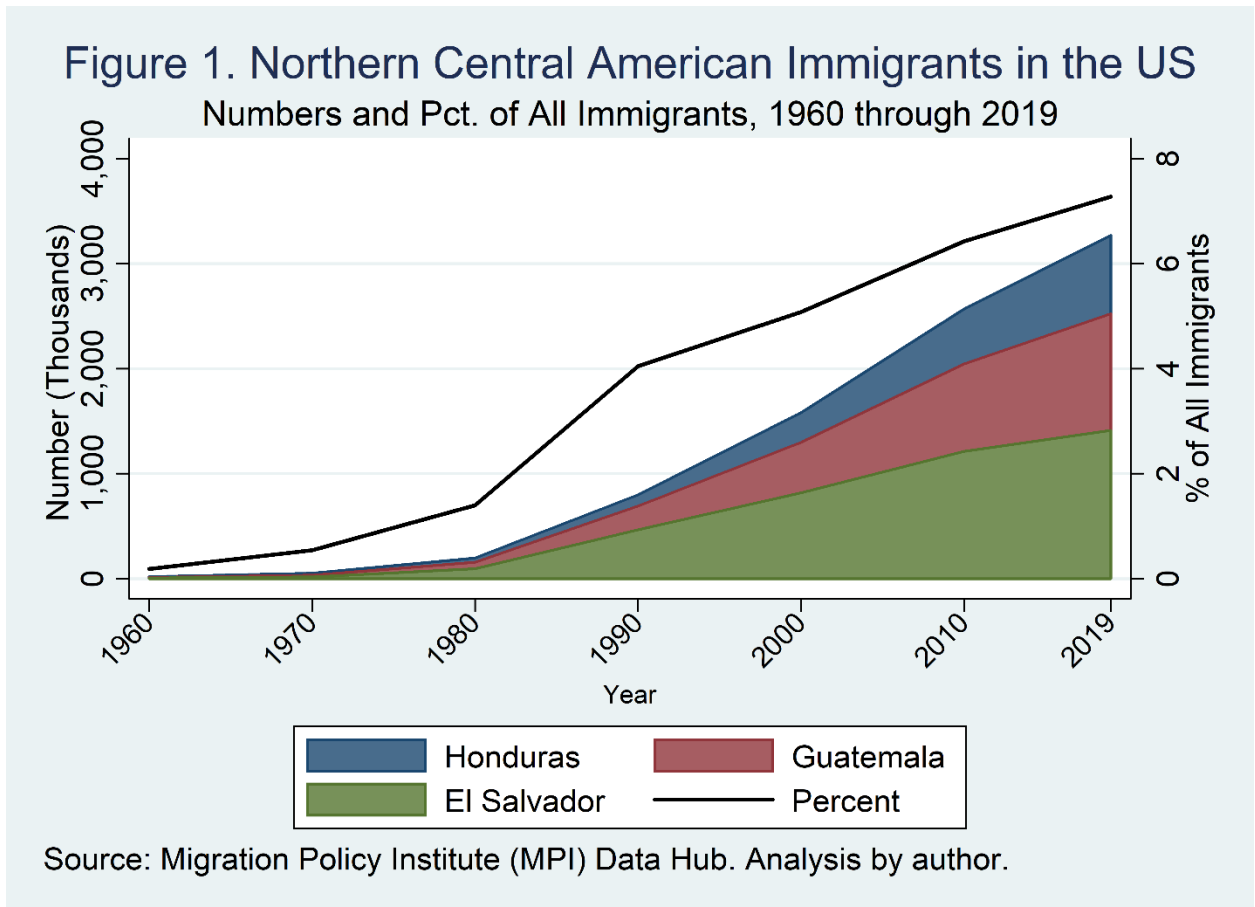
The U.S. immigration system has consistently shown skepticism towards Central American migrants and asylum seekers, resulting in exclusionary practices tempered by the occasional provision of legal status, typically non-permanent in nature. In the 1980s, the United States played a significant role in various Central American conflicts, positioning the region as a battleground in the Cold War. As the conflicts exacted a horrific humanitarian toll, particularly in Guatemala and El Salvador, tens of thousands of migrants fled northwards, seeking protection in the form of asylum. Given the United States' geopolitical objectives and the narrative it had propagated regarding the conflicts in Central America, U.S. leadership refused to recognize the migrants as political refugees. Instead, State Department officials referred to these individuals as “economic” migrants, unworthy of permanent protection. The political rhetoric reverberated in the asylum adjudication process, with near-systematic denials of Central American asylum claims except for Nicaragua (Coutin 2003, Wasem 2020: 252). As an illustration, at the start of fiscal year 1996, there were 63,000 new asylum cases and 137,000 pending cases from El Salvador; but only 157 were approved (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1997: 90).³ Faith-based groups and others ultimately filed suit against the U.S. government in *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*, resulting in a settlement agreement that permitted many of these migrants the opportunity to re-apply for asylum.

³ This number of approvals represents only 3 percent of cases adjudicated by the Asylum Officer Corps, compared to a 22% approval rate for all nationalities. It is revelatory that only 2,600 Salvadoran refugees or asylees were granted legal permanent residency, compared to almost 17,000 Nicaraguans and more than 121,000 Cubans (INS 1997: 95).

Notwithstanding this practice of exclusion, the U.S. government has employed temporary immigration statuses to provide a measure of stability for Central Americans in the United States. In 1999, the U.S. government designated Hondurans and Nicaraguans as eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Two years later, the U.S. government designated El Salvadorans for TPS. Each of these designations was premised on natural catastrophes that prohibited the safe return of migrants residing in the United States. The designations remain in effect today, as litigation has resuscitated many of these TPS designations despite repeated efforts by the Trump administration to terminate them. Such temporary statuses permit the U.S. government to save face vis-à-vis the international community and relevant domestic stakeholders while denying migrants a lasting status that might ultimately lead to U.S. citizenship. This practice complements the theory advanced by Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway; by funneling displaced people from northern Central America into a liminal status (Menjívar 2006), the U.S. can nominally comply with domestic and international law and loosely adhere to the principle of nonrefoulement, while effectively sidestepping the Refugee Convention. This allows the U.S. to avoid the complex endeavor of refugee adjudication that flows from its international legal obligations by giving these refugees a liminal status instead that renders some of them deportable in the future.

While the U.S. sought to exclude and limit the integration of Central Americans displaced by civil war and natural disasters, these efforts have largely failed to limit the number of Central Americans traveling and settling in the country. The number of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran-born migrants living in the United States has grown consistently since the 1980s, as has the percentage of immigrants to the U.S. born in these countries, which includes green card holders and refugees (see Figure 1). Demographically, though, Northern

Central Americans still make up a small minority of the foreign-born in the United States, suggesting that recurring narratives of crisis may be driven by something other than demographics.



Central American migrants also have been saddled with racialized labels of criminality and vice (Dudley 2020). In the 1990s, narratives regarding the dangerousness of Central American gangs buoyed efforts to expand grounds for deportation based on criminal conduct and mandatory detention during pending immigration proceedings for persons with even relatively minor criminal records. Although the U.S. government has acknowledged the pervasiveness of gang violence in Central America, it has deployed various legal arguments to deny asylum protection to those escaping this violence. Echoing arguments made in the 1980s,

some within the government have argued that today's Central American migrants are economic migrants seeking better opportunities. Others have argued, despite evidence to the contrary, that the situation is one of "generalized violence" – not of targeted persecution – and that asylum is, therefore, an inappropriate remedy. Adjudicators have used the peculiarities of asylum law – including the requirement that persecution be motivated by specific reasons – in concluding that many claims do not comply technically with narrow legal requirements. A seminal example is how past Attorneys General, the Board of Immigration Appeals, and some Immigration Judges have interpreted the criteria for "particular social group" under the Immigration and Nationality Act.

The downward trend in asylum acceptance rates from 2015 to 2020 reflected, in part, a shift in the treatment of asylum claims as a result of policy changes during the Trump administration, including the June 2018 opinion issued by Attorney General Jeff Sessions to reverse U.S. policy on asylum claims based on domestic violence or victimization by gangs. To tie the hands of adjudicators and limit the availability of relief, Sessions issued a binding decision in *Matter of A-B-*, undoing a precedent that allowed survivors of domestic violence a pathway to receive asylum. More broadly, *Matter of A-B-* signaled skepticism about asylum claims premised on acts of "private violence." On the enforcement side, the Trump administration deployed a host of tactics designed to disincentivize asylum-seeking, especially for those from Central America. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. invoked a little-known provision in Title 42 of the U.S. Code and closed the land borders due to public health concerns. The pandemic enabled even stricter migration-related controls, preventing asylum seekers and other humanitarian migrants from entering the U.S. and having access to immigration relief. By the end of Trump's term, his administration had made it basically

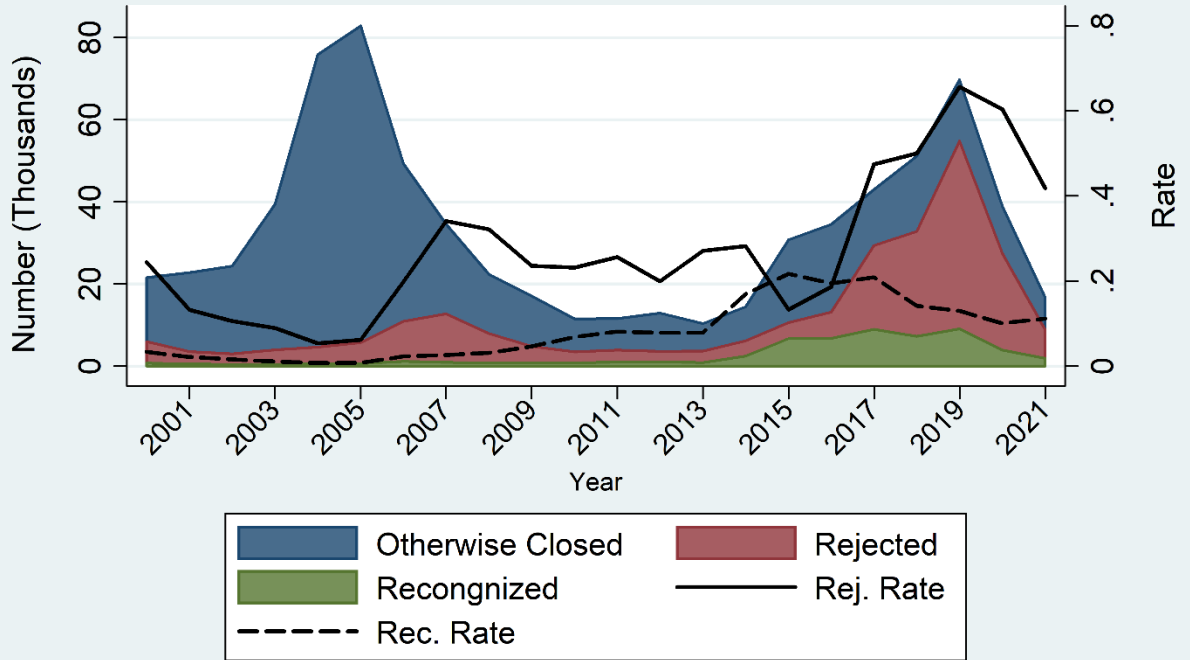
impossible to seek asylum at the border. It deployed tactics including family detention, family separation, the expanded use of detention generally, the “Remain in Mexico” policy (officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP), and the creation of long waits at ports of entry along the border through a practice known as metering. The Biden administration has rolled back some of these policies – including via the rescission of *Matter of A-B*⁴ and the declaration of a formal end to the metering policy (Department of Justice 2021). Attempts to cease the invocation of Title 42 and to roll back MPP have been blocked by the courts, and arguably were half-hearted to begin with.⁵

The recognition of asylum claims from these Central American countries declined drastically from more than 9,000 in 2019 to 3,900 in 2020 and 1,870 in the first half of 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the effective shutting down of new asylum cases through Title 42 expulsions and other measures. Even still, considering this decline in recent historical context shows that the recognition of asylum claims from these countries has been extremely rare, and the low 2020 number was still higher than at any point before 2014 (UNHCR 2021, author analysis). Figure 2 graphs the total number of asylum decisions (left axis), including recognitions, rejections, and claims that were otherwise closed, as well as recognized and rejected claims as a share of total closed cases (right axis).

4 However, as of this writing, the Administration had still not issued regulations clarifying the circumstances under which someone should be considered a member of a particular social group, as ordered by the President in a February 2021 executive order (see CGRS 2022a).

5 While the Administration suspended and terminated MPP shortly after coming to office, after a federal district court in Texas ordered DHS to “enforce and implement MPP in good faith” the program was reinstated in December 2021 and expanded to cover nationals from all countries in the Western hemisphere.

Figure 2. NCA Asylum Claims in the US
Recognition, Rejection, and Attrition (2000-2021*)



*2021 through mid-year.

Source: UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder. Analysis by author.

An upward trend in the number and rate of denials began in 2015 and accelerated thereafter, with the number of rejections jumping to more than 20,000 from more than 6,000 from 2016 to 2017. This trend continued with the number of rejections of asylum claims from these countries peaking at almost 46,000 in 2019, before falling to 23,000 in 2020 and 7,000 in the first half of 2021 largely because of federal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, the rate of rejections as a share of decisions also grew steadily to peak at 66% in 2019 before declining sharply in 2020 and 2021. The recognition rate declined from a 2015 peak of 21% to 10% in 2020 before increasing slightly to 11% in the first half of 2021.

Criminalization of immigrants and the militarization of the border are also inhibiting transit from Mexico into the United States. Though more visible in Trump’s discourse and

disregard for governing norms, the phenomena are not new: President Bill Clinton started building border fencing and increased agents deployed at the border. George W. Bush continued this trend, and Obama implemented border enforcement with more effect than any of his predecessors. The common thread was exclusion, and the consistent message to Central Americans has been: “don’t come.” The Biden administration has indicated some fundamental changes to its posture towards Central American migration flows, including policy reversals on safe third country agreements, delayed attempts to end the Remain in Mexico/MPP program, and provision of substantial funds to humanitarian and development assistance efforts in Central America. The Biden administration is also seeking to implement wider reforms to the asylum system. Among them is the “Asylum Officer Rule,” which could provide a more hospitable and less adversarial process for asylum seekers by moving initial adjudication of claims for those subjected to expedited removal proceedings from immigration court to DHS asylum officers. However, this reform—which is being challenged in court by attorneys general from a group of conservative states—is coupled with reforms to expedite immigration court decisions which will make it difficult for asylum seekers to secure representation and may end up sacrificing justice in the name of expediency (CGRS 2022b). Thus, despite attempts to roll back of some of the Trump administration’s most restrictive policies and other reforms, both official rhetoric and policy confirmed that the primary goal of limiting Central American immigration and provision of asylum remained unchanged.

The bigger picture that this analysis of asylum cases necessarily omits is that many migrants and asylum seekers never reach U.S. territory in the first place. The U.S. has worked with the Mexican government to limit the arrival and presence of Central American migrants

through externalized border controls and programs such as Remain in Mexico/MPP; it has extended this cooperation to include interdiction practices within Central America itself.

Mexico: Transit and Destination Country for Central American Refugees

Mexico plays a key, if ironic, role in the North American migration regime. Mexico is at once instrumental in establishing Fortress North America while at the same time its citizens are excluded from the greater regional free movement allowed to Canadian and U.S. citizens. Clearly, being part of a single commercial region does not confer de facto equality; instead, an internal hierarchy is defined by U.S. interests. This power disparity—especially between the United States and Mexico, but also between Mexico and some Central American countries—leads to a dynamic of policy extortion and coercive negotiation. As a result, Mexico occupies a role as the vertical border buffer between the United States and Central America. Most explicitly, the Trump administration used the NAFTA renegotiation to ensure Mexico’s already crucial role as a buffer state that deported more migrants to Central America than the United States. According to official figures, 635,761 Central Americans were deported and returned by Mexican immigration authorities between 2015 and 2019 (Gandini et al. 2020: 31). Mexico has “una política migratoria de puertas cerradas hacia el sur y de puertas abiertas hacia el norte [a policy of closed doors towards the South, and one of open doors towards the North] (Gandini et al. 2020: 121).

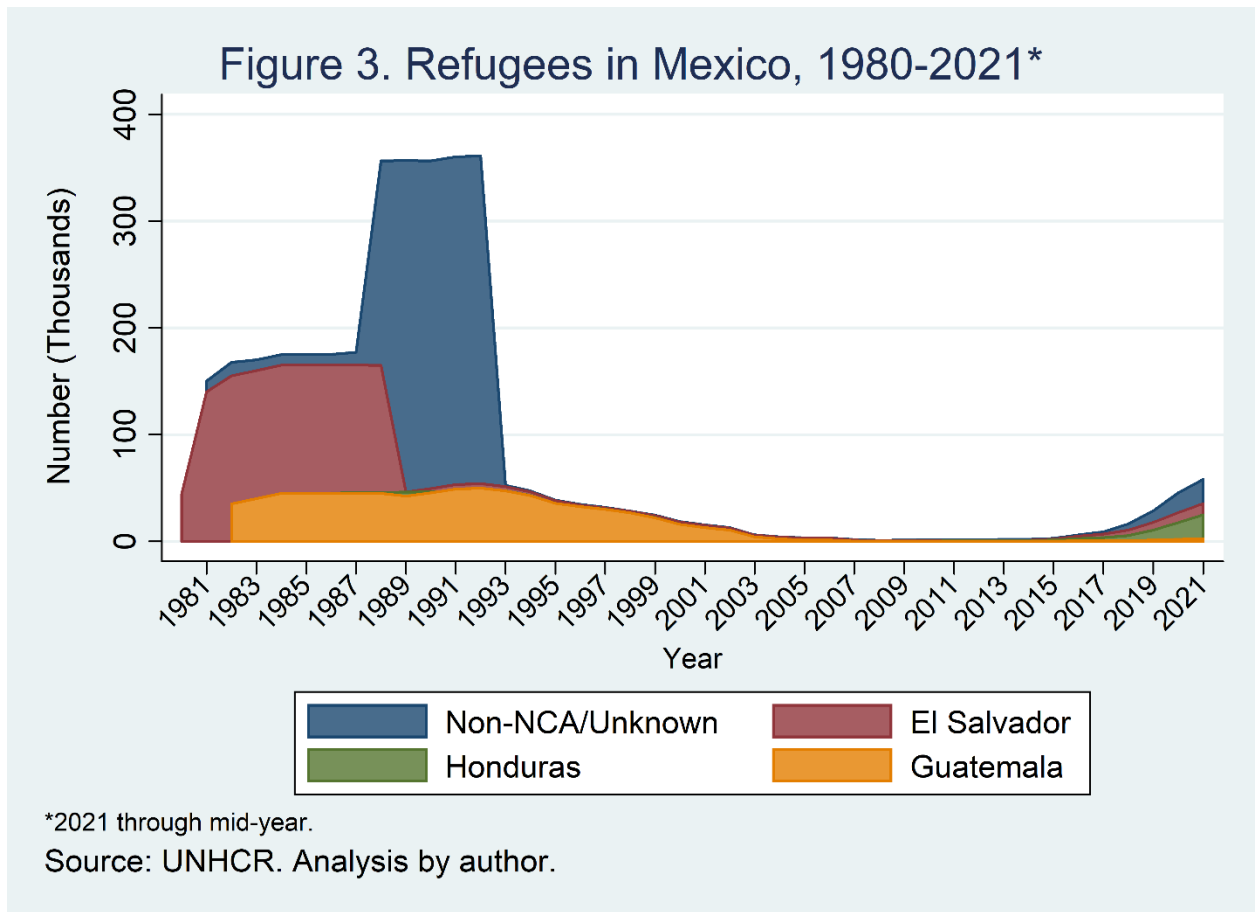
Mexico has played a unique and varied role with respect to Central American refugees, serving as a transit country for migrants traveling to the U.S. and Canada while also absorbing some Central Americans for whom Mexico became a destination country. Mexico passed a new immigration law in 2011 intended to make Mexico more hospitable to immigrants and asylum

seekers. The law was framed as a way to show how Mexico — a country that complained about the treatment of its nationals in the U.S. — treated immigrants in a generous and humanitarian fashion. Nonetheless, the letter and spirit of the law have not been closely observed, including in relation to Central American arrivals. It is more suggestive of country branding and competition to project an aura of being pro-immigrant and pro-refugee. Nevertheless, the extent to which this law did not fundamentally improve the treatment of migrants shows how cooperative deterrence pushed by the United States shaped how the law was implemented in practice. In reality, Mexico reacted in many ways to deflect migration: 1) Mexico dramatically increased its patrolling of its southern border with Guatemala; 2) Mexico increased its number of deportations of the foreign-born; and 3) Mexican immigration agents do not present readily to refugees the option to apply for asylum in Mexico. In an example of national deflection of immigrants over a Fortress North America policing role, Mexican local and federal authorities facilitated the passage of caravans through the country to get them closer to the U.S. border for the U.S. to process them until the Mexican government agreed (under pressure from Trump to close the border to trade) to the Remain in Mexico/MPP program (Gandini et al. 2020: 93).

In what seemed like a course correction, during its first months in office, the Lopez Obrador administration instituted a humanitarian visa policy that let migrants stay in Mexico legally and safely. The numbers of applicants quickly became overwhelming, however, while the policy produced an unintended consequence of making travel to the U.S. border much cheaper. As a consequence, the program was scaled down and then neglected, leaving intact the core exclusionist feature of the North American migration regime.

A connected history

Mexico and Central America share a long and complex history, with common indigenous foundations, the experience of colonization, integration after independence from Spain, and ultimately, the creation of independent states. For purposes of the present inquiry, the civil wars and conflicts in Central America throughout the 1980s and 1990s serve as a useful starting point in understanding Mexico’s posture towards Central American migrants. Those conflicts generated many political refugees, prompting a series of formal responses from the Mexican government.



The influx of Central American migrants into Mexico during this time encouraged the Mexican government to form the Commission for Refugee Assistance in 1980. In 1981, over 80,000 Guatemalans fleeing genocide arrived in Chiapas, Mexico. In that year alone, Mexico

granted protection to 46,000 Guatemalans escaping the country's civil war, establishing refugee camps in the south, and later allowing them to settle in the country. Many of these people eventually became Mexican citizens (Stein 2015). Although the Mexican government was at first unprepared for the number of people seeking refuge in the country, the government ultimately built health clinics, roads, and refugee camps to assist the arriving migrants. Despite these efforts to support the migrants, repatriation was a key component of the Mexican strategy, even as early as the 1980s. In 1987, an agreement was made between Mexico, Guatemala, and the UNHCR to create "basic conditions and human rights standards for repatriated refugees" (Ogren 2007: 208). According to Cassandra Ogren, "by 2001, over 75 per cent of Guatemalan refugees had repatriated voluntarily... while the 23,000 who decided to remain in Mexico were granted the right to naturalize" (2007: 208).⁶ Salvadoran refugees arrived in Mexico in even larger numbers during this period, hitting 140,000 in 1981 and remaining at around 120,000 until rapidly declining in 1989 (UNHCR, author calculations).

Once the conflicts ended, the state institutions were weak and unable to repair the social fabric. In turn, as noted above in the U.S. context, Central American nationals heading northwards were commonly labeled as economic migrants (Menjívar 2000). This framing has persisted through the present. Nevertheless, as French journalist Emmanuelle Stein explains, many migrants entering Mexico "flee general insecurity produced by violent **non-state** actors (VNSA) and the civil war, rather than **direct threat or persecution from the government** of their home country. Moreover, Central America is not considered a conflict zone according to the definition of International Humanitarian Law" (Stein 2015, emphasis in original), but this does not mean that they are not suffering from lack of security provision by the state and that are

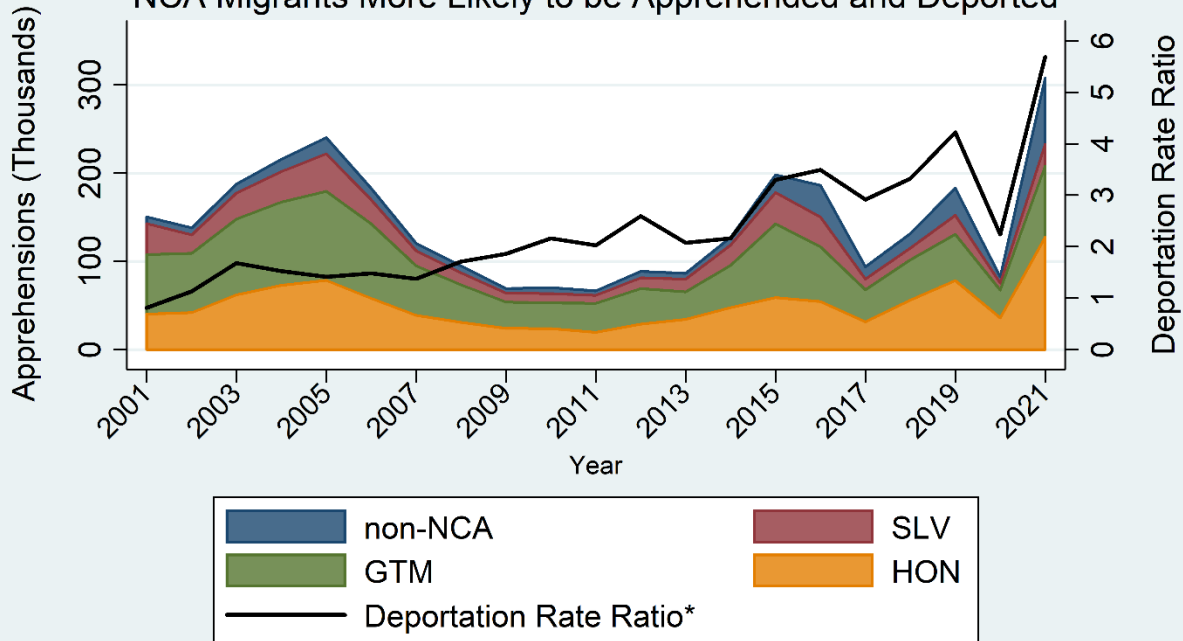
⁶ Note that refugees in Chiapas did not obtain a right to legal status until 1998, which was partly due to the Zapatista uprising (Lopez and Hastings 2016: 1113).

targeted as individuals or families through for example gang recruitment (Dudley 2020). Because cartels and other VNSA are committing the violence, in many cases, Mexico did not recognize these individuals as political refugees. Indeed, it was not until 2011 that Mexico passed the Law on Refugees and Complementary Protection, which offered, on paper, protection for asylum-seekers who are being persecuted by non-state actors (Stein 2015).

In recent years, Mexico has faced significant scrutiny for its treatment of Central American migrants. A centerpiece of Mexican migration policy is the Southern Border Strategy, announced in 2014. The Southern Border Strategy was designed to increase security and the detention of migrants attempting to enter Mexico's southern border. It came immediately in the wake of the "surge" of unaccompanied minors that created a political problem for the Obama administration, which in turn leaned on Mexico to interrupt people before they could get to the U.S. border. The Fortress's walls were pushed outwards to Mexico's border with Guatemala and, when that did not work, additional barriers were erected within Mexico itself.

After the strategy was introduced, in a one-year period, apprehensions of migrants increased by 79 percent, from 97,245 (July 2013-June 2014) to 174,159 (July 2014-June 2015). The increase over two years (July 2014-June 2016) was 85 percent (Isacson et al. 2017). Between 2013 and 2016, over 520,000 people from Central America's "northern triangle" were arrested by Mexican authorities, and 517,249 of those people were deported (Villasenor and Coria 2017).

Figure 4. Apprehensions and Deportations by Mexico
 NCA Migrants More Likely to be Apprehended and Deported

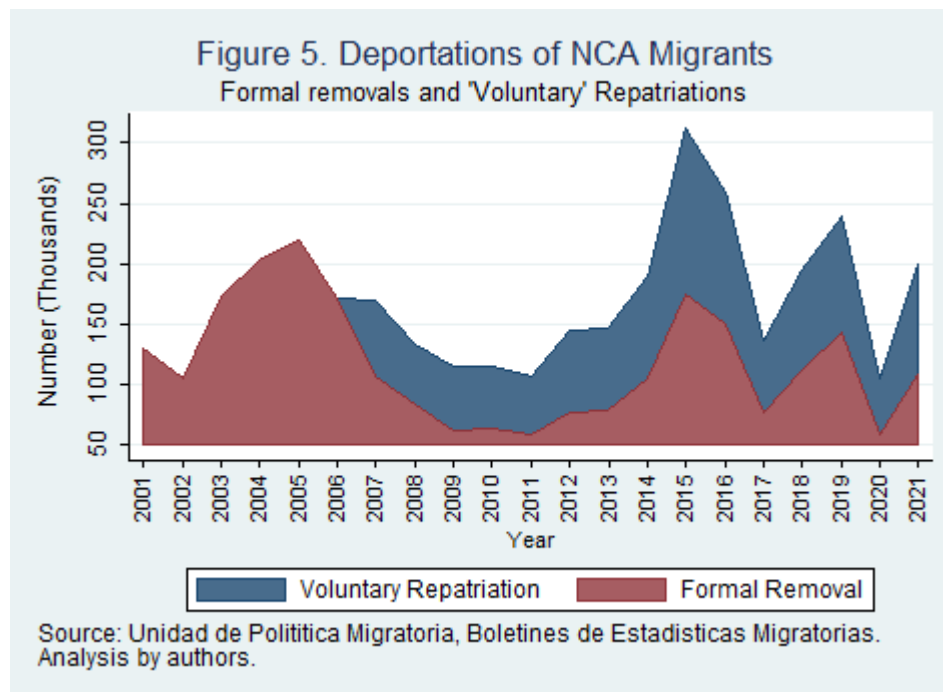


*Ratio of percentage of apprehended NCA migrants who are deported to the non-NCA percentage.

Source: Unidad de Política Migratoria, Boletines de Estadísticas Migratorias.
 Analysis by authors.

While these increases are striking, examining available data over the past two decades shows how Mexico has had a relatively consistent role as the first line of enforcement for Fortress North America, with the exception being the period of the great recession centered in the U.S. and before the violence crisis of the 2010s. Figure 4 plots the total number of migrants apprehended by Mexican migration authorities and examines the varying treatment of migrants from Northern Central America compared to others (Unidad de Política Migratoria, author analysis). The number of apprehensions (left axis) is consistently dominated by migrants from the subregion, especially Guatemala and Honduras, while others make up a small but growing share. Until 2019, virtually all migrants from Northern Central America apprehended were

removed to their countries of origin, and they consistently have been more likely to be deported than migrants from other countries (right axis).



These data understate the extent to which Mexico’s Southern Border Strategy and its long-standing deportation practices have been centered on removing Central Americans from its territory. This is because in 2006 and 2007, the governments of Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua signed an updated Memorandum of Understanding to ensure “the dignified, ordered, speedy, and safe repatriation of Central American nationals traveling overland” (Unidad de Política Migratoria).⁷ Figure 5 shows the total number of deportations, including formal removals (*devueltos*) and “voluntary” repatriations of NCA migrants by Mexican authorities.⁸ Figure 6 compares total deportations (“voluntary” and formal) from

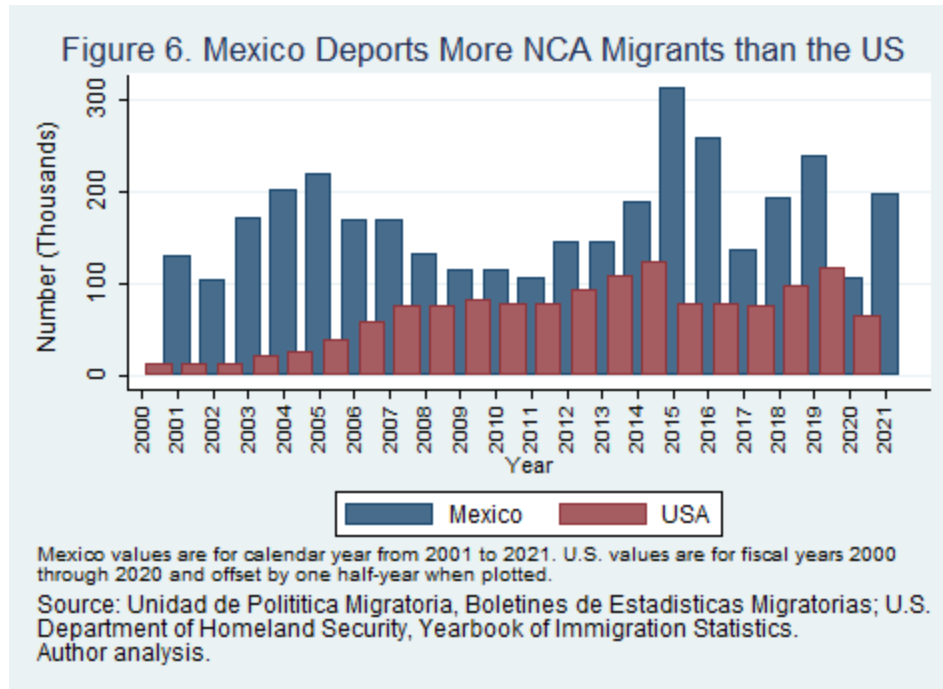
⁷ Translated from Spanish by the authors.

⁸ Notably, the U.S. long used a similar policy to control its southern border, where the vast majority of Mexican deportations were “voluntary returns”, without a formal deportation order. The value of this practice to the US

Mexico and the United States over the past two decades and offers a clear picture of the extent to which Mexico has become the primary and arguably most effective barrier to keep migrants and would-be asylum seekers from reaching the United States.

Those NCA migrants who do enter Mexican territory face roadblocks to advancing an asylum claim in Mexico. Alex García, a former volunteer with UNHCR Mexico and officer for the Commission for Refugee Assistance, explained in 2008 how the legal system for refugees in Mexico was “not in accordance with the international law of refugees and ha[d] no provision for courts dealing specifically with migration or refugee issues” (2008). More recent accounts confirm significant deficiencies in Mexico’s asylum system. Esmeralda Lopez and Melissa Hastings (2016: 1119) explain that “many migrants are not informed of their right to asylum when they enter detention centers.” In fact, in 2013, 68% of the people held within Mexico’s largest detention center were not aware of their right to asylum (Lopez and Hastings 2016: 1119-1120). Minors and other vulnerable persons are especially likely victims of these due process deficiencies: of the unaccompanied children and adolescents who arrived in Mexico between 2013 and 2016, only 1.1% applied for asylum, and of those, a mere 230 (.4%) successfully obtained refugee or asylum status (Villasenor and Coria 2017). Would-be asylum seekers are often not reliably informed about their right to claim asylum (Amnesty International 2018, Gandini et al. 2020). In some cases, state actors affirmatively discourage or block potentially qualifying immigrants from applying for asylum. Furthermore, Article 33 of Mexico’s constitution allow s the executive branch to force any alien to leave Mexico without any trial or hearing (Ogren 2007: 216).

government was found in the speed with which migrants apprehended by the Border Patrol could be deported. However, its utility as a deterrent to unauthorized migration is questionable. Indeed, the system “worked” for many years because immigrants were more than happy to be returned to Northern Mexico to be able to quickly make another attempt.



Mexico has a very short “asylum clock,” requiring claims to be filed within one month of entering the country. Recently acceptance rates have increased, but lingering critiques include long delays in adjudication, an agency that is very under-resourced given the number of people seeking protection in Mexico, and the lack of sufficient personnel to process claims. Finally, many asylum seekers and migrants are apprehended in Mexico when trying to reach the United States and may choose to accept “voluntary return” to their home country in hopes of making another attempt to cross. So, Mexico operates as a border wall in many ways, making it more difficult for immigrants coming from outside of Mexico to make it to the United States or Canada by land (Varela 2019).

Canada: Humanitarian Image with Cycles of Restrictive Asylum Policies

The Canadian experience with Central American immigration differs significantly from that of both the United States and Mexico, in that far fewer Central American migrants have

sought to enter or seek refugee protection in Canada. Geography has been a key determinant for these lower numbers. Nevertheless, statistically speaking, Canada has awarded refugee protection to a larger *proportion* of Central American applicants (Garcia 2006b: 119). Although Canada is often perceived as being more welcoming to refugees, the country has alternated between open and more restrictive approaches from the 1980s to the present and has embraced some of the same tropes about the danger of irregular migration from the Northern Triangle. Moreover, while touting its refugee resettlement program, Canada has deployed various strategies to limit the ability of overland migrants to seek and obtain refugee protection at the Canadian border. Furthermore, according to FitzGerald's analysis (2019: 59), a Canadian visa policy change in 2009 by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper was "openly motivated" by "[t]he goal of reducing the number of Mexicans applying for asylum."

Before 1970, "there was virtually no history of Latin American migration to Canada" (Simmons 1993: 283). Laws passed in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s eliminated restrictions on immigration, facilitating arrivals from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The Canadian Immigration Act of 1976 established a framework for immigration and refugee protection (Garcia 2006b: 120-121). In the 1970s, Canada began to offer protection to a significant number of Chileans fleeing the Pinochet regime, marking one of the first significant inflows of Latin American migrants to Canada.

After the outbreak of civil war in 1979, Salvadoran refugees began arriving in Canada. In 1979, Canada received only 108 Salvadoran migrants, but that number grew substantially in the years to follow, reaching 4,290 in 1990 (Simmons 1993: 294). Guatemalans and Nicaraguans likewise migrated to Canada in the 1980s, but in smaller numbers. Between 1982 and 1987, Canada admitted nearly 16,000 refugees from Central America, the majority from El

Salvador (Garcia 2006a). It is estimated that there were over 56,000 refugees or displaced persons in Canada in 1987 from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua (Lacroix 2004: 147). The Canadian government even instructed its consulates in the United States to issue visas to Central Americans facing deportation. Moreover, asylum grant rates for Central Americans during this time were substantially higher in Canada than in the United States (Garcia 2006a). Canada's refugee policy "was an important way to distinguish Canada culturally and politically from the United States" (Garcia 2006b: 130). Canada received the 1986 Nansen Medal from UNHCR for its efforts to protect refugees, including Central Americans (Lacroix 2004: 147).

Canada's welcoming posture towards Central American migrants was linked to the country's distinct policy position on the conflicts in Central America and, according to FitzGerald, as well as "a means of promoting its international brand as a beacon of humanitarianism" (FitzGerald 2019: 127). The Canadian Parliament had issued a report in 1982, recommending that Canada focus on Central American foreign policy and adopt policies "independent in tone and substance from the policies of the United States" (Garcia 2006b: 125). Unlike the U.S., which viewed the conflicts through a strategic Cold War lens, Canada viewed the conflicts as homegrown and rooted in economic and political inequality. Instead of providing military aid, Canada offered funds to UNHCR, the Red Cross, and other organizations to support various forms of humanitarian assistance (Garcia 2006a). Despite its distinct approach, Canada avoided direct critiques of the U.S. position on Central America, and the U.S. never penalized Canada for adopting divergent asylum policies (Garcia 2006b: 126-127).

The arrival of these large numbers of Central American migrants ultimately led to a backlash against Canada's more permissive migration policy. In 1986, after the passage of the

Immigration Reform and Control Act in the United States—which regularized immigrants and sought to constrict employment opportunities for unauthorized migrants and strengthen enforcement efforts into the future—large numbers of Central Americans sought protection in Canada (Simmons 1993: 201). Between December 2006 and February 2007, nearly 10,000 refugees – mostly Central Americans – entered Canada (Garcia 2006a). The arrival of these migrants contributed to hyped-up narratives of refugees flooding the borders (Lacroix 2004: 150). Parliament was recalled to address the situation, and in 1987 new laws were passed (Bills C-55 and C-84) to tighten the refugee determination process. Faith-based organizations and other non-profits vigorously advocated to decrease these laws’ restrictive aspects (Garcia 2006a). Nevertheless, the policies did result in a substantial reduction in the number of Central American border entrants in Canada (Garcia 2006b: 132).

Another restrictive immigration measure, Bill C-86, was approved in 1993. The law further streamlined hearings and tightened eligibility criteria for asylum and included a provision relating to applicants who had passed through a safe country. In all of the 1990s, only 6,906 asylum applicants were filed in Canada by El Salvadoran applicants, and 4,357 applications by Guatemalan nationals (UNHCR 2001). Nevertheless, Canada continued to enjoy a global reputation for relatively permissive refugee policies, and the overall number of refugees and immigrants steadily rose throughout the decade. However, public polling revealed concern about the country’s immigration and multicultural policies (Garcia 2006b: 152-153).

After the 9/11 attacks, in December 2002, Canada and the United States formalized a bilateral safe third country agreement after almost a decade of negotiations (Garcia 2006b: 140-142), which enabled the Canadian government to return to the U.S. thousands of asylum-seekers at Canadian land borders who had transited through the U.S en route to Canada. In the

year of implementation, refugee claims dropped from a prior five-year average of 35,095 to just under 21,000 (Grant & Rehaag 2016: 226). In the years that followed and through the present, the agreement has imposed a significant limitation on Central American and other asylum seekers who have traveled northward after passing through the United States. Any would-be asylum seeker who wishes to avoid the harsh effects of the agreement must arrive at an airport or a seaport — typically requiring a visa, which can be challenging to obtain.

In 2012, Canada clamped down on asylum-seekers once again, with the enactment of new federal legislation that resulted in a 49 percent decline in asylum claims that year (Reynolds & Hyndman 2015: 41). The law, among other things, gave the government greater flexibility to select Designated Countries of Origin (DCOs), which are states presumed to be relatively safe. Mexico was designated as a safe country of origin in 2013, sharply reducing the number of asylum claims (FitzGerald 2019: 59). Additionally, the 2012 law called for the capture of biometrics for a larger swath of arriving immigrants, including temporary immigrants. With the dismantling of asylum protections in the United States during the Trump administration — particularly for Central American migrants — many advocates in Canada encouraged the government to withdraw from the safe third country agreement. A lawsuit by refugee advocates made its way through the federal courts in Canada, designed to compel the government to withdraw from the agreement. A federal judge initially struck down the agreement, finding that it infringed on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, in April 2021 the Federal Court of Appeal overturned the lower court's decision and upheld the agreement as constitutional. Notably, one of the plaintiffs in this lawsuit was a Salvadoran woman who experienced severe domestic violence in her country of origin.

There are loopholes in the safe third country agreement wherein those who arrive at a country between official ports of entry are eligible to apply for asylum—which became especially relevant in 2017 when many Haitians, among others, arrived in Canada, and particularly to the French-speaking province of Quebec, in anticipation of the end of TPS protection in the U.S. This caused the number of asylum claims to spike and renewed calls by advocates in Canada to stop recognizing the U.S. as a safe country (see FitzGerald 219: 129).

Overall, the Canadian refugee protection approach has privileged the refugee resettlement program, whereby refugees are identified overseas and selected for resettlement in Canada. By contrast, consistent with the logic of “Fortress North America,” the Canadian government has sought to discourage the spontaneous arrival of asylum seekers at Canadian borders. Over the years, the media have referred to the latter as “bogus refugees” or “queue jumpers” (Reynolds & Hyndman 2015: 42-44). Even the Canadian government has implicitly endorsed this rhetoric, suggesting that those who arrive at the border are diverting government resources from more worthy refugees (Jackson & Bauder 2013: 364). In recent decades, refugees arriving by boat have generated especially virulent public reactions. These include the arrival of the *Amelie*, in 1987, a boat carrying 173 Sikh refugees, and the arrival in 1999 of boats carrying nearly 600 Chinese refugees (Jackson & Bauder 2013: 364).

The resettled refugees, however, tend to come from a relatively small number of countries, suggesting that this favored approach is not accessible to many (Reynolds & Hyndman 2015: 42-44). Moreover, Canada has explicitly embraced the trend towards externalization of border controls with its Multiple Borders Strategy. This initiative began in 2003 seeking to “push the border out” and undertake screening of putative immigrants far from the actual Canadian border, including the migrant’s country of origin. The core objective of this

strategy is to prevent unwanted arrivals at Canadian borders. Consistent with this approach, the strategy embraces using the term “irregular migrant” to describe these unwanted arrivals, even if they are asylum seekers (Reynolds & Hyndman 2015: 45).

Although Canada presents itself as a beacon of humanitarian protection – and by some metrics, its refugee and immigration policies are relatively generous – domestically, migration policy has been a frequent site of contestation. Indeed, as Marie Lacroix (2004: 147) observed, “refugee policy in Canada is one of the most controversial and debated political and social issues.” Canada has at specific junctures welcomed Central American migrants, particularly during the 1980s, but since then it has instituted reforms to its asylum and refugee system that effectively inhibit many Central American migrants from advancing asylum claims. The politics of externalization of border control (and the corollary preference for resettled refugees), along with the safe third country agreement, make it extremely difficult for northbound Central Americans to find protection in Canada.

Canada’s unique relationship with the United States also plays out in its refugee policies. While the countries are inextricably intertwined economically and socially, Canada has sought to distinguish itself from the U.S. on certain matters of social policy. While laudable from a humanitarian standpoint, Canada has nevertheless acquiesced to U.S. pressure to securitize aspects of its migration policy. The Canadian government has also capitulated to domestic political pressure and has imposed various restrictions on migration and refugee processes (see McKercher, this volume).

The MPP as Example of the North American Immigration System

Recent developments in North American migration policy perfectly encapsulate the arguments advanced here. In 2018 and early 2019, the Trump administration framed Central American migration – including the imminent arrival of migrant caravans (see Gandini et al. 2020) – as a crisis requiring a more aggressive response. Among the responses was the promulgation of the Migrant Protection Protocols in January 2019, colloquially known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy. Under this protocol, the U.S. government returned certain foreign nationals to Mexico while their immigration proceedings were pending.

Despite the significant burden placed on Mexican authorities, the Mexican government acquiesced to the practice. When similar ideas were floated in 2018, some predicted that the Mexican government – particularly one led by López Obrador – would more strongly contest the practice. Instead, the Mexican government reiterated its commitment to humanitarian protection, and suggested that returned individuals would be given an opportunity to seek protection in Mexico, should they qualify. This response allowed the Mexican government to embrace a rhetorically distinct approach from the U.S. while submitting itself to the U.S.’s externalized enforcement policy.

The MPP showed Mexico playing an active, visible role in Fortress North America. The end of the program was not brought about by Mexico’s refusal to keep cooperating or by having *de facto* refugee camps in its northern border cities, nor even by Trump’s electoral loss. Indeed, the fate of MPP remains to be seen, as lawsuits brought by conservative state attorneys general have produced temporary orders requiring the Biden administration to administer the program “in good faith”—something that it has done while expanding coverage of the program to asylum seekers from the entire Western hemisphere.

The statutory basis for the Migrant Protection Protocols technically applies to migrants entering via the northern border (from Canada), though the program as announced focuses exclusively on the southern border. The U.S. and Canadian governments have discussed possible revisions to the U.S.-Canada Safe Third Country Agreement to close the “loophole” that allows persons who evaded inspection (i.e., did not present themselves at a port of entry) to seek asylum in Canada, even if they already attempted to do so in the United States. For example, media statements show that Canadian Border Security Minister Bill Blair signaled a move in this direction, given the large numbers of asylum-seekers who had recently arrived from the U.S. At the same time, Canadian Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen proposed eliminating the policy that limited asylum seekers’ rights from countries deemed to be “safe.” These simultaneous developments perfectly encapsulate Canadian migration policy and Fortress North America's dual nature: the entrenchment of rigid and externalized border controls, with occasional concessions to stakeholders and a commitment to supporting “regular” migration.

Migration systems within regional projects: North America and Europe

While North America is explicitly an economic region since NAFTA and the renegotiated USMCA, these constitutive accords intentionally avoided addressing immigration in a holistic way, including only scattered provisions for specific professions. Nonetheless, the United States, Mexico, and Canada have created a system meant to deflect Central Americans and other immigrants of color from impoverished backgrounds. Despite these efforts, the large percentage of El Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans going to the USMCA region is indicative of both the dire conditions in these countries and the profound economic, social,

political, and historical ties across the larger region (see Giorguli-Saucedo et al. 2016). Thus, in the migration domain, Northern Central America is, undeniably, a defining feature of North American dynamics. Many proposed agreements have pointed to this direction,⁹ and they reflect the porousness of the Central American and North American borders to goods, capital, drugs, organized crime, and people (see Kloppe-Santamaria, this volume). Securitarian agreements, the war on drugs, and the criminalization of gangs extend from Canada to Colombia. Relations within the North American region are unequal in terms of power and economic might, but they show mutual dependence and close relationships; this is clearest for labor supply and demand. As Mexican immigration to the U.S. reached net zero after the financial crisis of 2007, Central Americans increasingly supplement the main labor force allowing the growth in construction and service industries in large American cities, including the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

We have argued that North America is a regional system in terms of contemporary immigration dynamics, and that these regional dynamics include Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. It is a region in which people from these Central American countries increasingly live. However, even if some have been economically and socially integrated for decades, the recurring cycles of politically motivated “crisis” show that newly arriving Central American adults are not welcomed at all, or at best are not welcome as equals—and their governments are complicit in this exclusion through the policing of political borders.

The apparent contrast in terms of regional integration is the European Union. In particular, the Schengen area which guarantees the free movement of goods and people throughout the area, successfully decoupling border policing from local and national political administration and elections (Castañeda and Shemesh 2020). In contrast, North America still

9 CAFTA-DR, the Puebla Process of 1996 (see Kron 2013; FitzGerald 2019), Merida Initiative/CARSI (Insight Crime 2012), 2014’s Programa Frontera Sur, AMLO’s southern development proposal.

aims to restrict the movement of people, however unsuccessfully and at a high human cost. Nevertheless, the externalization of borders to Mexico and, more recently, through the cooperation of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran armed forces is parallel to what the European Union has been doing to extra-regional economic migrants and asylum seekers (Vollmer 2016). The European Union has active buffers in Southern Europe, the Mediterranean, Turkey, and Libya. For example, the many deals that encourage Turkey to act as a refugee holder show the parallels between the North American and European migration systems, especially regarding their regional exclusionary goals. Turkey has used its geographic position and the EU's interest in reducing migration from Syria and the Middle East as leverage to gain aid and tacit political support for President Recep Erdogan's autocratic regime. This is echoed in the negotiations and exchanges (wielding both carrots and sticks) used in recent years to persuade emigrant-sending Central American countries to accept safe third country agreements and, in the case of Guatemala, to physically enforce the bottleneck at the border to block the flow of people North. The effect is similar: to push the border further south.

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