Panic at the border: U.S. relations with the Northern Triangle

by Michael Shifter and Bruno Binetti

Anti-narcotics and military police officers incinerate more than 200 kilos of cocaine seized in southern Honduras near the border with Nicaragua, on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa on August 5, 2016. (ORLANDO SIERRA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

The United States has had a dominant presence in Central America for more than a century, but the region received little media and public attention here except during the region's civil wars in the 1980s. Today, Central America is once again at the center of political debates in the U.S. as a result of rising undocumented immigration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, also known as the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA). While citizens of NTCA countries have been migrating to the U.S. for decades, a combination of factors including widespread violence and criminality, economic inequality and rural poverty, and the desire to reunite with family members who already live in the U.S. has led to a vast increase in their numbers.

Since the Great Recession, undocumented immigration from Mexico—the traditional source of immigration to the U.S.—has been steadily declining, while that from NTCA

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countries continues to rise. Further, a significant share of entries from NTCA countries are families and unaccompanied minors, who request asylum in the U.S. This situation has overrun the U.S. immigration system, which is inefficient and in desperate need of reforms due to decades of political blockage.

Under the Trump administration, combating illegal immigration has become a priority of the United States. President Donald Trump has proclaimed a "zero tolerance" policy on the issue, including curtailing the right to asylum, separating children from their families to expedite deportation processes, and increasing the number of raids and arrests of undocumented immigrants, some of whom have been in the U.S. for decades. These policies have deeply divided U.S. society and caused great human suffering, while doing little to stem the number of NTCA citizens attempting to enter illegally through the U.S. southern border.

This essay will analyze the relationship between the United States and Northern Triangle countries, in order to explain the structural causes behind the recent increase in undocumented immigration from the area. To do so, it will explain the long history of U.S. influence over the NTCA, which Washington saw as a critical Cold War battleground in the 1980s and has become a strategic zone for drug-trafficking into the United States since then. This analysis will also address the particularities of recent emigration from NTCA countries, and how it differs from Mexico's. In addition, it will evaluate U.S. policy responses to this surge in undocumented emigration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras under the Obama and Trump administrations. Finally, it will propose ways in which the U.S. can tackle this problem by focusing on the reasons that make people emigrate in the first place.

Historical background

The U.S. consolidated its influence over Central America in the early 20th century. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 under President Theodore Roosevelt was a testimony to U.S. hegemonic position in the area. Under Roosevelt and his successors, Washington intervened several times in the region in order to protect U.S. economic and political interests. In doing so, it undermined or deposed governments deemed hostile to U.S. goals and propped-up friendly regimes regardless of their respect for democratic norms or basic human rights. Meanwhile, Central American elites became entrenched, concentrating all political and economic power while most of the population remained desperately poor, especially in the countryside. As a result, rural revolts by peasants and indigenous populations became common, and were harshly repressed by the U.S.-backed security forces.

This trend became even more acute after the start of the Cold War in the mid-20th century. For Washington, authoritarian regimes in Central America were critical allies against left-wing forces supported by Moscow, and deserved assistance despite their corruption and violence. In

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1954, the CIA supported a coup against Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz, a democratically elected leader falsely accused of sympathizing with communism for his attempts to implement an ambitious program of land reform. The destruction of Guatemalan democracy generated instability and led to a vicious civil war between the military regime and left-wing guerrillas, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s. A similar situation ensued in El Salvador in 1980, when several guerrillas united to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and—with Soviet support—launched an outright offensive against the state, even managing to take some neighborhoods of the capital, San Salvador.

The importance of Central America as a battleground of the Cold War became paramount during the Ronald Reagan administration. During the 1980s Washington spent billions of dollars in economic and military aid for the Salvadorian and Guatemalan regimes in their fight against left-wing guerrillas. In both countries the security forces and paramilitary groups supported by the state unleashed vicious violence against rural villages, which tended to support the guerrillas. More than 200,000 people were murdered in the Guatemalan Civil war, and 75,000 people were killed in El Salvador, most in the hands of government-backed death squads. Entire villages were razed, peasants murdered and buried in mass graves spread throughout these countries. One of the most infamous episodes was the *El Mozote* massacre, in which more than 1,200 people were slaughtered by the Salvadorian military in December 1981. Even after this operation became known, the Reagan administration resisted calls from Congress and civil society groups to cut ties with murderous Central American governments.

While Honduras did not experience a civil conflict, it was affected by the instability and violence of its neighbors. A strong U.S. ally, the Honduran government welcomed the deployment of U.S. troops in its territory and assisted the right-wing regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador.

The Memorial at El Mozote in 1993. It was built for families massacred in the village of Mozote, El Salvador, by the U.S.-trained Atlacatyl Batallion in the early years of the war. The plaque reads, "They did not die, they are with us, with you and with all humanity." (LARRY TOWELL/MAGNUM PHOTOS)

In addition, Honduras agreed to host a paramilitary force of right-wing Nicaraguans, who were being trained by the Reagan administration to fight against the leftist Sandinista regime that had taken power in Nicaragua. However, the U.S. Congress opposed further involvement in Central America following the revelations of massacres in Guatemala and El Salvador, and banned the government from funding the Contras. Instead of relenting, the White House decided to use the proceedings of a secret arms sale to Iran (a declared enemy of the United States) to keep supporting the Contras. In 1985, the scheme was revealed by the press, and the Reagan administration was crippled for months amid intense outrage in Congress and among the public.

As the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s, all Central American governments came together to find a way out of the region's intertwined and violent civil conflicts. This led to the Esquipulas Agreements, which laid the groundwork for democratic elections in Nicaragua (1990) and national peace accords in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996). Through these deals, governments, militaries and guerrillas committed themselves to restore democratic rule, rebuild state institutions, demobilize paramilitary forces, reform the security forces, and end human rights violations. As promising as these deals were, they were extremely hard to put into practice. Decades of conflict took a heavy toll on the NTCA: Infrastructure was in ruins, public services almost nonexistent, poverty was rampant, inequality was appalling, and state institutions were extremely weak, corrupt and inefficient. The democratically elected governments who took over in the 1990s managed to prevent a return to open armed strife, but the structural conditions caused by and that had contributed to the armed conflicts remained almost unchanged.

By that time, the region had ceased to be a priority for the United States, which offered little or no assistance for post-conflict reconstruction. Incapable of building strong democratic institutions, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala became fertile ground for the expansion of criminal groups and armed gangs in the 1980s and 1990s. Some of these criminal organizations became more powerful and sophisticated as they became involved in drug-trafficking: The NTCA is strategically located between cocaine production areas in South America and drug trafficking routes that go through Mexico and into

the U.S., the largest consumer of illicit drugs in the world. The weakness of state structures gave way to widespread corruption and inefficiency among the security forces, judiciary systems and the political class. Moreover, former members of paramilitary forces and intelligence services who had acted with impunity during the civil conflicts recycled themselves as members of criminal organizations.

Even as the U.S. withdrew from the NTCA, its policies still had large repercussions in the region. In the 1970s the U.S. government had launched a war on drugs based on a hardline stance against drug consumption and traffic. However, the expansion of interdiction efforts in the Caribbean increased the importance of Central America as a drug-trafficking route. In addition, in the 1990s the U.S. government deported thousands of gang members from NTCA countries living in Los Angeles (mostly Salvadorians) to their countries of origin. These groups used their criminal skills to build powerful and violent branches of U.S.-based gangs such as MS-13 (also known as Mara Salvatrucha) and Barrio 18, among many others. The U.S. policy of deporting dangerous criminals back to NTCA countries remains in effect today, with tragic consequences.

By the early 2000s, gangs had taken over entire neighborhoods in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, and were fighting each other and weak security forces over territory and drug routes. As a result, murder rates shot up in NTCA countries, becoming some of the highest in the world. The other Central American nations (Nicaragua, Panama and Costa Rica) also face significant criminal activity and are part of hemispheric drug-trafficking routes, but have been more able to cope with this threat due to their relatively more stable politics and stronger institutions. Meanwhile, Mexico launched a war on drugs of its own in 2006 under president Felipe Calderón, which led Mexican criminal groups to increase their presence in NTCA countries, building alliances with some local groups while violently fighting others.

Eventually, the dramatic rise in drug-trafficking activities and widespread violence got the attention of the U.S. government. In 2007 the George W Bush administration launched the Merida Initiative, a multi-billion-dollar assistance package designed to boost Mexican efforts to combat drug-trafficking organizations that included some funds for NTCA countries. While the Initiative was announced as a multi-dimensional effort, in reality most U.S. assistance was destined to provide training and equipment for widely distrusted security forces, neglecting much-needed reforms to state institutions and all but guaranteeing impunity for police abuses and political corruption.

Recent migration to the United States

Undocumented immigration from NTCA countries in the United States is not new, even if it only recently entered the public debate. In 1998, president Bill Clinton granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) –an immigration category that protects undocumented immigrants from being deported— to more than 50,000 Honduran nationals who had moved to the U.S. after the country was hit by Hurricane Mitch. Three years later, president George W Bush approved TPS for approximately 200,000 Salvadorians, most of whom had fled a catastrophic earthquake. TPS for both groups had been periodically extended many times since then.

The number of undocumented immigrants entering the U.S. rose significantly during the 1990s and early 2000s; a great majority of them were Mexican citizens. In the year 2000, over 1.6 million people were detained while trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, a historic high. According to Pew Research, in 2007 the overall population of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. reached its peak at 12.2 million: 6.9 million were Mexican citizens and 1.5 million came from NTCA countries. However, after the 2008 crisis undocumented immigration from Mexico began to decline, as the U.S. economy had less demand for undocumented workers in agriculture, construction and other sectors. In 2010, the number of people detained while attempting to illegally cross the southern border into the United States had dropped to less than 500,000.

However, since 2013 declining undocumented immigration from Mexico has been partially offset by a rise in im-

migration from NTCA countries. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico living in the U.S. declined by about 1.5 million, while those from NTCA countries rose by 400,000 and have continued to increase since then. Moreover, most undocumented immigrants from Mexico are young males looking for employment, meaning that they cross the border in secret and seek to elude U.S. border authorities. In contrast, a large share of NTCA immigrants are families and unaccompanied minors who request asylum in the U.S., a novel situation that quickly turned into a crisis for the U.S. government.

Although it is impossible to pinpoint a single reason, there are several intertwined factors that can explain the rise in immigration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

The first is the lack of economic opportunities in NTCA countries, which are among the poorest in Latin America: 53.2% of Hondurans, 50.5% of Guatemalans and 32.1% of Salvadorians are poor, according to the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLAC). Despite relatively high GDP growth rates or over 2% annually, wealth in the NTCA is highly concentrated, unemployment is high, and most people subsist in the informal sector. Further, poverty is even higher in rural areas, where a significant part of emigrants to the U.S. come from. Rural infrastructure is very precarious and peasants lack access to credit. This makes peasants particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes, and to the effects of climate change including hurricanes, massive storms and droughts, which have been rising in recent decades.

Structural poverty and inequality have combined with the entry of more people into the workforce: more than half of the population in NTCA countries is under the age of 25. This age group is more likely to decide to emigrate in search for better living conditions than older people. Moreover, since immigration from the NTCA to the United States began to increase in the 1980s, the remittances sent by those working in the U.S. has become a critical source of income for families in these countries. In 2016 remittances represented at least 20% of GDP in Honduras, 17% of GDP in El Salvador, and 10% in Guatemala. Those who seek to emigrate, therefore, not only look for personal improvement, but to take care of those left behind.

A second factor that explains the surge in undocumented migration from NTCA countries is the desire of people to reunite with their family members. ECLAC estimates that 82% of recent migrants from NTCA countries already have relatives living in the United States. This type of immigration tends to be self-perpetuating: With 1.2 million Salvadorians, 880,000 Guatemalans and more than 500,000 Hondurans already living in the U.S. (nearly half of them undocumented), family reunification efforts are likely to continue.

A third factor that has been mentioned above is widespread violence and criminality in NTCA countries. According to the latest data available from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2017 El Salvador had a murder rate of 62 per 100,000 inhabitants, Guatemala of 26 per 100,000, and Honduras of 42 per 100,000. The global average is 5 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. In addition to murder, armed gangs engage in kidnapping and extorsion, and forcefully recruit young men, attacking those who refuse and their families. According to a 2010 study, people in NTCA countries are 30% more likely to consider migrating if they have been the victim of a crime in the previous year. Part of this violence is related to common criminality, but a significant share is connected to drug-trafficking: more than 80% of all cocaine entering the U.S. passes through the Northern Triangle.

Murder rates in NTCA countries are among the highest in the world, but have been slowly declining since their peak in 2012. At least part of this improvement is due to new government initiatives, including taking back prisons that were being run by criminal gangs. El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have also implemented hardline policies based on the use of massive force by the security forces to combat criminality. This can be a deterrent in the short term, but eventually leads to human right violations, police abuses, and lack of trust for the police among the people they are intended to protect. Further, lower murder rates in some areas are a consequence of the consolidation of criminal organizations: armed groups have become so powerful that they now face less resistance

Mara Salvatrucha gang members are seen behind the bars of cells at a detention center on February 20, 2013, in San Salvador, El Salvador. (JAN SOCHOR/LATINCONTENT/GETTY IMAGES)

from rival groups and from the security forces. In fact, in 2012 murder rates in El Salvador dropped precipitously after the government brokered a truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18, the country's two main gangs. The cease-fire collapsed in 2014, after the authorities faced growing criticism for ceding to gang leaders' demands.

A final reason for rising emigration from NTCA countries, and perhaps the most important one, is the weakness of democratic institutions. State structures in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are incapable of providing basic public services to many of their citizens, such as healthcare and education, and have no presence in large parts of their territories. A legacy of the civil conflicts, security forces are corrupt, violent and underpaid, which makes them easy to permeate by criminal organizations. Judicial systems lack independence from both the political system and criminal groups. This creates an environment in which corruption flourishes and impunity is the norm.

Further, governments lack proper funding to do their jobs. In NTCA counties, tax avoidance is the norm: tax rates on the wealthy are still very low and most refuse to pay even that. As a result, Honduras only collects 19% of its GDP in taxes, El Salvador 16% and Guatemala about 10%. In comparison, the average for member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a club of high-income countries, stands at 34% of GDP.

Democratic governance: breakthroughs and setbacks

To be sure, the overall situation in NTCA countries has improved since the peace agreements of the 1990s. Civil society organizations work to defend the environment from predatory practices and to promote the rights of poor peasants and indigenous communities, despite suffering threats and violence from criminal groups. Similarly, brave journalists expose corruption from high-level officials and the brutality of the security forces throughout the region, and some public officials struggle to hold power accountable against all odds. Because of the efforts of activists, the media, and independent judges and prosecutors, some corrupt officials have been held accountable, and mobilized citizens are protesting against abuses in record numbers. Throughout the NTCA, however, there have been worrying signs of a further deterioration of democratic governance and the rule of law.

In 2007, under pressure from civil society groups, the Guatemalan government welcomed a United Nations-backed institution—the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG—to support the local judiciary in combatting human rights abuses by the security forces. With time, however, CICIG went beyond its original mandate and began working with judges and prosecutors in high-level corruption cases. With the international support and visibility brought by CICIG, these officials were able to make historic breakthroughs: in 2015, the president and vice-president of Guatemala were forced to resign after being charged with corruption, amid massive citizen demonstrations. Both are in custody awaiting trial. One year later, Guatemalans elected outsider and former comedian Jimmy Morales as president on an anti-corruption campaign. Soon, however, Morales clashed with CICIG and its chief prosecutor, especially after the body began investigating the president's family and advisors for alleged corruption and illegal campaign financing. Despite intense civil society protests, judicial rulings and citizen demonstrations, in September 2019 CICIG was forced to shut down after the Guatemalan government withdrew the authorization it needed to function.

People hold national flags and a sign reading "I love CICIG (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala)". (JOHAN ORDONEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Despite this significant setback, the example of CICIG inspired civil society groups, journalists and independent officials in other NTCA countries. It proved that local institutions could hold high-level politicians accountable provided they had the proper funding and outside support. In 2016, the Honduran government reached a deal with the Organization of American States to install a CICIG-inspired institution to

support the local judiciary: the Support Mission against Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). Although this new body lacks the independence and strength of its Guatemalan counterpart, its creation shows that the anti-corruption agenda is alive and well in the NTCA.

At the same time, Honduran democracy has deteriorated severely in recent times. In 2009 president Manuel Zelaya was removed from office by the military, with support from the country's political class in Congress, when he attempted to change the constitution to allow re-election. The OAS and most countries in the region deemed this a coup and isolated Honduras until democratic rule was restored. In 2016, environmental activist Berta Caceres—who led a grass-roots campaign against the construction of a dam on indigenous territory—was brutally murdered: the case brought international condemnation but no convictions. Two years later, president Juan Orlando Hernández—who had strongly backed the ouster of Zelaya—managed to change the constitution himself, and won reelection amid serious allegations of fraud.

The situation in El Salvador is also defined by widespread impunity and corruption, dotted with glimmers of hope. In 2009 the former leftwing guerrilla group FMLN—which had turned into a political party after the end of the civil war—won power for the first time through democratic elections. This achievement was quickly overshadowed by rising violence and corruption. As in Guatemala and Honduras, some members of the Salvadorian judiciary dared nonetheless to investigate high-level officials: a former right-wing president is in prison, accused of embezzling nearly 250 million dollars, and the first president from the FMLN fled to Nicaragua to escape prosecution. Tired of traditional, political elites, in 2019 Salvadorians overwhelmingly elected Nayib Bukele, who ran as an anti-establishment candidate. It remains to be seen if Bukele will be willing or able to fulfill his promises of uprooting corruption, and if a MACCIH-inspired commission created in 2019 will be effective.

Salvadoran Armed Forces soldiers line up in the historic center of San Salvador on June 20, 2019. (MARVIN RECINOS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Policy responses in the U.S.

In sum, the recent rise in undocumented immigration from NTCA countries—which began around 2013—responds to a combination of factors, including widespread violence and criminality, rampant poverty and unemployment amid a demographic boom, a desire to join family members already in the U.S., and the corruption and weakness of state institutions in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Migrants face huge challenges after they decide to leave, since they have to travel for more than 2000 miles across some of the most violent areas in the world until they reach the United States. Throughout the journey, migrants are subjected to all sorts of violence including kidnapping, extortion, forced prostitution, sexual assault, and forced recruitment into criminal groups. Parts of the trip are made by foot, especially in highly-policed border areas. Some people travel through Mexico by bus, others ride "la Bestia" (the Beast), a freight train that crosses Mexico from South to North every few days. Thousands of men, women and children stay in the train for more than two weeks until they reach the U.S. border, crammed up on top of the train's cargo. Hundreds die or are severely injured every year in the moving train.

Those who can afford it pay human smugglers between 3,000 and 10,000 dollars per person to provide protection during the journey, and then pay several thousands more to *coyotes* who help them cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Frequently smugglers themselves subject migrants to violence. For low-income migrants, the alternative is to join efforts with other people from their area who also want to reach the U.S., forming so-called "caravans" of several thousand people. These groups are created out of necessity, to try to protect each other and pull their resources on the long and perilous journey.

Nevertheless, even if they manage to reach U.S. territory and apply for asylum there, migrants from NTCA countries still face long odds. In fact, the relatively large presence of children among migrants—a new phenomenon—is partially due to the fact that they have special protections under U.S. law, which makes them more likely to stay in the country. For instance, unaccompanied minors can only be detained for a few days by border officials, after which they must be handed

A migrant caravan of Central Americans walked into the interior of Mexico after crossing the Guatemalan border on October 21, 2018. (JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES)

to foster homes or to relatives living in the U.S. Family groups are similarly protected, and must be released and allowed to stay in the U.S. after 20 days while their case is processed by backlogged immigration courts. With more than 800,000 asylum requests pending by 2018, in practice many migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras get to stay in the U.S. indefinitely after requesting asylum.

The growing number of asylum applications from NTCA citizens overflowed the U.S. immigration system, which had been designed to cope with only a few thousand requests a year. Between 2010 and 2017, for instance, asylum requests increased from 28,000 to 143,000, with most of the increase coming from citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Many thousands more applied for "defensive" asylum in an attempt to halt their deportation procedures from the U.S.

As the Northern Triangle surpassed Mexico as the origin of undocumented migration to the U.S., the region received increased attention from U.S. officials. In response to what he called an "urgent humanitarian situation" at the border, created by the arrival of more than 50,000 unaccompanied minors from NTCA countries in a matter of months, in 2014 president Obama asked Congress for almost 4 billion dollars in additional funding to build new detention facilities, increase surveillance and border patrols, and hire more immigration officials and judges in order to cope with the larger number of asylum applicants. The Republican-controlled Congress, however, resisted, amid serious clashes with the White House on immigration policy. Meanwhile, the Obama administration moved to protect undocumented immigrants who had been brought to the U.S. as children from deportation, while boosting deportations of undocumented immigrants with criminal records and recent arrivals.

To address the deep causes behind emigration from NTCA countries, the Obama administration launched the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, focusing on El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. This policy worked simultaneously on three fronts: economic development, democratic governance and security. Under this strategy, Congress channeled more than 1.2 billion dollars through the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to various programs on areas such as education, civil service and judicial reform, energy infrastructure, social development, crime prevention, and others. These initiatives were complemented by the Alliance for Prosperity, a multi-billion plan with similar goals launched by the governments of the three NTCA countries with U.S. support. The objectives of the Alliance are to boost the productive sector, develop human capital, strengthen the rule of law and improve citizen security in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Then-vice-president Joe Biden became the visible face of the administration's efforts to engage Northern Triangle countries in a constructive way and dispel old notions of U.S. hegemony in the region.

At the same time, under president Obama the U.S. increased pressure on Mexico to stop migrants from NTCA countries from crossing its territory, to reduce the number of people arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. Therefore, in July 2014 Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto launched the Southern Border Program, deploying more troops and police officials along its 577-mile border with Guatemala. The greater security presence resulted in an increase of over 70% in deportations of NTCA citizens from Mexico between 2014 and 2015. It also led to more human rights violations, abuses and violence against migrants by the Mexican security forces, and provided new opportunities for human smugglers who controlled alternative routes into Mexico.

Despite these efforts, by the time Obama left office in January of 2017 the idea that there was an unprecedented and dangerous crisis at the border had taken hold in Washington and throughout the United States. A key factor behind this growing sense of alarm was the man elected in November 2016 to be Obama's successor.

Enters Donald Trump

Anti-immigration sentiments were one of the key drivers of Donald Trump's successful presidential campaign, together with opposition to free trade. As a candidate and later on as president, Trump has used harsh and racist language against migrants, falsely accus-

ing them of being responsible for joblessness, drug-trafficking and allegedly rising crime in U.S. border areas.

Initially, President Trump focused on immigration from Mexican nationals, despite their declining numbers. His most infamous promise was to build a border wall to stop migrants and drugs from entering the U.S., even though by the time Trump took office about 650 of the 1954 miles of binational border were already covered by a fence. In addition to being highly insulting for Mexico, a key U.S. ally and important trade partner, this wall would be highly impracticable: it would dramatically uproot the lives of binational communities that move across the border sometimes daily, and would cost billions of dollars but do little to stop people from applying for asylum at U.S. ports of entry. Moreover, most of the drugs that enter the U.S. do it in small boats, or are smuggled in through legal border crossings. Facing growing resistance from Congress—including among his fellow Republicans—in early 2019 Trump declared a national emergency at the border to relocate funds toward the construction of the wall without Congressional approval. So far, however, no new sections have been built outside of already existing barriers.

At the same time, the Trump administration launched a "zero tolerance" policy toward undocumented immigration, targeted toward entries from NTCA countries. The government instructed the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—the agency in charge of implementing immigration policy—to expand the number of raids, arrests and deportations of all illegal immigrants, regardless of their criminal records or how long they had lived in the United States, a sharp departure from previous policy.

In addition, the White House has gradually implemented a complete overhaul of U.S. immigration regulations, in order to restrict the right to asylum and worsen the living conditions of undocumented immigrants in detention. The proclaimed goal of these policies is to end "catch and release" (the practice of releasing undocumented immigrants in the U.S. while their asylum case is decided on) and deter new immigrants from attempting to enter the U.S. For example, new rules impose a mandatory fee on asylum claimants, prohibit them from seeking employment in the U.S. while their case is heard, and state that families who have applied for asylum can be detained indefinitely. Further, the Trump administration has taken measures to immediately reject asylum requests from people who have entered the U.S. through another country: that would immediately ban immigrants from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala from seeking protection in the U.S. These changes have led to more people being detained in increasingly cramped detention facilities, with very limited access to legal counseling and healthcare. At least 8 children have died in these centers, most of them of dehydration and the common flu. Most of these measures have been challenged in court by civil society groups and some U.S. states, but the administration's relentless anti-immigration push continues.

President Trump's crackdown on immigration is not limited to newcomers. Breaking a decades-old precedent, the president has also sought to end TPS status for citizens of El Salvador and Honduras, among other countries. This would allow ICE to deport over 300,000 people that have been in the U.S. since the 1990s. So far, the decision has been halted pending several judicial proceedings. The administration was also forced to partially reverse its decision to forcefully separate children from their parents in detention facilities, which was aimed at facilitating deportation procedures for adults.

In addition to making it harder for migrants from NTCA countries to enter and stay in the United States, president Trump has also increased pressure on Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to stop migrants from reaching the U.S. border in the first place. Mexico's situation is probably the direst: So far, more than 60,000 people have been forced to wait in Mexican border cities for their asylum request to be heard in the U.S. Since the U.S. immigration system has a backlog of hundreds of thousands of cases, they are likely to stay in that geographical and legal limbo for years. In the meantime, migrants live in precarious encampments maintained by Mexican authorities and some NGOs. Others wait in the streets and are vulnerable

Hundreds of activists and immigration advocates took to the streets in New York City on October 11, 2019. (ERIK MCGREGOR/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES)

to sexual exploitation and violence.

Despite Mexico's efforts to accommodate people who had been expelled from the U.S. and to boost security over its southern border, in May 2019 Trump threatened to impose massive tariffs on Mexican exports if the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador did not do more to stem the "flow" of people coming to the United States. Facing an economic disaster (which would have gravely affected the U.S. economy as well), the Mexican government quickly accepted to take in even more Central American migrants while their asylum application in the U.S. is being processed, and to send over 8,000 additional troops to its border with Guatemala in order to stop migrants from NTCA countries from entering Mexico on their way to the United States. As a result, Trump "indefinitely suspended" his tariff threat.

Central American governments have also felt the anti-immigrant wrath of the White House. In March 2019, Trump ordered over 500 million in aid toward El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to be halted as punishment for their failure to stop their people from migrating to the United States. This is a dramatic reversal in U.S. policy toward these countries: instead of seeing assistance to the NTCA as a way to change the structural conditions that make people emigrate, Washington is now chastising them, which is likely to weaken these countries even further and increase emigration. Democrat and Republican members of Congress have opposed this move, but the government has discretion to withhold the funds if it chooses to.

So far, the governments of Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have sought to accommodate the U.S. president as much as possible and avoid confrontation. In 2018, for example, Guatemalan president Morales followed the U.S. in recoating his country's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to gain the favor of the U.S. president. In July 2019, after Trump threatened to impose sanctions, Morales agreed to sign an agreement declaring Guatemala a "safe third country" for asylum seekers. If enacted, under this deal the U.S. would be able to deport thousands of Salvadorian and Honduran migrants to Guatemala, which would be responsible for their well-being.

Regardless of the text of the deal, Guatemala is far from being safe for its own citizens, much less for asylum seekers from other NTCA countries. Human rights organizations and others have criticized the deal as being completely unworkable, and as an attempt of the U.S. to forcefully return thousands of migrants to the situation of poverty and violence that made them flee in the first place. Confirming these claims, Guatemala's Supreme Court halted the implementation of the agreement, and Morales' elected successor (who will take office in January 2020) questioned its efficacy and announced that he would seek to renegotiate it. Nonetheless, the Trump administration has defended the deal, and vowed to continue pushing for similar agreements with other NTCA countries.

The anti-immigrant rhetoric of the president and other high-level officials is at least as consequential as the policy changes they are implementing. In countless speeches, tweets and statements the president has normalized language that until then was confined to the most extreme right-wing fringes of the political spectrum. He has accused Mexican immigrants of being "rapists and killers", he has talked about Central American immigrants "invading" the United States, and falsely accused migrant caravans of being full of drug-traffickers and gang members. Further, he has directly tied undocumented immigration with crime and murder, promoting false and dangerous stereotypes that can lead to more xenophobia and even violent acts against migrants.

What lies ahead

Evidence suggests that punitive approaches do not work to deter desperate people from migrating. A long-term U.S. policy to gradually reduce the number of undocumented immigrants arriving at its border would need to focus on the structural factors fueling this vast displacement of people from NTCA countries, both "push" and "pull."

In order to address the "push" factors that make people leave their countries, the U.S. will need to engage the region in a constructive way, with properly funded programs that work with local governments while holding them accountable. The approach used by the George W. Bush administration was based on free trade, and led to the signing of the Dominican Republic Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA). This deal generated new economic opportunities in NTCA countries, but the benefits have not reached most citizens. Under President Obama, U.S. assistance shifted toward more targeted, community-based projects, but did not have enough funding nor time to be implemented before recent changes under President Trump.

Existing assistance programs that focus on education, infrastructure development and health in the NTCA could be expanded instead of cancelled or used as bargaining chips. U.S. efforts could also focus on strengthening accountability and democratic institutions in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. In that sense, the silence of the Trump White House while Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales expelled CICIG and Honduran President Hernández secured reelection by dubious means directly contradict the administration's efforts to reduce undocumented immigration from these countries. Every time the U.S. has tried to rely on authoritarian or corrupt leaders to pursue its strategic goals in Central America, it has backfired spectacularly. This is a lesson Washington should have learned by now.

In addition, there is much the U.S. can do to reduce violence and criminality in NTCA countries, which are decisive factors behind emigration. For instance, U.S. lax gun regulations make it easy to smuggle weapons toward armed gangs and criminal organizations in Mexico and the NTCA. According to a recent study, more than 70% of the arms Mexican authorities decommission from criminals are U.S. made. Fur-

ther, U.S. assistance packages could focus more on accountability and human rights observance in the security forces: iron-fist policies based on brute force against organized crime overwhelmingly affect innocent citizens.

Ultimately, the massive demand for drugs in the United States creates overwhelming incentives and profits for Central American criminal groups. It is about time to accept that the U.S. decades-old war on drugs, focused on disrupting international supply routes and punishing all types of drug possession domestically, has failed miserably. Cocaine consumption in the U.S. has increased sharply in recent years, and shows no signs of abating. New drug policies—already being implemented in some U.S. states—should avoid punishing consumers and emphasize prevention and healthcare over repression. In addition, U.S. authorities could do more to prevent criminal organizations with presence in NTCA countries from using American financial institutions to hide and launder their assets.

But U.S. authorities must also accept that there are "pull" factors that attract immigrants. In particular, the U.S. economy continues to demand thousands of undocumented workers in sectors in which American-born people are less likely to participate, such as construction, restaurants, agriculture, and child and elderly care. Undocumented immigrants make about up 5% of the workforce force in the United States, or about 8 million people. The numbers are even higher in states such as California and Texas, where they constitute more than 10% of the total workforce. It is very difficult to attempt to repress a movement of people that is at least partially generated by the demand of U.S. citizens and businesses.

More broadly, it is impossible to separate the present crisis from the state of the U.S. immigration system, which is in desperate need of reforms. Unfortunately, political blockage in Washington—which predates Trump—has made it impossible to find an acceptable compromise. Reaching such common ground, however, is indispensable to finding a durable and humane solution to the rise in undocumented immigration from NTCA countries. A bipartisan immigration reform—similar to those that were common until the 1990s—would include measures that would be unpleasant for both sides of the aisle: it must include the regularization of the nearly 9 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., some of whom have been here for many years. It would also include drastic changes to the asylum system, which was designed to process a few requests a year and is based on an outdated distinction between "forced" migration and "voluntary" migration. As we have seen, the exact reasons for emigration from NTCA countries are hard to pinpoint, and elements from both categories tend to overlap. A possible compromise might be to restrict the right to asylum while granting more temporary visas for humanitarian reasons and for workers in areas that demand them.

Perhaps most importantly, U.S. policy regarding immigration from NTCA countries (and from elsewhere) needs to be decided based on an accurate representation of reality. Dangerous and xenophobic prejudices against immigrants should have no place in American political discourse, and should certainty not dictate U.S. policy on the matter. The thousands of people risking their lives traveling from NTCA countries do it to secure a better future for them and their families, and to escape vast poverty and violence. That is a struggle that should be familiar to most Americans, whose families came to this country under similar circumstances.

In fact, according to Pew Research, a vast majority of U.S. citizens support measures to improve the living conditions of asylum seekers at the U.S. border and to increase assistance to NTCA countries. Perhaps most surprisingly given the current political environment, 72 percent of Americans (and a majority of Republican voters) believe undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay in the U.S., provided that they meet certain conditions. This is encouraging, and suggests that there is vast public support for a bipartisan consensus on immigration reform.

The United States has had a significant role in Central American history. In order to have a positive impact on this region's future, the U.S. needs to remember its own history and enact an immigration policy that is humane and pragmatic.

U.S. President Donald Trump shakes hands with a member of the US Customs and Border patrol during a roundtable on immigration and border security at the US Border Patrol Calexico Station in Calexico, California, April 5, 2019. (SAUL LOEB/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

discussion questions

1. President Trump has declared a national emergency at the southern border, deployed military forces to support U.S. immigration and customs officials, and diverted appropriated defense funds from infrastructure projects to improve physical barriers along the border. How great a threat to U.S. national security is the situation in the Northern Triangle and along the U.S.-Mexico border?

2. Consider the duration and the importance of U.S. foreign relations with the countries in the Northern Triangle. Do you regard these challenges to be immediate, more mid-term (three to six years), or long-term (seven years or more)? How would you judge the area's importance to U.S. foreign policy goals?

3. Which U.S. foreign policy instruments are most applicable to addressing these challenges? Consider diplomacy, information, military, and economic measures.

4. Given the importance you have ascribed to the region, consider the three principal factors the author suggests are driving immigration from the Northern Triangle to the U.S.:
•The lack of economic opportunity in the NCTA countries.
•The desire of immigrants to reunite with their family members.
•The widespread violence and criminality in the Northern Triangle.

5. Reflect on your policy choices. Did your group reach consensus on which factor is most important, and which instruments are likely to be most effective?

6. The author concludes that current U.S. immigration policy is "ineffective, morally wrong, and contrary to U.S. interests." Do you agree? If so, how will your recommendations improve the situation in the Northern Triangle and along the southern border of the U.S.?

suggested readings

Guadarrama, Irma N. **In the Shadow of the Half Moon: Struggles of Women From Central America in Search of a New Life**. 181 pp. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Publishing, 2018. Why do women from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America risk their lives along with their children's, traversing through the treacherous, dangerous Mexican corridor, full of chaos and not knowing if they will live another day, if delinquents will steal their last peso, hurt them, or kill them?

Kinzer, Stephen. **Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua.** 450 pp. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. *Blood of Brothers* is Kinzer's dramatic story of the centuries-old power struggle that burst into the headlines in 1979 with the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. It is a vibrant portrait of the Nicaraguan people and their volcanic land, a cultural history rich in poetry and bloodshed, baseball and insurrection.

McCullough, David. **The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal.**. 698 pp. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978. From the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of Truman, here is the national bestselling epic chronicle of the creation of the Panama Canal. In *The Path Between the Seas*, acclaimed historian David McCullough delivers a first-rate drama of the sweeping human undertaking that led to the creation of this grand enterprise.

Martinez, Oscar. **A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America.** 288 pp. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2017. Martínez travels to Nicaraguan fishing towns, southern Mexican brothels where Central American women are trafficked, isolated Guatemalan jungle villages, and crime-ridden Salvadoran slums. With his precise and empathetic reporting, he explores the underbelly of these troubled places.

Arnson, Cynthia J. **In The Wake of War**. 320 pp. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. *In the Wake of War* assesses the consequences of civil war for democratization in Latin America, focusing on questions of state capacity. Contributors focus on seven countries Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru where state weakness fostered conflict and the task of state reconstruction presents multiple challenges.

Mayers, Steven. **Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Young Refugees from Central American.** 336 pp. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2019. They are a mass migration of thousands, yet each one travels alone. Solito, Solita, ("Alone, Alone"), is a Voice of Witness collection of oral histories that tell the stories of youth refugees fleeing their home countries and traveling for hundreds of miles seeking safety and protection in the United States.

Don't forget: Ballots start on page 98!!!!

To access web links to these readings, as well as links to additional, shorter readings and suggested web sites,

GO TO www.fpa.org/great_decisions

and click on the topic under Resources, on the right-hand side of the page.