

The Biden-Harris Strategy on the Root Causes of Migration (and Fragility) in Central America

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The Biden-Harris administration recently launched a strategy for addressing the root causes of migration in Central America. This critical question summarizes the strategy then analyzes how it is different from previous efforts, how it aligns with other administration priorities and international efforts, and what success could look like.

Q1: What is the Biden-Harris administration's strategy to address root causes of migration in Central America?

A1: The newly released U.S Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America (heretofore referred to as the "root causes strategy" or simply "the strategy") is the Biden-Harris administration's blueprint for addressing irregular migration from the region. With an introduction from Vice President Kamala Harris (who was asked to lead the administration's efforts in the region in March 2021), the strategy focuses on the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The strategy "lays out a framework to use the policy, resources, and diplomacy of the United States, and to leverage the expertise and resources of a broad group of public and private stakeholders, to build hope for citizens in the region that the life they desire can be found at home." It aims to build a broad coalition that will include Congress, the governments in the region, the private and public sector, and civil society organizations, with the aim of creating tailored and coordinated solutions to both short-term and long-term causes of migration.

The strategy groups the root causes of migration into five pillars, offering several approaches for each:

1. Addressing economic insecurity and inequality;
2. Combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law;
3. Promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press;
4. Countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other organized criminal organizations;
5. Combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.

Taken together, the five pillars can be seen as the administration's effort to address the structural fragility that is so often at the root of why people leave the Northern Triangle.

Q2: What is different or unique about the proposed strategy?

A2: The root causes strategy differs greatly from the Trump administration's more reactive, punitive, and shortsighted approach to migration, which included very little mention of root causes, much less proposed solutions for them. For example, under its "zero tolerance" strategy toward irregular border

crossings, President Trump's Department of Justice aimed to prosecute all adult migrants caught crossing the border irregularly, a break from prior administrations, which pursued relatively fewer criminal cases. The zero-tolerance policy infamously included the family separation policy, which led to the separation of children into poorly equipped detention facilities and other violations of the human rights of migrants and asylum seekers. At the same time, the Trump administration drastically cut foreign assistance to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, in contrast to how its predecessor and successor administrations utilized foreign aid as a tool to address migration. When then vice president Biden was put in charge of addressing the causes of migration from Central America, he placed foreign aid squarely at the center of his strategy. His plan, developed in cooperation with the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador and the Inter-American Development Bank, was called the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P). The A4P secured up to \$750 million in foreign assistance to "address the structural causes of irregular migration through the generation of economic opportunities and the improvement of citizens' quality of life." With its newly announced root causes strategy, the Biden-Harris administration is once more placing foreign assistance front and center, though Vice President Harris acknowledges in her introduction to the strategy that "providing relief is not sufficient to stem migration from the region." She is right; while an important tool in the toolkit, evidence suggests that foreign assistance has historically had limited impact on deterring migration and could actually lead to increased migration in the short term.

Overall, the root causes strategy reflects a more nuanced and clear-eyed understanding of the structural fragility at the heart of migration from Central America, especially when compared to the Obama-Biden administration's A4P, which the new strategy does not even mention.

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Additionally, the root causes strategy differs from past efforts in several important ways. In stark contrast to the previous administration, it places paramount importance on the protection of human rights and the humanity of migrants themselves, making the case that addressing migration challenges at their roots is more sustainable than erecting physical and metaphorical walls. It acknowledges the longer-term nature of the root causes and that the historically inconsistent approach of the United States toward the region has not helped. It places emphasis on international and private-sector partnerships. Perhaps most importantly, the strategy does not pretend that these are easy issues with quick fixes, especially if the United States does not take a holistic view of all the root causes and "build on what works, and . . . pivot away from what does not work."

Q3: Where does the strategy fit within the broader Biden-Harris immigration reform and global fragility agendas?

A3: The strategy notably ties root causes (typically seen as a foreign policy issue) with immigration policy (typically seen as a domestic policy issue) with the understanding that both domestic and foreign policy issues matter for the execution of the president's immigration agenda. However, though not surprising, it is notable that the root causes strategy is a standalone document. Two days before the strategy was released, the Biden-Harris administration released a Blueprint for a Fair, Orderly and Humane Immigration System, much of which will require executive action or an act of Congress to achieve. In contrast, the root causes strategy will serve as an actual blueprint for the nation's foreign policy apparatus, much of which will require neither executive nor congressional action. Despite being

separate, the immigration and root causes documents both emphasize that addressing root causes is critical to the administration's overall immigration efforts.

Though it avoids usage of the "f" word, the root causes strategy essentially offers ways to reduce state fragility in Central America. In other words, it acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of fragility and human mobility issues. As such, the Global Fragility Act (GFA), a bipartisan effort that uses an interagency approach to addressing fragility and mitigating violent conflict, is relevant. Even if Central American countries are not selected as priority countries for GFA implementation (a selection process that is still ongoing at time of publication), the act could provide a useful framework to help the Biden-Harris administration achieve its overall strategic goals in the region.

Q4: How does this strategy align with global efforts to make migration safe, orderly, and regular?

A4: Another important element of the strategy is that it specifically includes a focus on international outreach, stating clearly that "the United States cannot do this work alone." Though their respective titles use different words, the Biden-Harris administration's root causes strategy is largely in line with global efforts like the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), a first-of-its-kind intergovernmental agreement to "protect the safety, dignity and human rights and fundamental freedoms of all migrants, regardless of their migratory status, and at all times" with which the Trump administration refused to engage.

Similarities abound. For example, the GCM seeks to "[minimize] the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin," which is the very premise of the root causes strategy. The strategy looks to expand private-public partnerships to elevate small businesses and low-income families, also focusing on increasing political stability within states by bolstering rule of law and strengthening civil society. Likewise, the GCM points out the necessity for people to "lead peaceful, productive, and sustainable lives in their own country and to fulfill their personal aspirations," also stressing the need to "promote inter-institutional networks and collaborative programs for partnerships between the private sector and educational institutions." Furthermore, the GCM aims to promote economic growth and stability, protect human rights, and prevent gender-based violence, all of which are key tenets of the root causes strategy. Though it makes no mention of the GCM, the strategy aligns in many ways with it; whether the Biden-Harris administration intended for this to happen or not, it behooves the administration to actively reengage with the GCM execution process in support of its own strategic goals in the region.

Q5: What does successful execution of the root causes strategy look like?

A5: Each pillar in the root causes strategy has associated strategic objectives against which the administration will presumably be tracking its progress. But the "desired end state" is encapsulated in one phrase: "[a] democratic, prosperous, and safe Central America, where people advance economically, live, work, and learn in safety and dignity, contribute to and benefit from the democratic process, have confidence in public institutions, and enjoy opportunities to create futures for themselves and their families at home." This is as notable for what it does not say as for what it does. For the Biden-Harris administration, success is not stopping all migration from Central America, because it knows very well not only that this is an impossibility, but that a strategy focused just on that will result in irregular migration flows that are inherently unfair, disorderly, and inhumane.

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Thus, successful execution of the root causes strategy would be if Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador addressed state fragility and afforded agency to Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorians to “create futures for themselves and their families at home.” In other words, success looks a lot like Mexico. Historically a migration origin country, Mexico has drastically reduced net migration to the United States since the mid-2000s, due to economic development and demographic shifts, but also to successful efforts to address social and security concerns. Though Mexico is far from perfect (and every country, including the United States, deals with varying degrees of state fragility), there is little doubt that U.S. policymakers would welcome Central American countries trending in the direction of their neighbor to the north. More importantly, Central Americans themselves might prefer that as well. The Biden-Harris administration’s strategy on the root causes of migration (and fragility) is perhaps a first step in that right direction.