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The Trump era and counter migrant smuggling: a new geopolitical order on the US–Mexico borders?

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ABSTRACT

The Trump administration decided to pursue a different set of policies toward Mexico compared to the previous administrations. Immigration and border security policies toward Mexico and the southern US border constituted a significant pillar of Trump's "America First" concept. Due to the intensification of US immigration and security policies on the border, migrant smuggling increased significantly during the Trump era. However, there is little evidence of the impact that these policies had on the Mexican counterpart. What are the effects of Trump's immigration and border security policies on the US–Mexico borderline? Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with high-profile Mexican officials, this article aims to explore the intersection of the impact that Trump's policies had on the US–Mexico border and the migrant smuggling activities from the Mexican perspective.

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L'ère Trump et la lutte contre le trafic de migrants : un nouvel ordre géopolitique aux frontières américano–mexicaines ?

RÉSUMÉ

L'administration Trump a décidé de mener un ensemble de politiques différentes envers le Mexique par rapport aux administrations précédentes. Les politiques d'immigration et de sécurité frontalière à l'égard du Mexique et des frontières sud des États-Unis ont constitué un pilier important du concept "America First" de Trump. En raison du durcissement des politiques américaines en matière d'immigration et de sécurité aux frontières, le trafic de migrants a considérablement augmenté pendant l'ère Trump. Cependant, il existe peu d'éléments permettant d'objectiver l'impact que ces politiques ont eu sur l'homologue mexicain. Quels sont les effets des politiques d'immigration et de sécurité aux frontières de Trump sur la frontière américano–mexicaine ? En s'appuyant sur des données qualitatives issues d'entretiens avec des fonctionnaires mexicains de premier plan, cet article vise à explorer l'intersection de l'impact que les politiques de Trump ont eu sur la frontière américano–mexicaine et les activités de trafic de migrants du point de vue des Mexicains.

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Introduction

“America First” as a concept reflects on strategies in the field of US foreign policy, emphasizing non-interventionism, i.e. isolationism,¹ which dominated the interwar period (Braumoeller 2010). This concept was firstly suggested by US Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Warren G. Harding – during his presidential campaign in 1920 – and more recently by Donald Trump (Leffler et al. 2018). Trump also introduced a new dimension to the concept by including the migration issue. Indeed, migrants were considered as “criminals” and threats to the national security (Armendares and Moreno Brid 2019; Tan 2017; Capps et al. 2019; FitzGerald 2019, FitzGerald 2020).

Threats of migrant smuggling and transnational organized crime were the first targets of Trump’s “America First” set of policies toward Mexico. Scholars have yet argued that the relation between organized crime, drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and migrant smuggling is not always linear and that the War on Drugs in Mexico led mostly individual actors to engage in criminal activities with the aim of surviving (Izcarra Palacios 2022, 2019; Sanchez and Zhang 2018).

Since 9/11, the concept of US immigration policies has changed. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the US government created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which also included the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, viewing migration as a threat to national security (Garrett 2018; Rosenblum 2011; Schriro 2017; Tan 2017). In terms of interior securitization against migrants, Trump focused on the removal of unauthorized people with criminal charges and convictions and on the expansion of the activities of ICE as an immigration enforcement agency (Bolter, Israel, and Pierce 2022; Garrett 2018; Schriro 2017; Tan 2017).

Moreover, as far as the externalization of migration control policies is concerned, the Trump administration planned to create “buffer zones” in third countries to restrain the arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers on the US borders (Azadeh, Garcia, and Flores 2021; FitzGerald 2019; Margheritis and Pedroza 2022). In 2018, the US government exerted strong pressure on the Mexican government to sign a “safe third country agreement” and, at the same time, pressured the governments of Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador to sign bilateral agreements forcing them to function as “buffer zones” for the migrants and asylum seekers who were able to reach the US southern border.

This article seeks to explore the impact of President Trump’s counter migrant smuggling and border security policies on the migration issue on the US–Mexico border. The Trump administration presented illegal migration flows and transnational organized crime as related “threats”, which also affected the US inland significantly. Indeed, what are the effects of President Trump’s policies on the issue of irregular migration?

In response to this question, the article argues that the Trump administration focused its anti-smuggling and border security policies on these particular “threats” to defend its “aggressive” approach, but without having any significant effect on reducing the migration flows. Its policies toward Mexico and other Latin American countries were ineffective, as they increased the migrant smuggling activities. The Trump administration presented “America First” as a projection of US geopolitical power in the region, without succeeding in significantly diminishing the so-called migrant “threat”.

Through a series of semi-structured interviews with high-profile Mexican actors from military, police and other institutional backgrounds, this article aims to uncover the

effects of the Trump administration in terms of anti-smuggling and security on the borderline with Mexico and give new insights from the Mexican perspective. It summarizes the findings on the impact of Trump's policies on Mexico through the analysis of interviews conducted at the beginning and end of his presidential term.

We argue that this set of policies were ineffective to reducing the illegal migration flows passing by the borderline regions due to three main factors: (a) hardening border controls only increased migrant smuggling activities; (b) corruption of US agents; and (c) adverse impact on the Mexican policymaking on the migration issue.

By emphasizing US border security policies, the question of illegal migration flows and US–Mexican relations, this article sheds some more light on the impact of Trump's policymaking on the Mexican side and the people who are the most affected by the implementation of these policies. Its contribution aims to fill the research gap on the ineffectiveness of US policies to tackle the irregular migration issue and therefore to eliminate the migrant smuggling networks on the US–Mexico border.

Literature review

The USA has traditionally supported international migration either by accepting immigrants in the country or by influencing and convincing other countries – particularly in Europe – to increase migrant labor on their soil as a mechanism of economic development (Kaba 2019). This was also reflected in US policymaking in 1980s, when the refugee resettlement strategy became a federal program (Bose 2020), and during the 1990s and the 2000s, when the numbers of immigrants increased significantly and steadily (Young 2017). In this sense, Barack Obama accepted the resettlement of many Syrians refugees in 2016 and 2017 fleeing from the Syrian civil war (Kaba 2019).

There is still a debate in literature about the exact period that immigration policies coincide with border security policies and counter migrant smuggling. On the one hand, scholars argue that was this a consequence of the events of the 9/11 attack on US soil (Garrett 2018; Rosenblum 2011; Schiro 2017; Tan 2017). On the other hand, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 suggests otherwise and gives a more historical dimension to the issue (Baxter and Nowrasteh 2021; Saddiki 2017). Yet, in both cases, migration is constantly associated with securitization and border security policies (Bergeron and Chishti 2011; Boswell 2007).

Since immigration and border enforcement controls were internationally hardened, migrant smuggling became more structured, organized and “professionalized” (UNODC 2017), and also “criminalized” (Achilli 2015; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012), in the sense that actors of organized crime got involved or individual actors were involved in criminal acts. Although border security gained more attention after the 9/11 attacks, important fencing projects had already begun during the Clinton administration in 1994, when the first construction of a border fence made its appearance between San Diego and Tijuana, as well as the deployment of border agents at various borderline regions with Mexico (Correa-Cabrera 2022; Garrett 2018). After 9/11, the Bush administration enhanced these measures by extending the border fence in 2005 and 2006, with the aim of curbing immigration and stopping potential terrorists and illegal drugs (Correa-Cabrera 2022; Garrett and Storbeck 2011).

It is also argued that these evolutions, in respect of the way the USA considers immigration and border security policies, contributed to the changes in the tendencies of irregular migration (Cruz and Payan 2020). Border and immigration enforcement on the US–Mexico border redirected migrant routes and reconfigured migrant smuggling operations (Correa-Cabrera 2022; Sanchez 2015; Sanchez and Natividad 2017), forcing migrants to seek more dangerous and isolated routes, increasing, thus, the phenomena of violence against them (Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Sanchez and Zhang 2018). Indeed, to avoid detection, migrants have chosen new practices of crossing, via remote areas, and they often become victims of violence or just “objects” of the smuggling operations of *coyotes* (smugglers) (González 2018; Sanchez 2015; Sanchez and Zhang 2018; Slack and Whiteford 2011).

Moreover, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism prevention Act of 2004 established the Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center within the ICE, laying the ground for the institutionalization of counter migrant smuggling policies. To further understand the counter migrant smuggling strategies of Donald Trump, it is important to point out the approach of his predecessor in the field. Barack Obama took office when the period of the Great Recession began (2008), which significantly affected the Latin American countries – and also Mexico – and strengthened the “push” factors for many people to look for better employment opportunities in the USA (Correa-Cabrera 2022).

Controversies: from the previous administration to the Trump era

Barack Obama’s approach to immigration and border security policies was a mixture of repressive and protective measures toward migrants (Galli 2018; Hing 2018; Seelke 2014). On one hand, he tried to reform the US immigration system by introducing various laws, i.e. the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the DREAM act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) and later the DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans), as well as to facilitate the process for work visas for immigrants (Galli 2018; Kaba 2019; McHugh 2018; Pierce, Bolter, and Selee 2018; Tan 2017; Tardis 2020). On the other hand, the repressive measures of his policies appeared mostly after the migration crisis in Latin America in 2014 and the massive arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers on the US–Mexico border in that period, placing as priority the deportation of criminals or of those with prior convictions, and of those who recently crossed the borders without authorization (Armendares and Moreno Brid 2019; Chishti, Pierce, and Bolter 2017; Hing 2018; Tan 2017; Tardis 2020; Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2017).

It is important to highlight that, the USA has also implemented the “Secure Communities” (S-Comm) Program since 2008, under the Bush administration, which is a set of operations against undocumented migrants, coordinated by local, state and federal police forces with the assistance of ICE (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2017). This program was implemented under a strict legal and institutional framework during the Clinton and Bush administrations, but also during the Obama administration (Armendares and Moreno Brid 2019), until 2014 (Bolter and Chishti 2021). It was Obama’s extension of this deportation program that allowed ICE to proactively remove significant numbers of undocumented migrants, which was often characterized as one of the largest operations of state and local immigration policies (Kalhan 2013).

By 2012, it was implemented in 1,300 communities, including all the border areas of the southwest, and it was projected that, by 2013, its application would cover the entire country (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2017). During the eight years of the Bush administration, more than 8 million migrants were apprehended at the southern border of the USA, and 526,509 of them were from Central American countries; in contrast, since Obama's first term in office until 2014, 2,574,360 migrants were apprehended, 639,312 of whom were from Central America (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2017). Indeed, this was one of the factors that contributed to the denomination of Barack Obama as the "Deporter in Chief" (Armendares and Moreno Brid 2019; Chishti, Pierce, and Bolter 2017; Hing 2018; Tardis 2020; Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2017).

However, one of Obama's biggest goals was the reform of the US immigration system. Several attempts for the so-called "Comprehensive Immigration Reform" (CIR) – which would try to combine border security policies with the possibility for undocumented immigrants to legalize their status – failed in 2006 and 2007, and also later on, under the Obama administration, in 2013 (Tan 2017). There was a second attempt in 2014, with the aim of expanding the DACA program to children who had arrived in the USA at the age of 16 and had been living in the country since 2010. They were granted a three-year period, during which deportation was deferred and they could legally work, but in 2016 the Supreme Court blocked Obama's executive order, ruling that he had exceeded his presidential authority (Tan 2017).

The arrival of Donald Trump in office in January 2017 marked a drift from the policymaking approach of his predecessor. His rhetoric and discourses were focused on how to discredit migrants and asylum seekers and link them to either criminal or terrorist acts, even since his presidential campaign (Heyer 2018; Klingner 2018; Young 2017). He targeted not only Mexican immigrants – pledging for the construction of the wall on the US–Mexico border – but also Muslims, creating insecurity even in American Muslim communities (Kaba 2019; Kocher 2017; McHugh 2018; Pierce, Bolter, and Selee 2018).

Donald Trump's aggressiveness did not only target the irregular migration but also the "regular" legal migration. Indeed, Trump's political discourse was also based on the rhetoric that even legal immigration is a threat to the US economy and, as a consequence, to the national security (Bolter, Israel, and Pierce 2022). In this line of thought, agencies which grant immigration benefits, i.e. the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Department of Labor, were mostly targeted either by being tasked with increased enforcement duties or by imposing new barriers regarding applications for immigration benefits (Bolter, Israel, and Pierce 2022; Greenberg, Batalova, and Fix 2019).

"America First" also had its immigration dimension, and it has been associated with national security, foreign and border security policies. Indeed, Donald Trump, with his aggressive rhetoric, started to undermine the relations with Mexico and the Central American countries – and Latin American in general – by arguing that these countries are incapable of fighting against drug trafficking violence and irregular migration (Guida 2018). The departments of Homeland Security, Justice and State, in accordance with the ICE and the Customs and Border Protection agency, were in charge of reducing the number of immigrants coming to the USA (McHugh 2018; Pierce, Bolter, and Selee 2018).

In terms of border security policies, Donald Trump tried to create a strong fear of the sociopolitical conditions of a potential threat (Correa-Cabrera and Garrett 2014), as it

was similarly constructed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, even though the terrorists never crossed the US–Mexico border (Garrett 2018). Indeed, this mental preparation of public opinion was used to justify the establishment of a border security apparatus to counter illegal migration (Garrett 2018). The first step was to deploy military troops and the National Guard in the border regions, increase the numbers of US Border patrol agents significantly and give further authorization for enforcement operations to the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) members and other personnel from the DHS (Bolter, Israel, and Pierce 2022; Capps et al. 2019; Correa-Cabrera 2022; Garrett 2018; Tardis 2020).

Obama's approach toward Mexico and the US southern border

US relations with Mexico have been and will always be of particular importance for both countries and high ambivalence due to extreme violence generated on the standard borders (Chabat 2010). During the first term of Barack Obama (2009–2013), Mexico's situation was urgent as well as significant for the US future due to two determinants: on one hand, the strong surge in homicides and conflicts between the Calderón administration and the drug cartels; and, on the other hand, Mexico's abrupt economic downturn due to the financial crisis in the USA (Lowenthal, Piccone, and Vaughan-Whitehead 2010). The Obama administration had two distinct visions of how the relations would be with Mexico. First, in terms of how to cope with the drug trafficking and the narco-violence, Obama argued that the emphasis should be more on economic development and less on militarization. Second, even though he considered that the USA had crucial responsibility in drug trafficking (due to the high demand) and arms trafficking (due to the high offer) (Salonius-Pasternak 2015), he opted for the USA to play a mere supportive role to the policies adopted by the Mexican State to reduce the high level of violence (Randall 2013).

With regard to border security and immigration policies, the Obama administration, since its first mandate, had preserved a large number of Border Patrol agents on the southwestern border region and had also enhanced the enforcement apparatuses by increasing the budget and by continuing the expansion of fences and barricades alongside the borders (Nevins 2010). In addition to these measures, the Obama administration continued the externalization of migration controls either by high seas interdictions or onboard screenings, sending the “potential migrant threats” to Guantanamo bay (Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016). He further pushed Mexico to stem arrivals of migrants by land through the Merida Initiative Program and later through the Coyote Operation, by deploying DHS agents to Mexico and to Central American countries, strengthening, thus, the capacities in intelligence and human smuggling enforcement (Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016). Extra-territorialization – a regulation outside the state's territory – of migration controls as a practice aims to reduce migration flows and be the first barrier before border controls (FitzGerald 2020).

Moreover, during Obama's second term in office, and since 2014, unprecedented waves of Central American migrants and unaccompanied children arrived at the US border (Isacson, Meyer, and Morales 2014). Acute economic conditions, uncontrolled gang-related violence and highly suppressive regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – the countries of the “Northern Triangle” – are considered the principal

drivers of emigration to Mexico and then to the USA (Isacson, Meyer, and Smith 2015). Obama addressed this huge exodus toward the USA as a “humanitarian crisis” (Hipsman and Chishti 2014).

Nevertheless, his response to the migration crisis and the US–Mexico border security policies was contradictory, as he implemented a combination of protection and repressive measures (Schriro 2017). The former included the reform of the immigration system, passed by the Senate as the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act (S.744) (Seelke 2014), and the increase in federal funding for pro-bono legal representation cases of unaccompanied children (Galli 2018). The latter relied on the increase in US funding for border enforcement in Mexico and Guatemala to stem arrivals and interdict migrants before entering Mexico (Galli 2018; Isacson, Meyer, and Smith 2015). In response to the challenges presented at Mexico’s southern border, the Mexican government, under Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), introduced the “Southern Border Program” in 2014 (*Plan Frontera Sur*), i.e. a set of operations to enhance security and control human mobility in the region (Arriola Vega 2017). Thus, in 2015, Mexico deported more Central Americans than the USA (Rosenblum and Ball 2016).

All these measures, in terms of migration control and border security policies, did not efficiently address the issue of migrant smuggling. As a matter of fact, since 2014 and the implementation of the Southern Border Program in Mexico, the enforcement operations did not eliminate the smuggling operations, they merely led smugglers to shift their routes and continue their activities by vehicles (trucks mostly) and not trains (Yates and Leutert 2017). Massive deportations, enhanced border security policies, extra-territorialization of migration controls and even expansion of ICE’s detention and supervision capacities during Obama’s mandates seem to be ineffective measures in terms of counter migrant smuggling practices.

Trump’s discontinuity and “criminalization” of migrants

Donald Trump deviated from the policies implemented by the Obama administration on the US–Mexico border in terms of dealing with migration flows and security. Trump refused to take into consideration the push factors (e.g. gang or societal violence, high rates of corruption within the weak states, poor economic conditions, homicide rates among the highest in the world) fueling Central American migration (Galli 2018; Hiskey, Malone, and Orcés 2014; Meyer and Taft-Morales 2019). Donald Trump’s concept of “criminalizing” migrants relied on his rhetoric associating Central American migrants with the *maras* gang groups (MS-13 and Barrio 18) (Leutert et al. 2018) and Mexican migrants with drug trafficking and Mexican criminal organizations (Flores and Chavez 2019).

In this line of thought, Trump increased the number of border patrol agents, electronic surveillance and drones to intercept and arrest illegal migrants (Garrett 2018). These anti-immigrant and zero-tolerance policies on the border with Mexico were accompanied by a significant rise in the number of detentions of non-criminal undocumented migrants – simply because they were undocumented – disregarding that some of them had petitioned for asylum (Verea 2018). Indeed, he responded aggressively against sanctuary policies adopted by the Obama administration, e.g. trying to put an end to the DACA Program² and the Temporary Protected Status (TPS).³

This “criminalization” of mainly Central American and Mexican migrants by Donald Trump led to the “instrumentalization” of these people in order to put more pressure on the Mexican side. Based on his anti-migrant rhetoric, Trump shaped his national security strategy toward Mexico, denouncing a specific porosity of the US–Mexico border, blaming Mexico for the lack of control over the migration flows and stating that he would proceed with the construction of a physical wall on the southern border (Saddiki 2017).

In terms of externalization of migration control policies, in 2019, he decided to cut off US aid to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, by minimizing the actions of the “Alliance for Prosperity” Initiative established by the Obama administration, arguing that these countries failed to contain the massive migration flows that were fleeing toward the USA (Parthenay 2020), and he also pushed the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua to accept bilateral agreements, which would transform them into “buffer zones” (FitzGerald 2020). Toward Mexico, an essential expression of this aspect relies on creating the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) in January 2019, i.e. the “Remain in Mexico” program.⁴

Under high pressure by Donald Trump, the López Obrador government agreed to collaborate with the program at the end of 2018, arguing that he was doing so “for humanitarian reasons” and to “address the saturation of detention centers for undocumented migrants in the United States” (Gutiérrez Castillo 2020). However, asylum seekers deported from the USA were not returned to their country of origin and were forced to stay on the borderline regions of northern Mexico in life-threatening conditions, comparable to those that forced them to leave their country in the first place (Azadeh, Garcia, and Flores 2021; Gutiérrez Castillo 2020).

The significant increase in border controls and measures to discourage undocumented migration led migrants and asylum seekers to carry out border crossings at a high cost, involving routes through less safe points and the service of “*coyotes*”, exposing themselves to climatic risks, scams and abductions, among other issues (Andreas 2022; Thompson 2019). As was the case in the past, these zero-tolerance immigration and border security policies emphasized effectiveness in increasing arrests and deportations of migrants (Pierce, Bolter, and Selee 2018), without detecting and eradicating migrant smuggling networks (Correa-Cabrera 2022; Izcarra Palacios 2019; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016).

In terms of migrant smuggling operations, scholars argued that there are two basic categories: on one hand, the individual smugglers (*coyotes* mostly), who act through social and family connections and are not associated to organized crime (Achilli 2015; Sanchez 2015; Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Sanchez and Zhang 2018; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012); and, on the other hand, the smugglers who are part of bigger organized criminal networks and are related to Mexican drug cartels (Correa-Cabrera 2022; Donnelly and Hagan 2014; Olson 2016; Slack and Campbell 2016; Slack and Whiteford 2011).

In both cases, the policies implemented by the Trump administration to counter migrant smuggling were inefficient (Correa-Cabrera 2022; Izcarra Palacios 2019) compared to the policies of previous administrations. The fact that US Border Patrol apprehensions of illegal migrants reached 1,662,167 in 2021 – the first year of the Biden administration – highlights this argument, which is that, since 2015, enhanced border security and immigration enforcement policies on the US–Mexico border have

only deviated migrants to choose the “smuggling option” more and that the migrant smuggling business became more complex and lucrative (Correa-Cabrera 2022).

There are various reasons why the phenomena of migrant smuggling increased in recent years on the US–Mexico border. Firstly, detection and prosecution of smuggling and human trafficking networks have been a relatively low priority target of US policymaking (Correa-Cabrera 2022). Secondly, US high labor demands increased the corruption of US immigration officials, who allowed migrants to pass through certain paths at specific times (Izcarra Palacios 2019). Finally, US employers facilitated the smuggling operations (Izcarra Palacios 2018, 2020; Izcarra Palacios and Yamamoto 2017; Richards 2004).

Research design and methods

This article draws on qualitative findings based on 16 interviews conducted in 2016–2017 (the first part) and in late 2020–early 2021 (the second part), covering the end of Obama’s second mandate and the Trump administration. In these periods of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted according to the typology of Berg (2009).⁵

In 2016, a questionnaire was provided to the interviewees with questions focusing on the security issues on the US–Mexico border during the Obama and the Peña Nieto administrations, respectively, and the expectations of Trump’s arrival in the White House. For the first part of these interviews, long-term field research was carried out in Mexico between September 2016 and January 2017. In 2020–2021, the second part of the interviews was conducted from a distance. This part was focused on the evolution, results and legacy of Donald Trump and his administration in terms of immigration and border security policies toward Mexico and the Central American countries and counter migrant smuggling strategies.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the similarities and differences in US policymaking in terms of immigration, border security and counter migrant smuggling between Obama’s and Trump’s administrations and to put the emphasis on the effectiveness of such policies implemented by Donald Trump. Indeed, the interviews explore the impact of Trump’s policies on the US–Mexico border, especially the migration issue, as it is viewed by Mexicans.

The interviewees were selected based on their background and expertise in immigration and border security policies. Indeed, they are high-profile actors from Mexico’s institutional backgrounds (army, police, policymakers, academics). Their insights were fundamental in understanding the different aspects of Mexico’s relationship with the USA in the domain of policymaking. Both countries are bound to one another due to their common border and the USMCA (ex-NAFTA) agreement and cooperation regarding immigration, border security policies and the fight against transnational organized crime.

All interviews were transcribed and translated from Spanish for the research. The analysis was conducted by first reviewing all transcripts to identify the convergences and divergences in the interviewees’ responses in terms of policymaking by the Trump administration. Second, the focus of the analysis was put on the factors that shaped US immigration policy toward Mexico and other Latin American countries – especially the countries of the “Northern Triangle” – and the links with border security policies in recent years. Third, topics such as migrant smuggling, the porosity of the US–Mexico and southern Mexican borders were also analyzed, and how these issues affect the increase in

migration flows. Finally, various concepts (e.g. concept of “safe third country” agreements with Mexico and Central American countries, externalization of migration controls) arose from the interviews that could represent essential parts of further research regarding US immigration policymaking and the management of borders.

Empirical results

The interviews were divided into three parts. In the first part, the interviews conducted in Mexico in 2016–2017 focused on the border security policies implemented by the Obama administration and the collaboration with the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations in the security agenda. As the field research was conducted in the final months of the second term of the Obama administration, Donald Trump’s intentions – according to his presidential campaign – were also part of the study. Furthermore, the issue of migration flows and their significant increase during the second term of the Obama administration, which fueled the aggressive rhetoric of Donald Trump, was also part of the questionnaire presented to the interviewees.

First part of the interviews: 2016–2017

In this first part of the interviews, the interviewees were from military (4), police (2) and other institutional backgrounds (2).⁶ All interviewees had worked in the past or were working at the time of the interviews in posts related to national security or institutions collaborating closely with high-profile actors of the Mexican administration. In this research, three major themes were covered in the first part of the interviews. First, Obama’s border security policies and the intentions of the forthcoming – at the time – President Trump. Second, the issue of illegal migration flows crossing the borders and migrant smuggling activities. Finally, the US–Mexico relations during the second term of the Obama administration (2013–2017) and the Peña Nieto administration (2012–2018).

After the transcription and the further analysis of the interviews, we highlighted the main convergences and divergences in the interviewees’ answers. On one hand, convergences were presented in the intentions of the forthcoming presidency of Donald Trump in terms of border security and immigration policies:

Trump is an anti-immigrant politician, and he is planning to construct a Soviet style wall to block us [Mexicans] from crossing the borders. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 30 October 2016)

The strict border security policies of Trump were a projection of his interior policies with populist aspects to respond to the needs of his electoral base. (Active Army General in charge of border security policies, anonymous, personal communication, 25 November 2016)

Trump in his presidential campaign presented migrants as enemies for the US although migration *per se* has no impact on security. (Pr. Martín Gabriel Barrón Cruz, personal communication, 10 December 2016)

Moreover, during the second term of Obama, border security policies were implemented in an environment of trust toward Mexico, either by strengthening the Mérida Initiative or by cooperating in the minimization of the porosity of the southern Mexican border:

Through the Merida Initiative there are resources that would not have been allocated to Mexico without this Program. One could say that there was a kind of oversight by the Congress and the US governments, but the difference with Colombia is that, in Mexico, soldiers from other countries cannot enter and operate on its soil. (Active Army General in charge of border security policies, anonymous, personal communication, 25 November 2016).

The most significant Program is the Merida Initiative, which has the same objectives as the Plan Colombia. Its first objective was to equip the border guards with advanced technology, armament and helicopters. (Pr. Martín Gabriel Barrón Cruz, personal communication, 10 December 2016)

Finally, as far as the impact of Obama's policies on Mexico is concerned, the interviewees also agreed that the two administrations had worked closely together to safeguard their mutual interests without any significant deadlocks:

During Obama's two mandates, many visits were carried out and the Mexican and US governments worked in an environment of trust. Mexico was not really pressured to change its policies in terms of management of the borders. It was more a process of adaptation to new issues which emerged (irregular migration, narco-violence). (Senior Official of the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 23 November 2016)

The impact of Obama's policies was mostly seen through the Merida Initiative, which also offered training programs in exchange for information in security issues. However, the militarization of the security sector in Mexico was not well seen by the US. (Active Army Brigadier General working at PEMEX, anonymous, personal communication, 10 November 2016)

On the other hand, the divergences of the interviewees were mainly focused on the issue of illegal migration flows and the border security policies implemented regarding this issue. The interviewees of military and police backgrounds agreed that the borders had a strict security policy, and the controls were of high intensity:

The control on the borders during Obama's two mandates was very strict, having even aircrafts watching over the borderline. This strict control had also been intensified after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 30 October 2016)

Under Obama we witnessed an increasing presence of FBI agents in Mexico on the border-line regions. For example, a Program has been set up between the DHS and the Single Mexican Police Command [*Mando Único Policial Mexicano*] in Tamaulipas and there was daily exchange of information. (Retired State Policeman from the Mexico City police district, anonymous, 17 November 2016)

Nevertheless, the policymaker shared insights which pointed out that border closures were not so repressive under the Obama administration:

Border security and immigration policies under the Obama administration were not that repressive as under the Clinton one and particularly under the Bush administrations, especially after 9/11. (Senior Official of the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 23 November 2016)

In terms of deportations, one of the former policemen found that, between 2012–2016, the rates were extremely high compared to the previous US administrations:

If we compare the rates of deportations under Clinton and Bush, we will see that the Obama administration – especially in its first term – deported more migrants. It was a strategy of Obama because, after the Great Recession, the US needed to restructure its immigration system and restrict the access of foreigners to the US labor market. (Retired State Policeman from the Mexico City police district, anonymous, 17 November 2016)

Instead, some of the interviewees of military background considered that the Obama administration had not deported so many migrants:

The Obama administration was not openly anti-immigrant. However, there were many deportations, yet nothing out of the ordinary in comparison to the previous administrations. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 30 October 2016)

Second part of the interviews: 2020–2021

In the second part of the interviews, the interviewees were also eight in number and were military (3), retired police officers (2) and policymakers (3).⁷ For this part of the research, three significant topics were discussed in this series of semi-structured interviews: first, how the US border policy evolved under the Trump administration; second, the illegal migration flows and migrant smuggling; and finally, the impact of Trump's policies on the Mexican side.

After the transcription and the analysis of the interviews, we highlight some of the interesting views in terms of border security policies:

Trump put pressure on the Mexican government to deploy the National Guard in the northern and southern borders. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 20 December 2020)

Security on the shared border has been intensified since Trump took office in Washington. The security measures at the border were not that repressive and coercive before Trump's administration, and it was not the military that guarded the borders. (Regional coordinator of the Central Zone in the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 27 December 2020)

This increasing militarization of the US–Mexican border was a consequence of the policies adopted by Donald Trump and the pressure he put on the Mexican authorities to align with his approach by also increasing the FBI agents' presence on Mexican soil. (Retired Former Commissioner of the Federal Preventive Police, anonymous, personal communication, 5 January 2021)

Moreover, as far as the question of illegal migration flows and immigration policies are concerned, the interviewees agreed that illegal migration constitutes a complex issue and needs global and transnational solutions and cooperation:

The first cause of this complexity lies in the extremely high number of people involved in the illegal migration process (e.g. migrants, families, other relatives or acquaintances, smugglers). The second reason is the variety of ways people can migrate (e.g. crossing the borders, traveling by plane, being smuggled by other means). A country, even if it is the US, cannot fight against illegal migration all by herself, without a transnational response. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 20 December 2020)

The interviewees also reflected that the USA needs and will continue to need migrants because of the high demand for cheap labor:

People who are usually underpaid without health and employment insurance (i.e. domestic service, building construction) are the usual profiles that respond to the characteristics of cheap labor. At the same time, people who migrate from Mexico or Central America have an extremely high need to work or find better living conditions and escape violence. (Regional coordinator of the Central Zone in the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 27 December 2020)

The US is a country that needs labor force mostly in the primary and secondary sectors. Without these people who traditionally migrate [to] the US, the companies could not produce this kind of wealth. (Political Analyst and former National Coordinator of IOM's Mesoamerica–Caribbean Regional Program on Migration, anonymous, personal communication, 20 February 2021)

Regarding migrant smuggling activities and the policies to counter them, the interviewees shared many important insights:

Migration or migrant smuggling requires the mobilization of high economic resources to facilitate people's mobility. Indeed, in terms of migrant smuggling, the process requires more resources than drug or arms trafficking. Some of these movements are funded by high-profile US businessmen, e.g. George Soros is one of the people who [is] supposed to be implicated. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 20 December 2020)

Other 'drivers' of these irregular migration flows seemed to be people close to the Trump administration who are aiming to further destabilize this part of the American continent, along with Mexico, and fund these movements. (Senior Official of the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 25 November 2020)

Following this line of thought, the porosity of the borders seems to be a determinant of the proliferation of the migrant smuggling activities:

People continue to arrive at Mexico's southern border and, in some way, many manage to pass through *coyotes*: migrant smugglers. The southern border is very porous, there are jungle parts, there are parts that are very rugged, and they take advantage of it to get across. The *coyotes* set their prices and their business represents a lot of money to accompany people to the northern border. This has not been stopped and continues in a trickle, but it is constant. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 20 December 2020)

Migrant smuggling and human trafficking networks have existed for a long time. The border is porous, and people continue to be smuggled, for example through the Sonora desert and the border with California and Arizona. There are contracts and there are people who help migrants cross the border. (Retired Army General and Former Chief of Military Intelligence, anonymous, personal communication, 17 January 2021)

Mexico has great porosity on both borders [North and South]. The northern border, especially, allows the transfer of drugs and arms. The migration issue also creates challenges for public security and border management. *Coyotes* have always existed and 'facilitated' the smuggling of migrants. The Covid-19 health crisis has not diminished these phenomena; it has only slowed them down. Detention and deportation are not the solutions because they generate more migrant smuggling phenomena. (Political Analyst and former National Coordinator of IOM, anonymous, personal communication, 20 February 2021)

There are also other significant factors which perpetuate the migrant smuggling phenomena and complicate the efficiency of counter migrant smuggling policies:

The question that is often asked is why the migration flows continue while there are detentions and deportations of migrants. No capacity? The authorities on both sides [US and Mexico] have all the statistics. One reason is that there are people who benefit financially a lot from the trafficking on both sides of the border. Because of the corruption of Border Patrol agents, the policies against migrant smuggling cannot work. (Regional coordinator of the Central Zone in the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 27 December 2020)

Trump and the previous US administrations think that more detention and deportations will give the solution to the migration issue by implementing mostly unilateral decisions on the borders. However, the corruption of Border patrol agents [on] both sides of the border facilitate the work of *coyotes*. These phenomena also make the US southern borders porous and decrease the level of detection of the smuggling activities. (Political Analyst and former National Coordinator of IOM, anonymous, personal communication, 20 February 2021)

Finally, the interviewees shared many insights on the impact of Trump's policies on the Mexican side:

Trump put the pressure on Mexico and threatened to tax trade and treated all people migrating from the south as bandits. Mexico deployed the Mexican National Gendarmerie with Peña Nieto and then the National Guard elements with AMLO [Andrés Manuel López Obrador] on the border to stop the flows and that implied a higher level of militarization of the country. But, for the moment, the phenomena of illegal migration are still present. (Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, personal communication, 20 December 2020)

Trump forced Mexico to accept the 'Safe Third Country' Plan but there is no comprehensive policy for this. It is just a social and economic reality. Mexico is not ready neither economically nor structurally to carry out this project well. Trump's policy was a failure and generates more insecurity on the northern border for Mexico and for those people [migrants]. (Regional coordinator of the Central Zone in the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous, personal communication, 27 December 2020)

In terms of security policies, we have not seen serious actions taken by the US administrations in recent years. Trump only wanted to impose his policies and did not seek to collaborate. But the immigration issue is not going to be solved by deploying 27,000 National Guard agents to the southern border or by intensifying Border Patrol patrols in the US alone. (Retired Army General and Former Chief of Military Intelligence, anonymous, personal communication, 17 January 2021)

Trump's policy had more of an economic character in all thematic areas (immigration, border security, foreign policy). He put a lot of pressure on Mexico for the immigration issue because it is a big electoral issue in the US. The Mexican authorities were obliged to deploy the military on the southern border of the country to strike the illegal migration activities. But that alone is not the solution. (Political Analyst and former National Coordinator of IOM, anonymous, personal communication, 20 February 2021)

Discussion

Donald Trump's "America First" concept also shaped his perception of immigration and border security policies toward Mexico. The Trump administration presented illegal migration flows and organized crime on the US southern border as linked "threats". However, the information provided by the interviewees demonstrated that the policies implemented by the Trump administration were ineffective to stop migrant smuggling

activities and therefore the migration flows coming from Mexico and Central American countries increased.

Migrant smuggling activities also existed before Trump took office and even before the two mandates of Obama. The fact that Obama decided to address the migration crisis of 2014 as a humanitarian crisis by introducing various measures (e.g. DACA, DREAM, DAPA) to reform the US immigration system and alleviate the difficulties of the Central American families who entered the USA could have had a positive impact on decreasing migrant smuggling activities. According to Correa-Cabrera (2022), the lack of important legal migration possibilities for people displaced due to economic, social, political and conflict reasons in the Americas enhances the human mobility through illicit pathways and increases the involvement of sophisticated human smuggling organizations. A more elaborate US strategy on legal pathways for migrants would counter migrant smuggling organizations and their networks (Correa-Cabrera 2022).

Trump's zero-tolerance policies on immigration and border security also increased the involvement of US businessmen into the "facilitation" of illicit migrant crossing, according to the interviewees. Indeed, the USA had – and will continue to have – a high demand for cheap labor, as many US companies depend on that. Hence, some of the migrant movements were funded by US businessmen, either by "making" Border Patrol agents "turn a blind eye" or by channeling migration flows through unguarded spots on the US southern border.

Furthermore, we argue that the impact of Trump's policies on Mexico had negative consequences. He put pressure on the Peña Nieto and later the AMLO administrations, asking them to secure the Mexican borders by further militarizing the immigration and security policies or, otherwise, he would withdraw the USA from commercial agreements and impose taxes on Mexican goods and companies. The result was a further destabilization on the border region because militarization does not seem to be an efficient strategy to counter migrant smuggling networks and implicates various phenomena of human rights violation against migrants and asylum seekers, as the army or the National Guard are not specifically trained to deal with people who try to escape violence.

Donald Trump did not really succeed in creating a new geopolitical order on the US–Mexico border, as he promised during his presidential campaign. His radical measures in terms of border security and immigration policies, instead of decreasing the migration flows, only made migrant smuggling networks deviate and adapt their activities by also implicating more US actors in the illegal business. Indeed, the number of Border Patrol apprehensions during the first year of Joe Biden's administration – reaching the historic record of 2000 – indicates that counter migrant smuggling policies need a reconfiguration by targeting more individuals or networks who "facilitate" the smuggling process and less migrants themselves.

Notes

1. Diplomatic policies whereby a nation seeks to avoid or even to withdraw from alliances with other nations or countries in order not to be drawn to war or other harmful actions.
2. Trump failed to put an end to the DACA program. The legitimacy of this action was successfully challenged in the courts, most notably in the US Supreme Court decision in

the Department of Homeland Security vs. Regents of the University of California case in 2020.

3. TPS was a temporary form of relief granted to Haitians arriving in the USA following Haiti's 2010 earthquake (Azadeh, Garcia, and Flores 2021).
4. Under this program, asylum seekers who have illegally entered the USA and do not have Mexican nationality will not be able to stay in the USA during the months or years it usually takes for US courts to decide whether a person meets the requirements to be recognized as a refugee, but will have to wait in Mexico (DHS report 2019).
5. In these interviews, the researchers recommend a questionnaire that would cover all relevant areas (i.e. research questions), and the interviewee would have more "flexibility" to answer either every question or specific questions.
6. Military: a) Retired Army General Juan Alfredo Oropeza, Director of the Strategic Intelligence Unit – Telecommunications México; b) Retired Air Force General, Leonardo González García; c) Active Army General in charge of border security policies, anonymous; d) Active Army Brigadier General working at PEMEX (*Petroleos Mexicanos*), anonymous. Police: Two Retired State Policemen from the Mexico City police district, anonymous. Other backgrounds: a) Senior Official of the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (NPSS), anonymous; b) Professor Martín Gabriel Barrón Cruz, Professor-researcher at the National Institute of Penal Sciences and at the Center for Studies of the Army and the Air Force, specialist in criminal policy.
7. Military: a) Retired Army General J.A. Oropeza, Director of the Strategic Intelligence Unit – Telecommunications México; b) Retired Army General and Former Chief of Military Intelligence, anonymous; c) Active Army General in charge of border security policies, anonymous. Police: a) Retired State Policeman of Mexico City police district, anonymous; b) Retired Former Commissioner of the Federal Police of Mexico City, anonymous. Policymakers: a) Senior Official of the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous; b) Regional Coordinator of the Central Zone of the Executive Secretariat of the NPSS, anonymous; c) Political Analyst and former National Coordinator of IOM's Mesoamerica-Caribbean Regional Program on Migration, anonymous.

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