

US-Mexico Security and Migration: That's a Game that Two can Play?

Hector Ramon Ramirez Partida

Bookend Lecture, October 2023

Hector Ramon Ramirez Partida is Distinguished Visiting Professor of Politics and a Fulbright-García-Robles Mexico Studies Chair.

Regional integration between Mexico and the United States has emerged as a historical process with economic, political, environment, social, and cultural implications. Cultural and social interactions have occurred as a way of generating social benefits. Here, territorial proximity has determined the issue areas of this integration such as trade, investment and flows of people. The flow of people through the US–Mexico land border is a contentious issue in the bilateral agenda. This is particularly true in the aftermath of 9/11 and the current political arena on both sides of the border. For this paper, examining US security and border protection policy responses is at the center of determining whether those responses make any difference to the protection of the US-Mexican border. First, this paper presents a theoretical framework based on Complex Interdependence elaborated by Keohane and Nye.¹ Second, it presents historical accounts that contextualize the Mexican frontier before 9/11 regarding the US border protection policy, a policy that led the path to border enforcement. Third, the final section is dedicated to examining the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Special emphasis is placed on how US policy responses set the course for a US homeland security and border protection strategy in the aftermath of 9/11.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section is intended to build up a theoretical framework for the analysis of the impacts of US security and border protection policy on the US–Mexico land border on, before and after 9/11. Therefore, this explanation must include a policy assessment approach in accordance with assumptions of international politics, as elaborated by Keohane and Nye in the model of “complex interdependence.”² The questions to explore are, first, what is complex interdependence and second, how complex interdependence explains the US–Mexico relationship given the policy issue of security and border protection on before and after 9/11?

Complex interdependence is a theoretical framework to study bilateral relations in a context of shared history, mutual dependence, territorial proximity, and mutual recognition of cooperative policies. This is the case between the US and Mexico if both countries want to progress specific US government policy goals with respect to the *insecurity* at the US—Mexican land border. In this respect, Keohane and Nye argue the political links between the countries consist of “interdependence.”³ This argument incentivizes the political analysis of interdependence. If this is the case for US and Mexico relations, “dependence” must be analyzed as the effect of “being affected by external forces.” Then, interdependence is understood as a state of mutual dependence. In other words, it means that in world politics there are “situations with reciprocal effects between countries or between actors in different countries.”⁴ The source of those mutual effects is the increasing number of international transactions and flows of money, goods, people, information, and messages that cross international boundaries. More specifically, “interdependence relationships will always involve costs, since interdependence restricts autonomy; but it is difficult to specify a priori whether the benefits of a relationship will exceed the costs.”⁵ Even when there is a possibility to increase joint benefits, and indeed when they are increased, a lack of distributional conflict cannot be guaranteed.

Therefore, in interdependent relationships between countries, it is helpful to include the role that power plays in such a bilateral relationship. Based on interdependence, the notion of power has been understood as the ability of an actor to get others to do something they otherwise would not do. But Keohane and Nye suggest that this definition differs by saying that the actor still has the power to control certain outcomes. In this situation, some reference should be made to “asymmetrical interdependence.” Under the circumstances of asymmetrical interdependence, the result is that different levels of dependency are the source of power. In this sense, the analysis is oriented to see the power of an actor to control the resources of power and/or the potential to affect the outcomes that result from a political, social, or economic process.

Within the theoretical foundations offered up in the previous paragraphs, the Model of Complex Interdependence is summarized in the following table:

Multiple channels of communication to connect societies.
The agenda of inter-state relationships consists of multiple issues that are not arranged in a clear or consistent hierarchy. Therefore, military issues do not dominate the agenda.
Military force is not used by governments toward other governments within the region, or on the issues when complex interdependence prevails.

Fig. 1. Model of Complex Interdependence.

From here on, this model is applied to explore the questions posed above : What is complex interdependence? Second, how does complex interdependence explain the US–Mexico relationship given the policy issue of security and border protection on before and after 9/11? Initially, it is argued that negative and indirect effects of post-9/11 US security and border protection policy responses will be noticeable compared to the pre-9/11 period. The next section is dedicated to presenting a historical account that contextualizes the Mexican front before 9/11 regarding the US border protection policy—a policy that led the path to border enforcement.

THE MEXICAN FRONT OF THE *EX ANTE* 9/11 US-MX BORDER POLICY

Legal and illegal migration flows from Mexico to the United States have been a complicated area in the US–Mexico bilateral and political agenda. For many decades, this issue has affected both Mexico as the country of origin of the large number of migrants, and the United States as the receiving country. In May 1924, the US government created the Bureau of Immigration. The US Border Patrol, attached to the bureau, had an initial force of 450 immigration officers. The main concern of this act was to launch a response to combating the increasing levels of illegal immigration coming from Mexico; however, a clear objective of the Border Patrol was also to stop the illegal immigration flows from Asia and Europe that were passing through the US–Mexico land border at a time when Europeans led immigration flows to the United States.⁶

World conflicts like World War II made the United States turn to Mexico again as a source of labour to fill those vacancies other Americans had created when the American economy was war-oriented. However, the US policy changed direction again, back to the mass deportation of Mexican agricultural immigrants. Another example of US border protection responses took place in 1954. ‘Operation Wetback’ was the first large-scale, systematic implementation of military strategy and tactics by the Immigration and Naturalization Service against Mexican immigrant workers, it is estimated that 3.8 million people were deported.⁷

The absorption of most of those Mexican workers that went to the US in the early 1940’s was determined by the context of World War II itself. However, the Mexican and the United States governments had agreed to sign up to a guest workers’ program to secure the supply of agricultural workers without risking the prosperity of the US agricultural economy, and to avoid the perils of illegal crossings through the US–Mexico land border. That agreement was the “*Bracero Program*.” This agreement was signed in August of 1942. Such an agreement had provisions to allow Mexican workers to be hired by American employers exclusively for

agricultural activities, and not to work in other US economic sectors. More importantly it granted a temporary migration status: this meant that Mexicans were hired to work through agricultural seasons, entering the US to grow and harvest crops and then going back home to Mexico. Mexicans were primarily contracted in the states of California and Texas.⁸ Additionally, some benefits to Mexican workers were guaranteed during their stay in the United States, such as fair and non-discriminatory treatment on the US soil, whether by contractors or by any government entity, housing, meals, and housing, and offer contracts written in Spanish. The Bracero Program lasted 22 years, from 1942 to December 31, 1964, though it was renegotiated in 1951. The 4.5 million Mexican guest workers in the Bracero Program framed a Mexican migratory pattern. Mexican farm, and more recently non-agricultural, workers still move between Mexico and the United States. At the end of World War II, however, “the flow of undocumented migrants into the country began to increase” after 1964 when no possibility of extending the program was feasible.⁹

As a result, from 1964, Mexican migrants constituted undocumented immigration, and the United States “New” Immigration era started. In this respect Suarez-Orozco affirms that the “new immigration era” in the United States commenced in 1965. This “new” immigration contrasted significantly with old immigration, because the latter was characterized by waves of immigrants from Europe, the former by about 80% non-white, non-English speakers, non-Europeans that came from developing countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and from Mexico.¹⁰ The American government enacted legislation to solve the problem of illegality and the vulnerability of US–Mexico land border security, where border patrol efforts to control crossings were close to useless along with the American public discontent.

The US policy response came out in 1986 in the form of an amnesty to regulate undocumented agricultural workers as well as illegal immigrants residing in American soil before January 1 1982.¹¹ The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 represented the legal framework to allow applicants to get legal resident status and future citizenship. IRCA, also known as the Simpson-Rodino Act (from the supporters in the US Congress Peter Rodino in the House of Representatives, and Alan Simpson in the Senate), pursued three specific goals. Firstly, it aimed to reduce the number of illegal immigrants that lived in the US territory at that moment. A second objective was to deter potential American employers from hiring illegal immigrant workers for their fields. Finally, it was intended to increase border enforcement through greater security infrastructure and surveillance.¹² Here it is fundamental to note that IRCA increased the budget assigned to patrol the US–Mexico border, especially to deploy more border patrol officers on the border and install iron fences.¹³

Clearly, IRCA was a restrictionist policy that needed to be completed by adding other measures and so reduce the migration-pushing factors from Mexico to the United States. The North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 was implemented to complete the strategy, and therefore, US immigration policy toward Mexico continued with an economic approach. For Mexico, NAFTA resulted from the economic restructuring to open to the world economy through a deeper integration with the US economy. Mexico's economic restructuring concerns about increasing undocumented Mexican inflows in the short and long term were made clear in the negotiation of NAFTA.¹⁴

IRCA of 1986 and NAFTA of 1994 were US initiatives to reduce illegal immigration from Mexico, putting to one side that NAFTA negotiations and implementation demonstrated the US regional foreign policy and Mexico entering in the world free market.¹⁵ Economic policy instruments and international aid were the preference for the US to affect immigration levels and reduce economic factors that push Mexico to US migration. In this respect, as W. Cornelius suggests, NAFTA did not banish migration incentives like wage differentials or uneven trade benefits among NAFTA members. Within Mexico, the gap of profits between the export sector and other sectors of the economy was widened. To a large extent, what NAFTA did accomplish was making illegal entry more dangerous and much more expensive and creating a profitable professional human smuggling (coyotes) industry on the US–Mexico land border, which has been connected to other illegal industries like drugs and weapon trafficking.¹⁶

Meanwhile, migrants perceived the risk and cost of crossing the border were increasing, “however, [this] also increased the incentive for many illegal immigrants to extend their stay or perhaps even to settle down permanently.”¹⁷ Clearly, NAFTA by itself was not enough to guarantee either a substantial reduction in Mexican migration flows or the security of its southern border. As a result, in the 1990s, US immigration policy was border enforcement oriented. In this respect, US President William Clinton and the US Congress approved the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 on September 30. It was the last immigration legislation of the twentieth century to strengthen the US land borders, begin reimbursing states and public hospitals, curb the production and use of fraudulent documents, and stop employers from hiring undocumented workers. At the same time, it continued the strategy of deterring illegal entries and expediting deportations of criminals, so the Act toughened penalties for illegal entries and expedited the removal of illegal criminal aliens. Those previously removed from the United States were inadmissible for five years, or up to twenty years if the person was an aggravated felon. The Act of 1996 also funded 150 new agents to crack down on immigrant smuggling (The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996).

As a result, the Immigration and Naturalization Service implemented border security in three different but coordinated phases, and four so-called border operations alongside the US–Mexico land border were enforced by the US border patrol to protect the border against illegal crossers using a tactic called “prevention through deterrence.” This was a tactic to elevate the risk of apprehension so high that probable undocumented entrants would reconsider attempting to get across the US–Mexico land border illegally.¹⁸ “Prevention through deterrence” was believed to have a more effective meaning since many potential migrants would reconsider migrating from Mexico to the United States even before they left their hometowns in any area of Mexico. The US Department of Justice through the Border Patrol office implemented the tactic in San Diego–Tijuana; El Centro; Yuma–San Luis; Nogales–Nogales; El Paso– Ciudad Juarez; and McAllen–Reynosa. Despite the financial, human, technological, and logistic efforts at prevention through deterrence, the most visible negative effect was the increasing number of migrants dying along the US–Mexico land border. Border security continued and illegal crossings did not disappear. Instead, the 9/11 terrorist attacks exacerbated the political debate over the border, as examined in the following section.

YEAR	Gatekeeper (CA and Yuma,AZ)	Safeguard (Arizona)	Rio Grande (Texas)	Total
1994	23	N/A	N/A	23
1995	61	N/A	N/A	61
1996	59	7	21	87
1997	89	26	34	149
1998	147	12	170	329
1999	113	44	201	358
2000	140	90	269	499
2001	134	81	172	387
Total	766	260	867	1893

Fig. 2: Deaths of Mexican Migrants Related to the Implementation of US Border Enforcement Policy on the US-Mexican Land Border, 1994-2001. Table created by the Author from data collected from US Border Patrol Data on Migrants’ Deaths (Data complemented with information of the Latin American Working Group [LAWG]), and Mexican Foreign Relations Department.

The number of deaths of undocumented immigrants on the US–Mexico Border reported in this table refers exclusively to deaths of Mexican undocumented immigrants who died as a consequence of US border enforcement. This information excludes deaths of undocumented

migrants of other nationalities, or migrants who died as a result of hate crimes or violence related to border criminal activity like drug or weapons trafficking.

US—MEXICO BORDER SECURITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11

On September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center in New York City was subject to unprecedented terrorist attacks on American civilians on US soil. Border security and protection concerns revived the daily debate about the long-standing undocumented migration flows, drug trafficking, and border crime in the post-9/11 era.¹⁹ American decisionmakers quickly reacted to initiate an international “War on Terror.” For instance, just 45 days after the terrorist attacks, on October 26, 2001, they approved rapidly the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism of 2001 (USA PATRIOT ACT of 2001), in the shortest period in contemporary American policymaking history. The USA Patriot Act was created to “deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement and investigatory tools, and for other purposes.”²⁰

One relevant aspect of the USA Patriot Act “allow[ed] the government to obtain warrants to monitor and search suspects without meeting previous standards of probable cause, in any criminal investigation, whether related to terrorism or not. The Act also allow[ed] greater information sharing between police and counter-terrorism officials.”²¹ Along these lines, the USA Patriot Act also sought to improve information sharing, as information collection is well-developed by US security agencies such as the CIA and FBI. Intrinsically, one foundation of the USA Patriot Act is the rule that “any information lawfully gathered during a foreign or domestic counterintelligence investigation or during domestic law enforcement investigation should be capable of being shared with other federal agencies” to “connect the dots.” Intelligence collection, sharing, and enforcement were unconnected before 9/11 and facilitated the perpetration of the attacks in New York City as stated in the US 9/11 Commission Report.²² Also, the Patriot Act permits law enforcers to use the so-called “sneak and peek search warrants” or “delayed notification search warrant,” to conduct a search and delay informing the drug dealers about it. It was common in the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) drug-related investigations.²³ Similarly, the Enhanced Border Security Act of 2002 mandated the US government to build a foreign students’ web-based registration program. As a result, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) was created. SEVP made the Student and Exchange Visitor and Information System (SEVIS) available to all universities via the Internet, so that each educational institution could individually enter students’ personal information. This system is still in use in 2024, 22 years of implementation.

Ultimately, Section 417 of the USA Patriot Act demanded that the US government implement a program to install machines for readable passports in all US ports of entry. As result, the US government had to negotiate with other countries the dates and conditions for providing all travelers to the United States with machine-readable passports. Among other things, this provision would facilitate the operation of the Entry-Exit system that was going to operate at all US ports of entry. Rather than manually entering visitors' passport numbers and personal information, an electronic passport reader would reduce the US immigration officers' time needed to register foreign visitors. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 and the US Homeland Security Act of 2002 were the perfect combination to create and implement the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as part of the American Executive branch. The DHS was an strategy to improve bureaucratic communication because "if all the relevant actors are under one organizational roof, they will work together and perform more effectively in achieving the goals of the organization, in this case the dominant goal is to improve the protection against terrorism."²⁴ Initially, in September 2001, President George Bush created the Office of Homeland Security as an Executive Order. The former Governor of Pennsylvania, Tom Ridge, was appointed to head the Office of Homeland Security to coordinate non-military activities of homeland security within a spectrum of rapid expansion of the federal government's role in domestic security affairs.²⁵ Just one year later during the summer of 2002, after an intense political debate in both Houses of the US Congress (some months before the mid-term Congressional elections), the Office of Homeland Security was transformed into the US Department of Homeland Security to reorganize the whole US homeland security apparatus within only one agency.

The US security apparatus to prevent the 9/11 terrorist attacks was strongly criticized given the domestic and international connections of the terrorist attacks. In particular, the intelligence community criticized government security malfunctioning. In order to fix the intelligence bureaucratic structure and to change standard procedures, President George Bush signed into law the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. In this regard, for A. B. Zegart, the way the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) acted before the 9/11 attacks to investigate terrorist activity.²⁶ The CIA watched a secret meeting held by Al-Qaeda operatives in Malaysia where Kahalid al-Mihdhar (the man that highjacked the plane that crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11, 2001) participated and whose name was well known by the CIA officials. Kahalid al-Mihdhar was in possession of a US visa. The CIA knew that, but it failed to put his name on the watch-list of the US State Department. As a result, the previous legislation such as the USA Patriot Act of 2001 and the Homeland Security Act of 2002, were complemented by the

Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 comprising the US security and border protection policy approach in the aftermath of 9/11.

Finally, the 9/11 Commission Report was built to investigate the facts of the 9/11 attacks. For the 9/11 Commission, “the United States ha[d] the resources and the people. The government should combine them more effectively, achieving a unity of effort.”²⁷ So, for the commission US security and border protection needed to reduce vulnerabilities. More legislation was to be created and implemented to budget the USA Patriot Act objectives. To reduce border vulnerabilities the Department of Homeland Security acted in consequence by implementing two fundamental security programs to secure the US homeland physical and non-physical border.

On the one hand, on September 3, 2003 ONE FACE AT THE BORDER (OFAB) was in effect. The OFAB strategy was to bring all inspection processes together (immigration, agriculture, intelligence, etc.) at US ports of entry. It utilized the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Officers to enforce the program. Given this organizational plan, the standard routine of inspection for travelers at US ports was three steps, from Immigration Inspection to Customs Inspection and finally Agriculture Inspection (if the travelers were transporting food or plants). So, in practice, OFAB merged the three inspections into only one inspection process by cross-training CBP Officers to carry out the three processes at any US port of entry, making this the process that all travelers into the US must get through. CBP Officers are a part of the DHS. Therefore, CBP Officer became “the principal front line officer carrying out the priority mission [prevent terrorists from entering the USA] and the traditional customs, immigration, and some agriculture inspection functions.”²⁸

On the other hand, the United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology System (US-VISIT) program contributed to connect the dots in intelligence gathering and cooperation among security agencies. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 provided that the DHS created the US-VISIT program within the Border and Transportation Security (BTS) office, and this was implemented on 31 December 2004. In support of the OFAB and the CBP, the US-VISIT program deployed an electronic system at US ports of entry for CBP Officers to record the personal information of international travellers (except US citizens). As a result, CBP Officers started registering travellers by passing the readable passports and visas through reader machines; also, all foreign visitors (including nationals of countries in the Visa Waiver Program) travelling to the United States have their two index fingers scanned and a digital photo taken to match and authenticate their travel documents at US ports of entry.²⁹ For ‘Connecting the dots’ in US intelligence, the US-VISIT system connects to anti-terrorism centres and terrorist watch-lists of the CIA, FBI, DHS, and the US Border Patrol to match travellers with wanted criminals and

terrorists in the lists in real time.³⁰ Along this line, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVIS) was aligned to circle the process, though this program is not in the scope of this paper. Lastly, the following section is going to recap what this paper has examined and highlight the relevant findings for the analysis of US–Mexico security and migration policy on before and after 9/11.

FINAL REMARKS

The economic approach to migration between Mexico and the United States was present in policies such as the Bracero Program in World War II and NAFTA in the early 1990s. In this economic framework documented and undocumented migration flows from Mexico have been managed. As a result, the era of mass migration started in the aftermath of the Bracero Program that ended in 1964, and therefore, the IRCA of 1986 emerged a management strategy of migration flows in contemporary US–Mexican history. As NAFTA of 1994 took effect, border enforcement based on “prevention through deterrence” was a border security strategy to reduce and stop Mexican undocumented migration inflows, by “catching and releasing” undocumented crossers. So, in terms of policy objectives results, US border protection policy implemented on the US-Mexican land border in the 1990s partially accomplished the reduction of flows down to reasonable levels. However, only indirect negative effects occurred, a ramping-up of the profitable human smuggling industry and increased deaths of Mexican undocumented migrants.

Unexpectedly, 9/11 terrorist attacks in US soil occurred, and the US government reacted by creating umbrella legislation to cope with terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. The USA Patriot Act of 2001, the US Homeland Security Act of 2002, and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 are policy responses. All of these legislations paved the way to the results of US homeland security and border protection strategies concerns that characterise the US–Mexico land border as framed to fight the US “War on Terror.” Almost twenty-three year later, the major bureaucratic restructuring processes that modified the standard procedures of the US homeland security apparatus, turned immigration and Mexican undocumented migration into issues of US national security. The balance of evidence, however, suggests that after 9/11 US–Mexico land border security strategy has the same tactical objectives as before 9/11. Thus, political and rhetorical contexts blur the performance of the before and after 9/11 US policy results affecting the US–Mexico bilateral agenda.

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