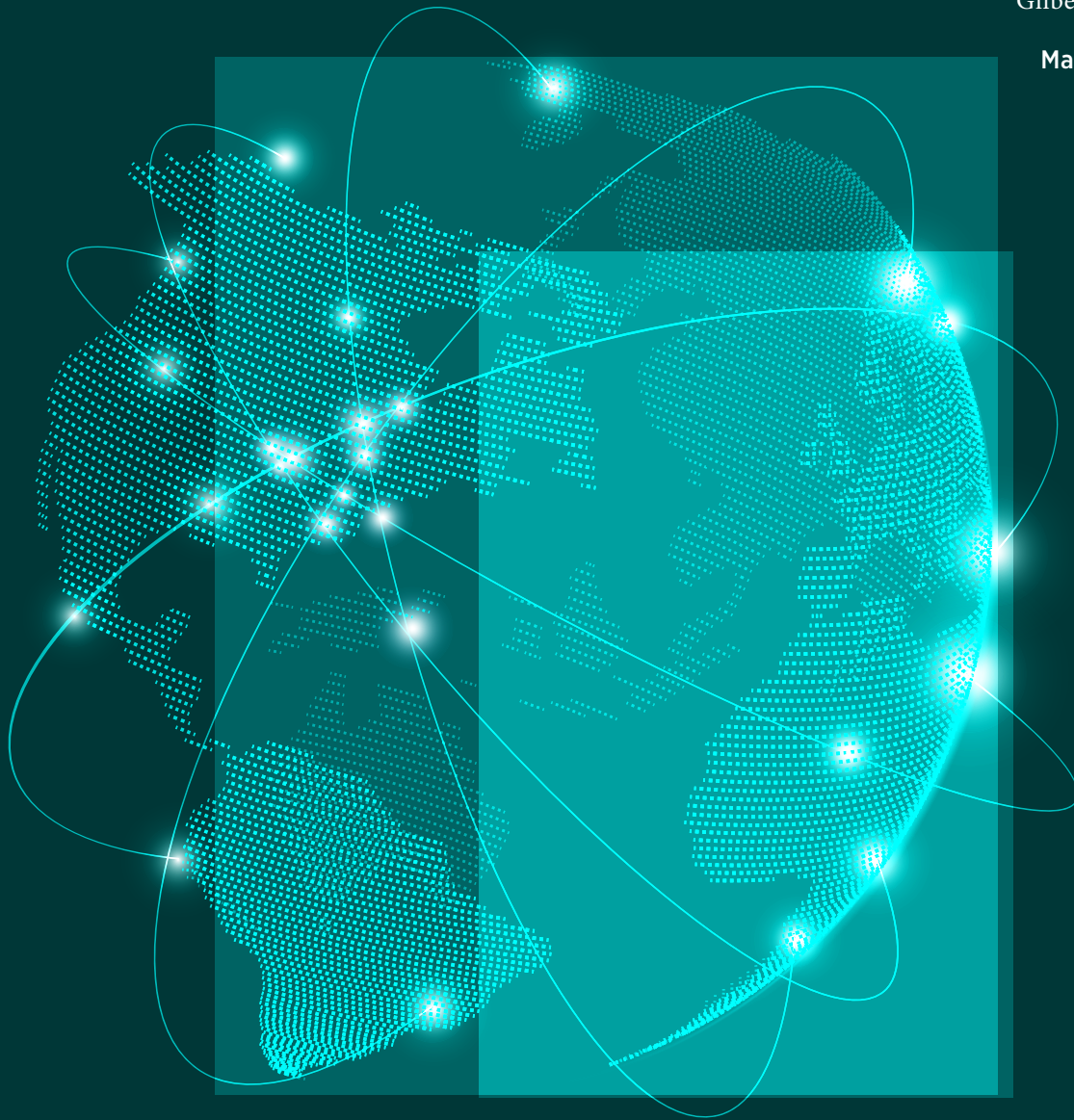


NISKANEN C E N T E R

DOMESTIC DEBATE, GLOBAL STRATEGY: REVISITING IMMIGRATION IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Gilbert Guerra

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Executive summary

Immigration policy is typically viewed within the confines and frameworks of domestic politics, yet it often serves as a potent instrument of statecraft in global strategy. This paper examines the intersections of U.S. immigration and foreign policy through nine recent case studies, using beneficial, adversarial, and competitive categories derived from a similar framework in Robbie Totten's research note *Statecraft and Migration*.

Beneficial measures: Immigration policies can be strategically employed to strengthen alliances and support friendly governments. For example, Brazil's visa-free travel initiative for American citizens, complemented by U.S. reciprocity through Brazil's inclusion in the Global Entry Program, illustrates how immigration measures can solidify diplomatic relations across partisan lines. Similarly, U.S. support for Guatemala's President Bernardo Arévalo through targeted visa restrictions on his opponents exemplifies the strategic use of immigration to reinforce democratic transitions and manage regional stability.

Adversarial measures: States can also leverage migration as coercive tools, as Kelly Greenhill explains in her seminal book *Weapons of Mass Migration*. Nicaragua's recent facilitation of irregular migration toward the U.S., combined with retaliatory U.S. sanctions and targeted parole programs, represents a complex dynamic where migration flows are strategically manipulated for political leverage. The Biden administration's Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV) countered these adversarial migration tactics by creating regulated channels, thus weakening autocratic regimes' control over migration narratives and flows.

Competitive measures: There are also more nuanced diplomatic maneuvers around immigration policy in which allies and adversaries seek advantage for themselves and are not primarily concerned with harming or helping another state. One example is the European Union's establishment of the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) to reciprocate U.S. visa restrictions, reflecting a broader assertion of EU autonomy vis-à-vis American influence. Additionally, the resumption of U.S.-China deportation flights after years of Chinese resistance underscores a pragmatic, albeit limited, alignment of interests between geopolitical rivals, while the U.S.-Mexico immigration relationship indicates the ways immigration policy is used to extract policy concessions in other policy areas.

By elucidating these recent case studies, this paper underscores that immigration policy transcends domestic politics and significantly influences global geopolitical dynamics. Policymakers must pay more attention to the use of immigration as a strategic tool capable of advancing diplomatic objectives, managing adversarial threats, and navigating complex international relationships.

About the author

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Introduction

Immigration is often cast as a domestic policy issue in our political imagination. Many of the most salient and charged public debates that have dominated coverage of American immigration policy — from DACA to family separation — have to do with how we address migrants once they arrive.

The international ramifications of immigration policy are not new, but they are nevertheless periodically “rediscovered.” Countless academic papers and books explore the intersection of immigration and foreign policy, and many begin by emphasizing that immigration is not a novel addition to the study of international relations.¹ Despite these efforts, this perspective has yet to widely penetrate public policy circles in Washington.

Immigration researchers outside of universities tend to specialize in topics like economics, humanitarianism, or law. Those focused on border security and the refugee system may touch on aspects of international relations, but relatively few focus on foreign policy in ways that are distinct from these sub-areas.

Without more direct engagement with and knowledge of American foreign policy considerations, policy-makers and immigration researchers risk missing or misunderstanding important factors driving policy change and implementation.

This paper examines nine relevant case studies from recent years that reveal more about the role immigration policy has played in foreign policy in the hopes of providing timely examples of why this intersection matters. These cases are primarily analyzed in the context of the theories, concepts, and historical frameworks introduced by the political scientists Kelly Greenhill and Robbie Totten.

Greenhill’s seminal book *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* posits that states and non-state actors deliberately create or manipulate mass migration crises to achieve political, military, or economic objectives they could not accomplish through traditional means. This form of coercion exploits the target state’s vulnerabilities, such as humanitarian obligations, political divisions, or fears of instability.²

This paper utilizes Greenhill’s framework and theories to consider some instances that have occurred since the book was last updated in 2016, such as Nicaragua’s facilitation of irregular migration and the U.S. response, including the creation of the “Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV)” parole program.

Totten’s 2017 article “Statecraft and Migration: The Strategic Use of Immigration Policy in American Foreign Relations” provides a framework for understanding how the United States has historically employed immigration policy to “please, harm, and bargain” with foreign states.³ This paper is divided into three broadly similar categories. It includes a summary of Totten’s findings under each related category where they are applicable. However, it differs from his article in that the case studies included here also include targeted immigration policy actions taken by other states towards the U.S.

1. Kelly M. Greenhill, “When Migrants Become Weapons,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022, <https://cis.mit.edu/publications/analysis-opinion/2022/when-migrants-become-weapons>.

2. Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

3. Robbie J. Totten, “Statecraft and Migration: A Research Note on American Strategies to Use Immigration in Foreign Policy from the Founding Era through the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 28, no. 2 (2017): 344–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2017.1309896>.

Greenhill and Totten are far from the only researchers who have published on the intersection of immigration and foreign policy in recent years. To name only a few, in 2016, Meredith Oyen authored *The Diplomacy of Migration: Transnational Lives and the Making of U.S.-Chinese Relations in the Cold War*.⁴ In 2017, Anna Oltman and Jonathan Reshon published “Immigration and Foreign Policy,” which surveys existing research and argues that studies on immigration and foreign policy to date largely focus on incorporating security into immigration studies, questions of national and racial identity in the immigration preferences of different populations, or on the “multiple actors located in between the domestic public and international regimes.”⁵ And in 2019, Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas published “Migration Diplomacy in World Politics,” which assesses additional recent examples of how states have incorporated immigration policy into their diplomatic strategies.⁶

With these contributions in mind, part I of this paper, “beneficial measures,” details instances where the U.S. has used immigration to help a friendly country or leader or vice versa. This aid can cut across administrations and ideological lines, as in the case covering changes in U.S.-Brazilian travel privileges. The most straightforward form of these measures is to increase access to the United States for citizens of a friendly country. As the Uniting for Ukraine case study demonstrates, such moves can have significant strategic implications. Less intuitively, punitive tools can also fall into the category of “beneficial measures” so long as they are deployed primarily to intervene in the target country to benefit a friendly figure rather than to punish a hostile regime. U.S. assistance in ensuring Guatemalan president Bernardo Arévalo’s transition to power is a case in point.

Part II, “adversarial measures,” explains how the U.S. is presently experiencing weaponized migration and responding to it in the case studies of irregular migration facilitated by Nicaragua and the process for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans. Perhaps the most salient adversarial measure, weaponized outbound migration, is an asymmetric tool favored by weaker states. But this section also shows that the U.S. is willing to use its comparative advantages in power and prestige as a destination to retaliate against rogue regimes and discourage allies from straying, as in the case of Hungary’s downgraded Visa Waiver Program status.

Part III, “competitive measures,” presents complications that occur when the U.S. has an immigration policy disagreement with a friendly multinational body in the EU, when immigration priorities align with those of a great-power rival in the People’s Republic of China, and when migration policy is wielded to extract foreign policy concessions that go beyond two countries engaged in bilateral negotiations, as in the case of recent U.S.-Mexico migration negotiations.

“Without more direct engagement with and knowledge of American foreign policy considerations, policy-makers and immigration researchers risk missing or misunderstanding important factors driving policy change and implementation.”

4. Meredith Oyen, *The Diplomacy of Migration: Transnational Lives and the Making of U.S.-Chinese Relations in the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

5. Anna Oltman and Jonathan Reshon, “Immigration and Foreign Policy,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis*, ed. Cameron Thies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

6. Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, “Migration Diplomacy in World Politics,” *International Studies Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (2019): 113–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky015>.

Part I: Beneficial measures

The U.S. has several options when it wants to use immigration policy to please a foreign state. According to Totten, some ways the U.S. has historically done this include passing major immigration laws and reform, passing special purpose or “one-time” laws, adjusting refugee policies, reaching formal diplomatic agreements on immigration, and pursuing “non-policies” such as delaying or blocking the implementation of unfavorable immigration provisions.⁷

As the following case studies illustrate, these approaches have recently proven effective in strengthening American foreign policy and achieving domestic immigration priorities, such as curtailing irregular immigration. However, as the case of Guatemala demonstrates, recent U.S. actions to please a foreign state have also included measures typically associated with punitive immigration policies, like visa restrictions.

Brazil implementing and retaining visa-free travel for U.S. citizens and admission to the Global Entry Program (2019 - 2024)

In 2019, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro announced that alongside other measures meant to signal alignment with the United States, Brazil would no longer require visas for American travelers.⁸ This decision was noteworthy because Brazil’s stated approach to foreign policy has long held reciprocity as a key tenet that reflects Brazil’s interconnected ambitions of leading the Global South while being treated as a peer nation by first-world powers.⁹ Brazilian officials frequently cite the principle of reciprocity in their communications. In 2024, for example, they justified the expulsion of the Nicaraguan ambassador to Brazil on that basis following a diplomatic row between the two countries.¹⁰

While the U.S. government did not waive visas for Brazilian travelers in return, the first Trump administration announced it would be taking steps to add Brazil to the Global Entry Program, which allows for expedited clearance and ease of travel for citizens of “trusted nations.”¹¹ The Biden administration followed through on this commitment, and Brazil was added to Global Entry in February 2022.

Bolsonaro lost his re-election bid in October of that same year, and shortly after taking office in 2023, the new president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), announced that visa-free travel for American citizens would be revoked based on the reciprocity principle.

However, since then, the Brazilian government has twice postponed the revocation.^{12,13} The latest postpone-

7. Totten, *Statecraft and Migration*, 348.

8. “Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and President Jair Bolsonaro,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Brazil, March 19, 2019, <https://br.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-from-president-donald-j-trump-and-president-jair-bolsonaro/>.

9. “Brazil Reintroduces Visa Requirement for US Tourists, Others,” Associated Press, March 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/brazil-us-tourism-visas-lula-bolsonaro-e206025994b64fa5695484b99a807971>.

10. “Brazil Expels Nicaraguan Ambassador in Retaliation as Rift Between Leaders Grows,” Associated Press, August 8, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/diplomatic-crisis-brazil-nicaragua-8f8e0e4cc82fa042ab8121b21c9e3ff3>.

11. “CBP Announces Global Entry Partnership with Brazil,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, February 8, 2022, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-announces-global-entry-partnership-brazil>.

12. KPMG International, “Brazil – Visa Waivers Extended for U.S., Canada, and Australia,” GMS Flash Alert 2023-167, August 31, 2023, <https://kpmg.com/xx/en/our-insights/gms-flash-alert/flash-alert-2023-167.html>.

13. “Message for U.S. Citizens: Postponement of Brazilian Visa Requirement to 2025,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Brazil, May 2024, <https://br.usembassy.gov/message-for-u-s-citizens-postponement-of-brazilian-visa-requirement-to-2025>.

ment extended the visa exceptions to April 2025, just a few months after Trump's second inauguration. This timing gives Lula the option of signaling continued cooperation with the new Trump administration, by again extending or formalizing the waiver, or issuing a subtle rebuking by allowing it to expire, with the built-in excuse that the decision was made well before the American election.

This case demonstrates that positive U.S. migration diplomacy can cut across administrations and ideological lines even in the era of high polarization. The first moves were between ideologically aligned administrations. While Brazil also announced unilateral visa exemptions for Canada, Japan, and Australia, and was at least partially motivated by increasing tourism, Bolsonaro's announcement coincided with a visit to Washington and was clearly meant to boost U.S.-Brazilian ties.¹⁴ It is very unlikely that the first Trump administration would have initiated steps to add Brazil to the Global Entry Program were it not for the close relationship between Bolsonaro and Trump and Brazil taking this first step. The Global Entry Program's exclusivity also gave Bolsonaro domestic political cover over violating the reciprocity principle to benefit the U.S.

The Biden administration's decision not to punitively exclude Brazil from the program despite the vast ideological gulf between Biden and Bolsonaro has likely also factored into Lula's decision to keep the Bolsonaro-era visa waiver alive despite the centrality of equal treatment in his foreign policy. Good relations between the Biden and Lula administrations have spurred further cooperation on migration issues, including, most recently, a decision by Lula to restrict entry of some nationalities thought to be using Brazil as a landing pad for irregular migration towards the U.S.¹⁵¹⁶

This posture is an example of Totten's "non-policy" approach.¹⁷ Both the U.S. and Brazil have thus far allowed policies set by different presidential administrations to privilege travel rights for citizens of the other country while maintaining some flexibility to revoke these benefits. If Lula decides to postpone the return of visa-free travel arrangements for Americans again, it could be interpreted as a sign that future migration agreements can be maintained between democracies that experience frequent partisan turnover. If he chooses not to, or if the second Trump administration removes Brazil from the Global Entry Program, it would serve as another example of how immigration policy is often used as the opening shot in more serious breaks in relations between countries.

U.S. assistance to Guatemala under the Arevalo administration (2020-present)

In recent years, the American posture towards Central America has been heavily influenced by the issue of immigration. Former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández was praised by then-Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf in 2020 for his cooperation with the U.S. on immigration matters, even after he had been convicted on drug trafficking charges in federal court (with another indictment and extradition to the U.S.

14. Anthony Boadle, "Brazil Waives Visas for Visitors from U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan," Reuters, March 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-brazil-visas/brazil-waives-visas-for-visitors-from-us-canada-australia-japan-idUSKCN1QZ2CB>.

15. Anthony Boadle, "Brazil Waives Visas for Visitors from U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan," Reuters, March 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-brazil-visas/brazil-waives-visas-for-visitors-from-us-canada-australia-japan-idUSKCN1QZ2CB>.

16. Mauricio Savarese, "Brazil Will Restrict Entry to Some Asian Nationals," Associated Press, August 24, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/brazil-migration-entry-restrictions-asians-b6f490d8005ee22fa26b55dea8f2f76d>.

17. Totten, *Statecraft and Migration*, 349.

following in 2022.)¹⁸¹⁹ Similarly, the Biden administration significantly softened its posture towards Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele's anti-democratic tendencies as irregular migration rose in political salience in the US and his repressive techniques proved effective.²⁰ It even signaled approval of his controversial reelection by sending official dignitaries to his inauguration.

The Biden administration went beyond symbolic gestures in the case of Guatemala. In 2023, anti-corruption candidate Bernardo Arévalo won the presidential election but seemed unlikely to assume the presidency for several months due to intense lawfare waged against his claim by entrenched and powerful forces within the Guatemalan government.²¹

U.S. policy played a significant role in ensuring a democratic transition and notably came in the form of visa cancellations for figures blocking Arévalo's assumption of the presidency.²²²³ Nearly 300 members of the Guatemalan congress were subjected to visa restrictions. These restrictions carried significant weight because of the economic and cultural ties between the Guatemalan elite and the U.S.: If they stayed in place, sanctioned individuals would have difficulty managing their U.S. financial assets or visiting family here.²⁴

The Biden administration's position on Arévalo's ascension to the presidency was undoubtedly somewhat motivated by the American desire to avert a renewed political conflict that would exacerbate outward-bound migration. It also ensured that the incoming president would have a reason to feel indebted to the U.S. and seek to continue Guatemalan cooperation on migration issues. Arévalo's first visit to the U.S. coincided with announcements of \$170 million of new investments related to Vice President Harris's root-causes strategy to deter irregular migration from Central America.²⁵

This case study complicates the concept of "positive" immigration diplomacy by demonstrating that its use in rewarding allies is not limited to benevolent actions like humanitarian classifications or travel waivers. It can also entail using punitive measures towards a domestic group perceived as undermining a current or future ally. It also demonstrates the predominance of immigration in American foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere, even in regions like Central America, where U.S. business interests and ideological concerns have historically played a determinative role.²⁶

18. Tim Padgett, "Trump's 'Proven' Partner in Honduras May Prove a Liability If Murder, Migrants Surge," WLRN, March 4, 2020, <https://www.wlrn.org/news/2020-03-04/trumps-proven-partner-in-honduras-may-prove-a-liability-if-murder-migrants-surge>.

19. U.S. Department of Justice, "Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras," U.S. Department of Justice, April 21, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/juan-orlando-hernandez-former-president-honduras-indicted-drug-trafficking>.

20. "U.S. Dampens Criticism of El Salvador's President as Migration Overtakes Democracy Concerns," Associated Press, February 3, 2025, <https://www.wnct.com/news/international/ap-u-s-dampens-criticism-of-el-salvadors-president-as-migration-overtakes-democracy-concerns/>.

21. Catherine Osborn, "Can Peer Pressure Protect Guatemala's Democracy?" *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/15/guatemala-presidential-election-arevalo-giammattei-democracy-united-states/>.

22. Robbie Gramer, "Inside the White House Effort to Prevent a Coup in Guatemala," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/28/guatemala-coup-kamala-harris-biden-administration-arevalo/>.

23. Stephen Schlesinger, "America's Turbulent Path in Guatemala," *The Nation*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/americas-skewered-path-in-guatemala/>.

24. Edgar Gutiérrez, "Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: Introduction," InSight Crime, September 1, 2016, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/guatemala-elites-and-organized-crime-introduction/>.

25. Sofia Menchú, "US to Provide \$170 Million to Guatemala to Prevent Irregular Migration," *El País*, March 28, 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-03-28/us-to-provide-170-million-to-guatemala-to-prevent-irregular-migration.html>.

26. Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, revised and expanded edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Uniting for Ukraine (2022-2025)

The Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) program was a humanitarian parole initiative the U.S. launched in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.²⁷ The program allowed American citizens to sponsor displaced Ukrainian nationals by providing them financial and social support upon arrival. Beneficiaries of the program were granted a two-year stay in the U.S. and authorization to seek employment. Since its inception, U4U has seen robust participation, with over 207,000 supporters and more than 100,000 Ukrainians admitted, exceeding the program's initial target.²⁸

This initiative demonstrated how a single innovation in immigration policy can have far-reaching impacts on American foreign policy. By creating a streamlined and compassionate pathway for Ukrainian refugees, the U.S. demonstrated a commitment to providing humanitarian support during the conflict and strengthened its alliance with Ukraine. The establishment of U4U also helped relieve some pressure on American allies in Europe, where the majority of Ukrainian refugees currently reside.²⁹ The program also sought to help create a national consensus on the importance of supporting Ukraine by personalizing the conflict for hundreds of thousands of Americans of all backgrounds.

Figure 1: Southwest Border Encounters with Ukrainian Nationals, October 2021-January 2025

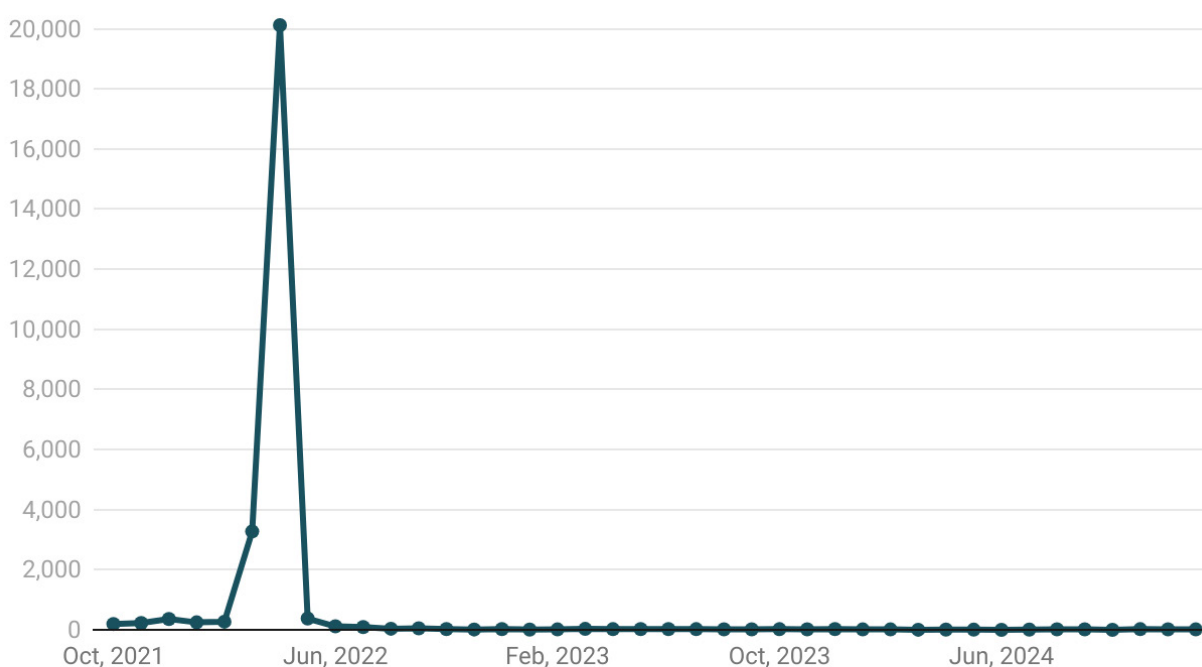


Chart: Gil Guerra, Niskanen Center • Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Nationwide Encounters • Created with Datawrapper

27. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Uniting for Ukraine," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, April 21, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/ukraine>.

28. Gil Guerra, "Uniting for Ukraine Has Been a Resounding Success. Here's What We've Learned," Niskanen Center, February 7, 2023, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/uniting-for-ukraine-has-been-a-resounding-success-heres-what-weve-learned/>.

29. "Ukraine Refugee Situation," UNHCR Operational Data Portal, accessed March 5, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

This program is also a modern example of the U.S. adjusting refugee policy to help an ally outside the hemisphere. A program like U4U could serve as a template for future American humanitarian responses if an overseas ally is attacked. Beyond humanitarian considerations, programs like U4U also have a clear strategic benefit. During interstate wars, allowing the family members of military members of allied countries to seek refuge in the U.S. could allow them to fight more effectively without constant worry over the safety of their loved ones. In protracted insurgencies or irregular warfare, providing humanitarian parole to the family members of allied security service members would likewise mitigate the threat of personal retaliation and assassination often employed by terrorist organizations and organized criminal groups.

U4U has also significantly reduced unauthorized border crossings by Ukrainians. Encounters with Ukrainian nationals at the U.S. southern border spiked dramatically in the wake of the invasion. However, these encounters dropped by 98 percent within a month of U4U's launch and have remained marginal through January 2025.

While the program is on pause as of February 2025, U4U will be held up as a model that demonstrates how good immigration policy can achieve multiple foreign policy goals at once by providing humanitarian aid to an innocent population, bolstering border security and limiting potential domestic distractions that would further complicate aid to an ally, and supporting that ally's military effort.

Part II: Adversarial measures

Conversely, the U.S. can also wield immigration policy to harm its adversaries, and often finds itself the target of coercive migration strategies. The work of Kelly Greenhill has been especially formative in this domain. To give a brief and simplified overview, Greenhill first defines “coercive engineered migration” as “crossborder population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states.”³⁰

The users of this tactic are then classified into three non-mutually exclusive categories, namely generators (who directly create coercive engineered migration), agents provocateurs (who seek to incentivize other actors to create irregular migration movements), and opportunists (who passively take advantage of migration crises to secure their own ends).³¹ As we will see, these classifications and definitions are especially useful in the Nicaragua case.

Totten also identifies five main ways the U.S. has used immigration policies to harm foreign states: By adjusting humanitarian immigration policy to encourage residents of a hostile state to exit in embarrassing or detrimental ways; by encouraging “brain drain” of skilled workers from an adversary to weaken it; by restricting or denying travel rights to its citizens as a form of rebuke; by punishing diaspora members of the target hostile state residing within the U.S.; and by training and encouraging migrants from the target hostile state to take measures against it.³²

The following case studies illustrate recent adversarial measures the U.S. has employed and been subject to in its immigration relationships with unfriendly states.

30. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration*.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Totten, *Statecraft and Migration*, 354.

Nicaragua’s facilitation of irregular migration and U.S. retaliatory sanctions and programs (2021-present)

Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega has systematically exploited irregular migration toward the U.S. in an example of what Greenhill would classify as weaponized migration. While Cuba and Venezuela were earlier pioneers in the use of weaponized migration towards the U.S., they were limited to manipulating the outflows of their own populations because of the significant geographic barriers of the Gulf of Mexico and the Darién Gap, respectively. Nicaragua’s comparative advantage is that although its population is among the smallest in Latin America, it can exploit its relatively unhindered proximity to the United States and deliberately facilitate irregular migration by people coming from outside the hemisphere.

Figure 2: Indications of Facilitated Irregular Migration through Nicaragua by Nationality

This table uses net irregular immigration encounters in Honduras compared to Panama as a rough proxy for which nationalities have most heavily used Nicaragua as an entry point in the route to the U.S.-Mexico border,

		2020 Net Honduran Encounters	2021 Net Honduran Encounters	2022 Net Honduran Encounters	2023 Net Honduran Encounters	2024 Net Honduran Encounters
1	Mauritania 🇲🇷	-1	-87	-155	5,816	3,730
2	Jordan 🇯🇴	0	1	30	156	2,921
3	Guinea 🇬🇪	10	-234	-283	12,568	2,707
4	India 🇮🇳	-30	-477	-1,878	630	1,678
5	Egypt 🇪🇬	-1	7	98	2,845	1,525
6	Senegal 🇸🇳	1	-883	-733	8,964	1,253
7	Morocco 🇲🇦	3	2	16	213	878
8	Uzbekistan 🇺🇿	0	-706	-127	5,153	574
9	Kazakhstan 🇰🇿	0	32	140	425	531
10	Kyrgyzstan 🇰🇷	0	10	-87	644	377

Panamanian data drawn from government transit data in the Darien Gap. Honduran data drawn from government database of irregular migration. Data accurate as of November 2024.

Table: Gil Guerra, Niskanen Center • Created with Datawrapper

Despite deeply held and historically rooted anti-American sentiment among Ortega and his officials, Nicaragua has only recently turned to weaponizing migration. For example, during the 2014 Cuban migration wave, Nicaragua did not lift visa restrictions on Cubans or allow Cuban nationals to pass unhindered through Nicaragua on their route to the U.S.-Mexico border.³³³⁴

After U.S.-Nicaragua relations deteriorated following the fraudulent 2021 Nicaraguan election, Ortega began a deliberate policy of opening Nicaragua for travel with countries that are security concerns for U.S. border officials, including Cuba in 2021, Belarus in 2023, and Angola and Qatar in 2024.³⁵³⁶³⁷ This opening of Nicaragua to the world stands in stark contrast to its otherwise paranoid and pariah-state behavior, which includes diplomatic breaks even with sympathetic regional powers such as Brazil, as mentioned earlier, and

33. Frances Robles, “Sharp Rise in Cuban Migration Stirs Worries of a Mass Exodus,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/10/us/sharp-rise-in-cuban-migration-stirs-worries-of-a-mass-exodus.html>.

34. “Nicaragua Eliminates Visa Requirement for Cubans,” Reuters, November 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nicaragua-eliminates-visa-requirement-cubans-2021-11-23/>.

35. “Belarus-Nicaragua Visa Waiver Draft Agreement Approved,” Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus, July 18, 2023, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/belarus-nicaragua-visa-waiver-draft-agreement-approved>.

36. Alejandro Flores, “Fortalecen Nicaragua y Angola sus relaciones parlamentarias,” *El 19 Digital*, 1 de mayo de 2024, <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:151562-fortalecen-nicaragua-y-angola-sus-relaciones-parlamentarias>.

37. “Nicaragua tendrá ‘consultas políticas’ con Qatar, y aprueba libre visado,” *Confidencial*, 19 de junio de 2024, <https://confidencial.digital/politica/nicaragua-tendra-consultas-politicas-con-qatar-y-libre-visado/>.

smaller, far-flung ones like the Netherlands.³⁸

Ortega benefits from this strategy in several ways. His regime profits significantly from the channeling of migrants eager to avoid the Darién Gap.³⁹ This money can then reward loyalists hit by U.S. sanctions and encourage dependency and corruption among all officials. Maintaining irregular migrant flows also allows the Ortega regime to cast the U.S. as xenophobic and hypocritical by creating a false contrast between the humanitarian crisis at the southern border and Nicaragua's ostensibly welcoming behavior.

Increased irregular migration also distracts the U.S., and the salience of migration as a political issue crowds out discussion of topics like Nicaragua's increasingly consolidated authoritarianism. Finally, the migration ultimately serves as a bargaining chip that Nicaragua can use in negotiations over future U.S. policy measures such as sanctions.

The U.S. has responded to Nicaragua's facilitation of irregular migration with several rounds of sanctions against Nicaraguan officials.⁴⁰ Visa revocations and restrictions have played a prominent role in each round. This has included 100 visa restrictions and revocations against Nicaraguan government officials in 2021, additional visa restrictions specifically against individuals operating charter flights that ferry irregular migrants in 2023, and 250 more against a wide-ranging group of regime-affiliated figures in 2024, for a total of over 1,400 individuals sanctioned.⁴¹

Rescinding or blocking travel rights to the U.S. is one of the only quick measures the U.S. has at its disposal in dealing with actors complicit in human rights violations, and has some degree of efficacy as many of the facilitators of irregular migration in Nicaragua are formally in the travel business and have personal and financial interests in the U.S. they need to regularly access. Sanctions of this kind are one of the most straightforward examples of punitive migration policy.

Despite these tensions, Nicaraguan and American incentives for migration have occasionally been aligned. In the 2023 Operation Nica Welcome, the U.S. accepted over 200 Nicaraguan political prisoners and repatriated them from Nicaragua to the U.S.⁴² For the Ortega regime, this had the possible benefit of relieving some domestic and international political pressure. Greenhill identifies such moves as "exportive engineered migration," which in one variant aims to "fortify a domestic political position (by expelling political dissidents and other domestic adversaries)." For the U.S., it was a way of signaling to democratic activists in the region that they would not be left behind.

Among the three types of actors that engage in coercive engineered migration, Nicaragua represents something of a blend between generator and agent-provocateur. On one hand, it shares commonalities with

38. "Nicaragua Breaks Off Ties with Netherlands," Al Jazeera, October 1, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/1/nicaragua-breaks-off-ties-with-netherlands>.

39. Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, "Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega Profits Handsomely from Vulnerable Haitian Migrants," *El País*, November 8, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-11-08/nicaraguas-daniel-ortega-profits-handsomely-from-vulnerable-haitian-migrants.html>.

40. Karla I. Rios, "Nicaragua," Congressional Research Service Report IF12247, April 26, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12247>.

41. U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, "Visa Restrictions on Executive of a Charter Flight Company Facilitating Irregular Migration to the U.S.," U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, September 11, 2024, <https://ni.usembassy.gov/visa-restrictions-on-executive-of-a-charter-flight-company-facilitating-irregular-migration-to-the-u-s/>.

42. Kate Applegate, "Operation Nica Welcome," *The Foreign Service Journal*, December 2023, <https://afsa.org/operation-nica-welcome>.

generators in that it is directly involved in the flow of extra-hemispheric migrants towards the U.S. for self-interested reasons. On the other, it is facilitating these migration flows and not directly creating them, and there is no public reporting suggesting the Ortega regime has made demands in order to stop the facilitation, which would make its behavior more akin to Greenhill's description of agents-provocateurs.

The Biden administration struggled to respond to Nicaragua's approach because, as Greenhill explains, liberal democracies make especially vulnerable targets of coercive engineered migration for a variety of reasons.⁴³ In this particular case, the most salient ones are the potential "hypocrisy costs" the Biden administration incurred in turning away migrants as his administration attempted to balance growing calls for border security from the electorate with pressure from progressive Democratic Party activists, and with "embedded liberalism", or the legally enshrined commitments most democracies have towards migrants.

This is further demonstrated by the intentional routes the Ortega regime facilitated for migrants from Africa, as they likely calculated that the Biden administration would need to be especially sensitive in its handling of Black migrants given recent scandals over the treatment of these migrants by U.S. Border Patrol and the importance of African American voters in the then-looming 2024 election.⁴⁴

But the Nicaraguan approach will not necessarily be as effective on the second Trump administration, since Trump is now term-limited, ran on a promise of enacting stringent border security measures, and has not demonstrated any particular concern for migrant protections.⁴⁵ Indeed, there are already signs that the Ortega regime may be winding down its strategy, such as through the exculpatory publication shortly after Trump's victory of new statistics showing that migration through the Managua airport has begun to decrease.⁴⁶

The U.S. has also used targeted humanitarian immigration measures to try to decrease the leverage states like Nicaragua can exert, as detailed in the next case study.

The CHNV parole program (2023-2025)

The Biden administration's Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV) was an immigrant parole program modeled on the Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) framework discussed above.⁴⁷ As in U4U, CHNV beneficiaries were granted two years of parole and received financial and social support from a private sponsor while having the option to pursue work authorization.

This approach addressed the unique and deeply entrenched political causes driving migration from these countries, which differ from the socioeconomic "root causes" diagnosis the Biden administration came to

43. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration*.

44. Matt Berg, "Patrol Agents on Horseback Did Not Whip Migrants, but Used Force and Inappropriate Language, Investigators Say," *Político*, July 8, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/07/08/patrol-agents-on-horseback-did-not-whip-migrants-but-used-forced-and-inappropriate-language-investigators-say-00044763>.

45. Nick Miroff, "Trump Administration Plans to Expand Guantanamo to Detain Migrants," *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2025/02/25/guantanamo-trump-migrants-deportations-venezuela/>.

46. "A pocas semanas de que Trump asuma el poder, régimen divulga extraña cifra sobre el uso del Aeropuerto de Managua," *La Prensa*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.laprensani.com/2024/11/20/economia/3404054-a-pocas-semanas-de-que-trump-asuma-el-poder-regimen-divulga-extrana-cifra-sobre-el-uso-del-aeropuerto-de-managua>

47. "What is the CHNV Parole Program?" Global Refuge, November 1, 2024, <https://www.globalrefuge.org/news/what-is-the-chnv-parole-program/>.

assign migration from the Northern Triangle. Tensions with the governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela and the lack of a functioning government in Haiti made the Biden administration's preferred first-line approach of rendering material aid for economic development and supporting security and anti-corruption measures in these countries untenable.

This program fulfilled an important foreign policy function as a direct countermeasure against the destabilizing effects of autocratic rule in the Western Hemisphere. As discussed above, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have each selectively weaponized migration outflows toward the U.S. at various times for various ends.⁴⁸⁴⁹⁵⁰ By granting parole status to individuals from these countries, the U.S. aimed to weaken the control of these regimes over their populations. The parole program also blunted the ability of these regimes to use their domestic populations as sources of irregular migration by creating regular and orderly channels for would-be asylum seekers.

These measures were met with a range of responses from the designated governments. The most overtly antagonistic was Nicaragua, which warned citizens that if they used the CHNV parole program, they would not be welcomed back into the country.⁵¹ This response further underlines that these governments see migration as a mechanism of control and not simply a matter of inflows and outflows.

CHNV demonstrates that adversarial measures do not necessarily have to be restrictive or “bad” for migrants. This policy allowed the U.S. to respond to human rights abuses and political repression without resorting to direct military intervention or broad economic sanctions, which can have widespread negative impacts on civilian populations. By selectively offering parole, the U.S. can embarrass the leadership of these regimes and partially defang their use of irregular migration as a weapon while providing a safe haven for those most affected by their policies.

This method also strengthens the moral standing of the United States in the international community as a protector of human rights and democracy, reinforcing its soft-power advantage and exposing citizens of its adversaries to a democratic system they will likely prefer and seek to emulate in the event they have the opportunity to participate in political change in their home countries.

Hungary's ESTA validity reduction (2023)

So far, these cases have dealt with uniformly anti-American authoritarian governments within the hemisphere. However, the U.S. has also recently demonstrated a willingness to employ adversarial measures against a European NATO ally.

In August 2023, the Biden administration announced it would dial back the ability of Hungarian citizens to enter the U.S. using the Electronic System for Travel Authorizations, or ESTA, over security concerns

48. Greenhill, “When Migrants Become Weapons”.

49. Gus Contreras, Justine Kenin, and Mary Louise Kelly, “How Nicaragua Is Weaponizing Immigration to the U.S.,” *NPR*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/04/1222951949/how-nicaragua-is-weaponizing-immigration-to-the-u.s>.

50. Jason Poblete, “How Venezuela's Dictatorship Is Weaponizing the US Border Crisis,” *The Hill*, February 27, 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/4443814-how-venezuelas-dictatorship-is-weaponizing-the-us-border-crisis/>.

51. “Nicaragüenses que salieron con parole humanitario no podrán regresar al país,” *100% Noticias*, May 16, 2024, <https://100noticias.com.ni/politica/131512-nicaraguenses-parole-humanitario-no-retorno/>.

around Hungarian naturalization laws.⁵² Under the new American policy, the ESTA validity of Hungarian passports has been cut from two years to one, and a Hungarian ESTA can only be used once.⁵³ According to the U.S., this policy shift stemmed primarily from Hungary's decision to issue passports to individuals who have never resided in the country with what American officials say are inadequate identity verifications.

The Biden administration had expressed concerns over Hungary's domestic policies under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, including issues related to judicial independence, media freedom, and corruption.⁵⁴ By targeting Hungary in this way, the U.S. is also leveraging immigration policy as a tool to demonstrate that decisions by Orbán such as the citizenship law change that deviate from NATO and EU standards will not be tacitly accepted. This approach signals to other allies that deviations from shared democratic values may lead to tangible consequences in bilateral relations.

The strategic use of immigration policy in this context underscores its role as an instrument of foreign policy. The U.S. has historically used visa policies to reward or penalize countries based on their compliance with international norms and bilateral agreements. In the context of strained U.S.-Hungary relations under Biden and Orbán, the pretext of security concerns also gave the U.S. an opening to use immigration controls to punish an errant ally for political and ideological misalignment.

Part III: Competitive measures

In between friendly and adversarial approaches, Totten has also identified ways the U.S. has used immigration to bargain and negotiate with other countries.⁵⁵ Totten argues that the U.S. has done this to gain concessions from the target country on immigration matters and unrelated policy areas alike.

These measures have captured complex international dynamics facing the U.S. in the present day. Taken together, they reflect broader trends where the U.S. is sometimes out of step with its traditional allies in Western Europe, willing to try to find common ground with serious rivals like China under the right circumstances, and slowly adjusting to changes in the migration power balance it has historically enjoyed over migrant-origin countries in Latin America.

European Union introduction of the ETIAS (2024)

In 2024, the European Union established the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS), mirroring the U.S.'s own Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA).⁵⁶ The stated purpose for this program is to enhance EU border security and streamline the tracking of visitors across EU countries. This approach is part of a growing trend among nations to adopt pre-authorization systems to manage and mitigate potential security risks associated with international travel.

52. Krisztina Than, "US Tightens Conditions of Visa Waiver Program for Hungary," *Reuters*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-tightens-conditions-visa-waiver-program-hungary-2023-08-01/>.

53. "U.S. Restricts Visa-Free Travel for Hungarian Passport Holders over Security Concerns," *PBS NewsHour*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/u-s-restricts-visa-free-travel-for-hungarian-passport-holders-over-security-concerns>.

54. Flora Garamvolgyi, "In Hungary, 'Deteriorating Relationship' Seen Behind Biden's Democracy Summit Snub," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/hungary-biden-summit-snub-viktor-orban/32340574.html>.

55. Totten, *Statecraft and Migration*, 349.

56. Armani Syed, "U.S. Citizens Will Soon Need an ETIAS to Enter Europe," *Time*, June 28, 2023, <https://time.com/6300111/strong-us-europe-travel-fee-strong/>.

But as in the Hungary case study, the broader context also matters. The EU formally set out a reciprocity policy in 2014 for several nations that did not grant full visa-free travel for all EU citizens.⁵⁷ The other non-reciprocal nations — Australia, Brunei, Canada, and Japan — all moved to comply with EU visa waiver requests, but to date the U.S. has only added Poland in 2019 and Croatia in 2021 to the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).^{58,59} Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Romania remain excluded from the VWP.

The implications of ETIAS thus extend beyond security and reciprocity. The European Union's insistence on similar travel authorization requirements for Americans highlights its growing interest in bucking U.S. hegemony and charting a more independent course in foreign affairs, particularly during the second Trump term.⁶⁰ Tensions over visa reciprocity and the American posture towards Europe flared during Trump's first term in office, and as in the case of the Brazilian case study, imposing these requirements on American travelers under the Biden administration allowed the EU to assert its interests without risking as much retaliation as might be expected had they introduced this requirement after Trump returned to office.⁶¹

Europe's adoption of the ETIAS demonstrates how other nation-states and multilateral bodies often mirror U.S. policy and, in combination with the U.S.-China case study below, shows that the U.S. can come to have restrictive immigration developments with its closest allies and find areas of collaboration with its greatest adversaries.

U.S.-China deportation flights (2024-2025)

In July 2024, China accepted the first American deportation flight since 2018.⁶² It has gone on to accept four more as of January 2025.⁶³ China has historically been uncooperative with U.S. removal efforts, which have targeted Chinese nationals convicted of crimes.⁶⁴ This is partially out of a desire to keep criminals out of China to save face and partially as a way of hitting back at the U.S. for granting asylum to Chinese political dissidents.⁶⁵ China fully suspended all cooperation with U.S. deportation operations in 2022 as one of several measures of protest against then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.⁶⁶

57. "Parliament Asks EU Commission to Press for Full US-EU Visa Reciprocity," European Parliament News, March 2, 2017, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170227IPR64156/parliament-asks-eu-commission-to-press-for-full-us-eu-visa-reciprocity>.

58. "Secretary Mayorkas Announces Designation of Croatia as a New Participant in the Visa Waiver Program," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, September 28, 2021, <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/news/2021/09/28/secretary-mayorkas-announces-designation-croatia-new-participant-visa-waiver>.

59. "Poland's Inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program," U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Poland, November 11, 2019, <https://pl.usembassy.gov/vwp-fact/>.

60. Laura Smith-Spark. "EU Parliament Urges Visas for US Citizens Visiting Europe," *CNN*, March 3, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/03/europe/eu-america-visa-trnd/index.html>.

61. Matt Welch, "Say Goodbye to Permissionless Travel," *Reason*, July 28, 2023, <https://reason.com/2023/07/28/say-goodbye-to-permissionless-travel/>.

62. Miriam Jordan, "U.S. Deports Chinese Migrants in First Large Flight Since 2018," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/03/us/us-china-migrants-deportation-flight.html>.

63. "DHS Conducts Removal Flight to the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, January 10, 2025, <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/news/2025/01/10/dhs-conducts-removal-flight-peoples-republic-china>.

64. Mark Hosenball and Tim Reid, "Exclusive: U.S. to China: Take Back Your Undocumented Immigrants," Reuters, September 11, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-us-to-china-take-back-your-undocumented-immigrants-idUSKCNORB0D0/>.

65. Rob Shmitz, "China Turns Away Deportees from United States," NPR, January 12, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/2007/01/12/6831820/china-turns-away-deportees-from-united-states>.

66. Phelim Kine, "Beijing Cuts U.S. Cooperation to Protest Pelosi's Taiwan Visit," *Politico*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/05/beijing-protest-pelosi-taiwan-00050155>.

Since then, irregular Chinese migration to the U.S. has grown exponentially. Driven by poor economic prospects, political repression, and social media, tens of thousands of Chinese nationals have made their way to the U.S. through the U.S.-Mexico border.⁶⁷ A total of 18,469 Chinese nationals were encountered by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at the southern border between January and June of 2024. This is a 43 percent increase from the 12,855 encountered during the same period in 2023, and a staggering 9,000 percent increase from the same period in 2021, when there were only 202 encounters.

Figure 3: Total Recorded Encounters with Chinese Nationals at the Southwest Border, 2020-2024

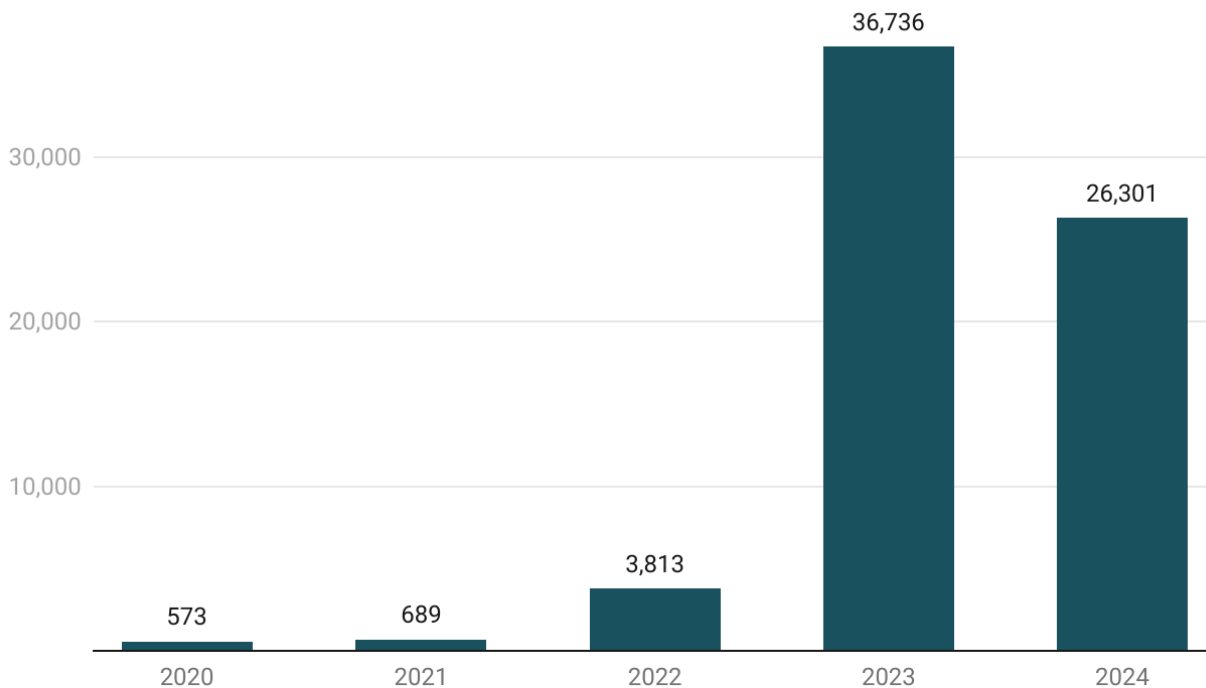


Chart: Gil Guerra, Niskanen Center • Source: U.S. Customs & Border Protection, Nationwide Encounters • Created with Datawrapper

The rise in irregular Chinese migration has posed challenges for both Beijing and Washington. For the U.S., it has caused processing difficulties due to the lack of Mandarin speakers on CBP staff and the impossibility of quickly repatriating the migrants.⁶⁸ The characterization of the migrants as potential spies in some corners has also caused a media firestorm around this wave of migration in the U.S.⁶⁹ For China, the images of middle-class Chinese citizens desperately crossing treacherous terrain in Latin America to reach the U.S. is embarrassing and undercuts Chinese ambitions to be seen and treated as the next global hegemon, and the security risks posed to the migrants during their journeys also threatens to complicate Chinese relations

67. Gil Guerra, "New Data Suggests Political Repression, Slowing Economy Driving Irregular Chinese Migration to U.S.," Niskanen Center, May 7, 2024, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/new-data-suggests-political-repression-slowing-economy-driving-irregular-chinese-migration-to-u-s/>.

68. Caitlin Doornbos, "Experts Warn of National Security Risks After CBP Slashes Question List for Chinese Migrants from 40 to Just 5," *New York Post*, January 7, 2024, <https://nypost.com/2024/01/07/news/experts-warn-of-national-security-risks-after-cbp-slashes-question-list-for-chinese-migrants-from-40-to-just-5/>.

69. Gil Guerra and Channing Lee, "Chinese Migrants Aren't an Invading Army," *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/23/chinese-migrants-arent-an-invading-army/>.

with Latin American countries.⁷⁰ For both, irregular migration is a relatively small issue that nevertheless holds the potential to irritate bilateral relations if its salience continues to rise.

China's acceptance of the deportation flight can be seen as an effort to control the narrative around emigration and illegal immigration. The Chinese government likely calculated that cooperation with the U.S. was worth the loss of face to deter future would-be migrants. Official Chinese statements on the flight and other regional responses to irregular Chinese migration, such as Ecuador's decision to rescind visa-free travel for Chinese nationals, were very tempered compared to the tone the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs often takes on other issues.⁷¹ This indicates that for now, China sees the reduction of irregular migration as being in its best interest.

From the American perspective, the need to reduce public apprehensions around the border has precluded any official attempt to exploit this migration as a soft power victory. While the U.S. could use the migration as an opportunity to overtly demonstrate that the U.S. economic and political system remains more attractive than China's, the risks of potentially encouraging even more irregular migration from China currently outweigh the benefits in light of China's cooperation with U.S. removal operations.

While U.S.-China relations are set to remain competitive and adversarial, the deportation flight is a small example of how incentives for both powers can lead to a mutually agreeable outcome.

U.S.-Mexico bilateral negotiations over migration (2016-2024)

So far, the case studies in this section have demonstrated how U.S. immigration policy can be entangled in complex ways in foreign relations with both allies and adversaries. Immigration comes to take on an even more complex role in the case of U.S.-Mexico relations. Mexico plays an indispensable role in American migration management and also has a far more ambiguous political alignment — neither a rich ally like the EU nor a peer competitor like China.

The first Trump administration relied on increased enforcement on the border between Mexico and Guatemala and cooperation with Mexico over the Migration Protection Protocols, or MPP, to stem migration.⁷² The Trump administration's use of Title 42 public-health authority to push migrants back into Mexico without asylum screenings, and the subsequent reliance on MPP, placed considerable strain on Mexican resources and border cities. In response, the Mexican government negotiated financial aid and logistical support from the U.S.

The negotiations during the first Trump administration also demonstrated a more coercive use of immigration policy. Threatened with damaging tariffs, Mexico agreed to deploy thousands of National Guard troops to its southern border to ward off U.S.-bound migrants and to increase migrant arrests.

70. Marlon Sorto, Omar Fajardo, and Yong Xiong, "Eight Chinese Migrants Found Dead on Mexico Beach After Boat Capsizes," *CNN*, March 31, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/americas/mexico-coast-eight-chinese-migrants-found-dead-intl-hnk/index.html.nation.com.pk+7>

71. Didi Tang, "China and US Resume Cooperation on Deportation as Chinese Immigrants Rush in from Southern Border," *Associated Press*, May 9, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/china-immigration-border-deportation-mayorkas-514f42ee56e80fe7eb7f9fcc71c4d55c>.

72. Peter Martin, "Understanding Chinese 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy'," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

73. Nick Miroff, "Trump-Mexico Immigration Deal Has Additional Measures Not Yet Made Public," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-mexico-immigration-deal-has-additional-measures-not-yet-made-public/2019/06/10/967e4e56-8b8e-11e9-b08e-cfd89bd36d4e_story.html.

The Biden administration has similarly leaned heavily on Mexico to help curb the surge of migrants crossing into the U.S. through the southern border. Executive orders introduced in the summer of 2024 to speed up removals hinged upon Mexico's willingness to accept the return of a large number of non-Mexican nationals into its territory.⁷⁴

Despite an assumption in some corners of the American government that Mexico will inevitably cooperate with the U.S. due to the power discrepancy between the two countries, this acquiescence has not come without Mexico extracting significant concessions.⁷⁵

Mexico's decisions during the Biden administration to increase enforcement at its southern border and keep migrants in limbo in southern Mexico came after significant U.S. financial aid and support for addressing the root causes of migration in Central and South America.⁷⁶ This approach is a core aspect of the theory of migration championed by then-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, which holds that migration is driven by socioeconomic factors like employment, wages, crime, and corruption and therefore can be deterred by investment in these areas. Since 2008, the U.S. has given Mexico over \$3 billion in aid towards these ends along with an additional \$5.2 billion in facilitated private sector investment in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras since 2021.⁷⁷

An even more serious development has been the change in U.S. posture towards Cuba and Venezuela, which was also a demand AMLO made in migration negotiations.⁷⁸ While not determinative, this pressure from Mexico likely factored into the Biden administration's temporary easing of sanctions on Venezuela ahead of the country's 2024 election. U.S. migration policy towards Cuba has gone even further, with the Biden administration restarting the Cuban Family Reunification Parole Program, resuming immigrant services at the U.S. embassy in Havana, launching a public information campaign around legal migration from the island, restarting visa issuances paused under the Trump administration, and including Cuba in the CNHV program listed above.⁷⁹

However, the most blatant example of Mexico using migration as a transactional issue is tied to the arrest and subsequent release of Mexican Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos by the U.S. in 2020.⁸¹ The Justice Department arrested Cienfuegos and charged him with protecting narcotraffickers, only to release him after AMLO's

74. Andrea Flores, [X post](#), June 4, 2024, 1:53 pm.

75. Rafael Bernal, "Speaker Johnson Calls on Biden to Address Border Crisis in Meeting with Mexican President," *The Hill*, February 28, 2025, <https://thehill.com/latino/4498745-speaker-johnson-biden-mexico-immigration-border/>.

76. Edgar H. Clemente, "Hundreds of Migrants Leave Southern Mexico on Foot in a New Caravan," Associated Press, April 23, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-migrants-us-border-ff6ec67feee12c38e3bcdd1cd34af90f>.

77. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress*, GAO-23-103795 (Washington, D.C.: September 2023), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-106871.pdf>.

78. "Mexico's President Slams U.S. Sanctions on Venezuela and Cuba," *PBS NewsHour*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/mexicos-president-slams-u-s-sanctions-on-venezuela-and-cuba>.

79. Gabriel Diamond, "Biden Administration Turns to Cuban TV To Promote Legal Ways to Citizenship, Could Win Voters in the Process," *The New York Sun*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.nysun.com/article/biden-administration-turns-to-cuban-tv-to-promote-legal-ways-to-citizenship-could-win-voters-in-the-process>.

80. Nora Gámez Torres, "U.S. embassy in Havana to start issuing visas suspended since Trump era," *The Miami Herald*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article280992123.html>.

81. "Mexico Celebrates an Ex-Military Official Once Arrested on Drug Smuggling Charges in the US," *Associated Press*, October 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-obrador-military-drug-trafficking-854bba46f715fbb9211937b7e07bc0a5>

officials threatened to upend the security and migration partnerships between the U.S. and Mexico.⁸² This made it clear to AMLO that migration could be used as an effective pressure point in U.S.-Mexico relations, and he went on to explicitly raise the specter of suspended immigration collaboration any time he perceived the U.S. as encroaching on his interests.⁸³

U.S.-Mexico negotiations over migration demonstrate how the high salience of migration has surpassed other traditional areas of U.S. interest like security and altered how the U.S. approaches negotiations. It is the clearest example of a country using migration as a bargaining chip to exact changes in U.S. foreign policy, both in bilateral and regional relations.

Conclusion: Migration as statecraft in a complex world

The preceding case studies underscore that immigration is an important component of American foreign relations and not merely a domestic policy matter. The tripartite framework of beneficial, adversarial, and competitive measures demonstrates the versatility with which migration policies can be deployed to advance national interests and shape geopolitical outcomes.

Viewing immigration through this lens carries several significant implications for U.S. foreign policy. First, the weaponization of migration by weaker states like Nicaragua represents an asymmetric threat that will likely proliferate as traditional power differentials erode in an increasingly multipolar world. The effectiveness of such strategies against liberal democracies, which face what Greenhill terms “hypocrisy costs” when responding to humanitarian challenges, demands a more proactive and coordinated approach to migration governance that anticipates rather than merely reacts to coercive tactics.

Second, though it falls far short of “weaponization,” the evolution of U.S.-Mexico migration negotiations challenges the way the power dynamic between migrant-sending and migrant-receiving nations is often portrayed in U.S. politics. Mexico’s success in extracting significant concessions—including changes in U.S. posture toward Cuba and Venezuela—is just one example of how transit and migrant-sending countries are able to use leverage over migrant-destination countries, especially as the publics in these countries grow increasingly skeptical of large-scale migration.

Third, the examples of U.S.-Brazil relations and the Uniting for Ukraine program illustrate how migration policies can serve as powerful tools of diplomatic engagement that transcend partisan divides. The bipartisan buy-in observed in these cases, while uncertain in the case of U.S.-Brazil travel privileges and temporary in the case of Uniting for Ukraine, suggests that carefully structured migration initiatives are capable of gaining broad support despite domestic political volatility.

Perhaps most significantly, the strategic deployment of migration policies across these diverse cases reveals the emergence of what might be termed “migration realism”—a recognition that states will leverage human mobility to advance their interests regardless of humanitarian considerations. This perspective differs from the rights-based and security-focused frameworks that were more influential during the earlier periods of globalization and the War on Terror, respectively.

82. Tim Golden, “The Cienfuegos Affair: Inside the Case that Upended the Drug War in Mexico,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/08/magazine/salvador-cienfuegos-mexico.html>.

83. “Mexico’s president condemns reports of an old US investigation into alleged drug campaign donations,” *Associated Press*, October 27, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-president-us-accusations-drug-campaign-donations-93ffd94c6a720ed6460c46e242198be>.

Looking ahead, the U.S. would benefit from incorporating a more coherent and forward-looking typology of migration measures into its policy process. Such a framework would enable policymakers to move beyond ad hoc responses to migration challenges and toward a more systematic approach that strategically deploys different types of migration policies according to specific diplomatic objectives.

The intertwining of immigration and foreign policy is not an anomaly but rather the continuation of a historical pattern in which human mobility has been central to international relations. By embracing migration as a multifaceted instrument of statecraft rather than treating it as a squarely domestic issue, the United States can more effectively advance its interests, support its allies, counter its adversaries, and continue shaping the shifting global order. As the case studies in this paper demonstrate, those who fail to recognize migration's strategic dimensions risk finding themselves outmaneuvered in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape where the movement of people has become as strategically significant as the movement of capital, goods, or information.