



Mexico: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021

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Mexico, a top U.S. trade partner and neighbor, could play a key role in addressing several challenges facing U.S. policymakers in 2021. Although President Andrés Manuel López Obrador initially [delayed](#) congratulating President Joe Biden on his electoral victory, the leaders now have spoken twice and have held a virtual meeting. During that March 1 meeting, they [committed](#) to collaborate on bilateral and regional migration issues and on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) response and recovery, while reaffirming the importance of security cooperation and anti-corruption efforts. Each of those issues could test U.S.-Mexican relations, with tension in one area of the relationship potentially hindering cooperation in others. Most experts maintain the best way for both countries to weather such challenges is to [continue working together](#) and with Canada to ensure the best possible outcomes for North America.

Migration

The Trump Administration's approach to Mexico de-emphasized human rights and corruption concerns in favor of a narrow focus on migration control. Under the threat of U.S. tariffs, the López Obrador administration [accommodated](#) U.S. border and asylum policy changes that shifted the burden of interdicting migrants and hosting asylum seekers from the United States to Mexico. Many human rights advocates expressed [serious concerns](#) about U.S. policies, however, and it was unclear how long Mexico would continue to devote resources to deterring and hosting primarily Central American migrants.

President Biden has announced [executive actions](#) on immigration, many of which revise restrictive policies implemented by the Trump Administration. President Biden also [proposed](#) a comprehensive immigration reform bill, introduced as the U.S. Citizenship Act (S. 348/H.R. 1177). As the top country of origin for unauthorized immigrants in the United States, and the recipient of more than [\\$40 billion of remittances](#) in 2020, Mexico could benefit from pathways to legal status included in that and other bills. However, the Biden Administration likely will require [assistance](#) from Mexico as it seeks to end policies restricting the availability of asylum and other protections for migrants at the Southwest border without overwhelming U.S. agencies' processing capacity.

Until pandemic-related [restrictions on asylum processing](#) end, Mexico will continue to receive non-Mexican adults expelled by U.S. officials; at the same time, Mexico is [no longer accepting](#) non-Mexican unaccompanied children and families at some ports of entry due to a new law that took effect in January.

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Some advocates have urged U.S. policymakers to [bolster Mexico's asylum system](#), encourage Mexican [investment in Central America](#), and ensure the well-being of migrants awaiting U.S. immigration proceedings in Mexico as the [Migration Protection Protocols \(MPP\)](#) are phased out. Amid a deep recession and budget austerity, Mexico has limited capacity to fulfill these aims and reportedly has [failed to protect migrants](#) from abuses. Mexico also is concerned about increased [alien smuggling](#).

Pandemic Response and Economic Recovery

With over [194,700 deaths](#) as of March 15, 2021, Mexico has the third highest number of COVID-19 deaths worldwide. The Mexican government's pandemic response has been [widely criticized](#). Whereas prior influenza outbreaks led to the creation of bilateral U.S.-Mexico and trilateral (with Canada) health cooperation frameworks, COVID-19 has revealed [new challenges on this front](#). Such issues include how to ensure the stability of supply chains and the safety of workers employed in essential industries, coordinate border closures, disseminate research and information, and secure vaccine supplies. The Biden Administration has [declined](#) to share vaccines with Mexico at this time, although some U.S. policymakers from border communities are urging it do so in order to reopen the Southwest border.

Economic recovery is underway in the United States, but [prospects for Mexico's economy](#)—which declined 0.3% in 2019 and 9% in 2020—remain uncertain. The Mexican government has devoted [less than 1% of gross domestic product](#) to economic stimulus measures, and [widespread vaccine coverage](#) is not expected until mid-2022. Mexico is seeking to leverage the United States-Mexico-Canada Free Trade Agreement (USMCA) to entice investors to relocate from China, but some investors remain concerned about Mexico's poor investment climate under President López Obrador. Some point to Presidents Biden and López Obrador's pledge to restart an Obama-era [High-Level Economic Dialogue](#) as positive for [economic cooperation](#). Nevertheless, enforcement issues regarding [USMCA's labor provisions](#), trade disputes, and/or U.S. concerns that Mexico's [energy policies](#) may violate the USMCA could hinder bilateral economic relations.

Countering Drugs

U.S.-Mexican security has expanded significantly under the [Mérida Initiative](#), a U.S. antidrug and rule-of-law assistance program through which Congress has provided some \$3.2 billion to Mexico since FY2007. Relations have been strained, however, since the October 2020 U.S. arrest of former Mexican defense minister Salvador Cienfuegos on drug trafficking charges. Although the United States ultimately agreed to release Cienfuegos to Mexico, where authorities dropped all charges against him in January 2021, Mexico's Congress [enacted legislation](#) limiting U.S. law enforcement operations in Mexico.

The 2020 *National Drug Threat Assessment*, issued in March 2021, [asserts](#) that Mexican drug trafficking organizations remain the “greatest criminal drug threat” to the United States and are “increasingly responsible for producing and supplying fentanyl to the U.S. market.” Amid surging U.S. demand during the pandemic, drug trafficking-related violence [remained elevated](#) in Mexico even as violence and crime declined in other countries. U.S. overdoses and drug trafficking and [organized crime-related homicides](#) in Mexico, combined with current tension in relations, have led many to question the Mérida Initiative's efficacy.

Many experts assert that past antidrug efforts have [failed and new strategies](#) are needed, but mutual mistrust and new regulations governing how U.S. agents operate in Mexico could limit policy options. Whereas the López Obrador government likely would welcome increased U.S. efforts to [combat weapons trafficking](#) or [money laundering](#), it could have difficulty accepting [U.S. attempts](#) to improve Mexico's military-led security strategy or human rights record. Some analysts suggest [trust-building efforts](#) to repair security relations; others suggest a [unilateral U.S. approach](#), involving further indictments of Mexican officials, suspension of some Mérida aid, and a halt of extraditions to Mexico.

Also see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, and CRS Report R44981, *The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)*.

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