



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. During a virtual meeting on March 1, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and President Biden [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. High-level officials from both countries held migration talks on March 23 focused on addressing root causes of migration and determining steps Mexico could take to interdict some U.S.-bound migrant flows. President Biden also is [asking Mexico](#) to accept migrant families expelled under current [pandemic-related restrictions](#) on asylum processing.

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 Mexico had limited resources for 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, Mexico—which received [\\$40 billion in remittances](#) in 2020, could benefit from pathways to legal status included in that and other bills. The Biden Administration has asked Mexico for [assistance](#) with securing its borders, as a surge in migrants from Central America is overwhelming U.S. agencies' processing capacity at the Southwest Border.

Until pandemic-related [restrictions](#), Mexico has received non-Mexican adults expelled by U.S. officials. Mexico has [not accepted](#) non-Mexican unaccompanied children and families at some ports of entry due to a [reform of its immigration law](#) that took effect in January. The reform bars Mexico from detaining children, accompanied or unaccompanied, in immigration detention facilities, requiring them instead to go to children's shelters. Amid a deep recession and budget austerity, Mexico has limited capacity to

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fulfill these aims; it reportedly has [failed to protect some migrants](#) from abuses and to respond to increased [alien smuggling](#).

Some advocates have urged U.S. policymakers to [bolster Mexico's asylum system](#), encourage Mexican and U.S. [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. [Others](#) have urged a restoration of MPP, which required non-Mexican migrants to await their immigration proceedings in Mexico, and other restrictions on migration.

Pandemic Response and Economic Recovery

With over [199,627 deaths](#) as of March 25, 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; 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. On March 19, 2021, the same day Mexico [closed its southern border](#), the United States [announced](#) it would [share 2.5 million doses](#) of Astra Zeneca's COVID-19 vaccines with Mexico.

[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 seeks 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 observers 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 cooperation 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. The United States ultimately agreed to release Cienfuegos to Mexico, where authorities dropped all charges against him in January 2021, and Mexico's Congress [enacted legislation](#) limiting U.S. law enforcement operations in Mexico.

The Drug Enforcement Administration's 2020 *National Drug Threat Assessment*, issued in March 2021, [asserts](#) that Mexican drug trafficking organizations 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. Increased U.S. overdoses and drug trafficking and [organized crime-related homicides](#) in Mexico, combined with current tensions 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 be hesitant to accept [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 through a high-level security dialogue; others suggest a [unilateral U.S. approach](#),

involving further indictments of Mexican officials, suspension of some Mérida aid, and a halt on 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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