

## A Better Approach Toward Mexico

[Reihan Salam](#)

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U.S. Border Patrol agents with illegal immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border near McAllen, Texas, May 9, 2018. (*Loren Elliott/Reuters*)

President Trump is not known for his enthusiasm for foreign aid. Nevertheless, the Trump administration is planning to offer \$20 million to the Mexican government in support of its efforts to deport unauthorized migrants from its territory, most of whom were passing through Mexico en route to the U.S. The *New York Times* [notes](#) the irony of the proposal: After insisting that Mexico would finance a border wall, here we have the Trump White House paying Mexico to deport would-be illegal border-crossers. I'm sure many *Times* readers found this apparent reversal amusing. But what we're really seeing is a tentative shift from a counterproductive approach to our relationship with Mexico, in which the president needlessly antagonized its governing class, to a more constructive one, in which we acknowledge that we could use Mexico's help. In truth, \$20 million is a small price to pay for greater cooperation.

The coming inauguration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico's president-elect, offers an opportunity for a reset. Most expect that the relationship between Trump and López Obrador will be antagonistic, as both men are purportedly uncompromising nationalists who will of course find themselves at loggerheads. Yet it's also true that, [as I observed last month](#), the desires of both men are in a sense congruent — “reducing emigration driven by desperation, in López Obrador's case, and reducing immigration driven by it, in Trump's.”

Whereas Mexican elites keen to rid themselves of the ambitious and obstreperous poor might welcome the prospect of mass emigration, López Obrador is an egalitarian who sees mass emigration as a tragic loss of potential. I'm reminded of a brief aside in an essay by Sam Quinones, [published in \*Foreign Policy\*](#) shortly after Trump's inauguration:

Meanwhile, instead of ruining the Trump administration's ongoing deportation of more Mexicans, the country ought to start the hard work now of reincorporating them into the country. Many will come with new skills learned on the job in the United States. They will have seen new ways of doing things, global citizens now and no longer the teenage *campesinos* (peasant farmers) they were when they left. Regardless of how much money they sent home, the loss of these dynamic and hard-working people to the United States was far more damaging to Mexico than the loss of territory in the mid-1800s, though it is the latter lesson that is taught in Mexican schools.

López Obrador might see things differently. But one can see why Quinones's perspective might resonate with Mexicans of a nationalist bent. This could be a basis for further cooperation.

Of course, the aid in question is aimed at helping Mexico control the flow from Central America and elsewhere. The Trump administration has been seeking a safe-third-country agreement with Mexico, which seems [highly unlikely for now](#), mostly because of the distrust between the two countries. It might take years of sustained cooperation to get to the point where the Mexican government would embrace the idea, providing targeted assistance is a good starting point.

Moreover, while most of the migrants crossing through Mexican territory to reach the U.S.-Mexico border are from Central America, a growing number are from elsewhere. There has been a surge of [South Asian](#) and [African](#) migrants apprehended at the border. Though the number of unauthorized migrants from outside of the Americas remains relatively small, it's not hard to imagine the influx getting larger and more chaotic in the years to come, and that trafficking organizations will pose a graver threat to civil order. I suspect the case for cooperation will look even stronger a few years hence.