

10. Between depoliticisation and path dependence: the role of Mexico in regional migration governance in North America

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses Mexico's role within regional migration governance in North America. By exploring regional cooperation from the perspective of Mexico's elite decision-makers on migration, the chapter argues that Mexico has moved from a 'policy of no policy' to an approach characterised by depoliticisation and marked by path dependencies. The resultant 'policy of depoliticised policy' operates through technocratic bilateral migration cooperation in order to deal with migration from and return migration to Mexico. Simultaneously, there are significant path dependencies in approaches to migration and transit dynamics, which repeats previous policies furthering the United States' (US) security interests through the securitisation of border controls. The resultant dual strategy attempts to deal with the uncertain scenario triggered by the US migration policy, characterised by increasing restrictions and a heightened securitised approach to migration. Ultimately, Mexico's strategy reinforces the status quo of weak regionalism that characterises North America (see Chapter 9 in this volume).

By analysing regional migration governance from the perspective of a key player such as Mexico, the chapter explores the following questions: What ideas and policies at the national level in Mexico, influence the wider North American regional migration agenda? What forms has regional cooperation taken? And, what is the role of ostensibly 'weaker' states in the regional governance of migration? These questions allow us to analyse the dynamics of regional migration governance from the perspective of an ostensibly 'weaker' player within the region, analysis that is consistent with the multi-level approach to migration governance discussed in this volume.

I answer these questions by analysing how key actors within the Mexican migration governance system make sense of migration and the pressures and risks associated with its governability in order to reflect on the position of Mexico within regional migration governance. Mexico's geopolitical location between North and Central America, coupled with its current economic performance and the migration restrictions imposed by the US, has made it a country of sending, destination, return and transit migration. While these dynamics make it a strategic player in the region, Mexico's influence in regional cooperation is weakened by a strong and demanding neighbour to the north plus increasing migratory pressures from its southern neighbours. The analysis developed in this chapter is particularly relevant in the context of North America, which is characterised by weak processes of regionalism, and where forms of regional cooperation in migration vary between countries and types of migration (see Chapter 9 in this volume). The chapter draws on 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with key actors in migration decision-making in Mexico between 2016 and 2017, as part of the project 'Prospects for International Migration Governance' (MIGPROSP).

The chapter is organised as follows: after the introduction, the second section briefly outlines the analytical framework and use of a sense-making approach. I also outline the methodology implemented. The subsequent two sections analyse Mexico's strategies and actions in dealing with their neighbours, particularly the US, and shows how the country implements a differentiated strategy to deal with different migrant categories. The chapter concludes by discussing how this dual strategy can shape regional migration governance.

SENSE-MAKING, UNCERTAINTY AND REGIONAL MIGRATION

'NO. Mexico will NEVER pay for a wall. Not now, not ever', wrote Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto on Twitter in April 2018 in response to Donald Trump's notorious campaign claim that Mexico would pay for a wall on the US–Mexico border. Peña Nieto's response only came more than a year after Trump made Mexico one of his main targets. But the strong response did not move beyond the Twittersphere.¹ Mexican policy-makers across different sectors recognise that the US is their main economic partner, and in the middle of the re-negotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) the relationship with their northern neighbours was treated with caution. There was widespread acceptance that Trump's election generated great concern and a series of reactive responses.

Trump's campaign and his election had a big impact here. It affects us directly as a neighbour country, particularly in relation to migration issues. Here in the Senate

it has created an increasing interest and concern among legislators. [...] One of the immediate reactions was the Operation Monarca that, in the end, it didn't progress. (Interview with Parliamentary Adviser, July 2017)

Trump had an impact in the Mexican government. They started with a series of strategies, some bad, some of them worse, trying to address the problem, literally the problem that the Trump presidency would pose. (Interview with Academic, July 2017)

The short-lived 'Operation Monarca' was an immediate reaction from the Mexican Senate, agreed across all political parties, aiming to create links between Mexico and some of the Sanctuary Cities that receive Mexican migrants in the US in order to protect them from what they called 'Trump's threats' (García 2016). Together with Trump's discursive affronts, Mexican policy-makers have also had to make sense of a number of fast changes in US immigration policy via executive orders, which have further restricted migration and which have also affected Mexico (Pierce et al. 2018). For example, the Trump administration ended the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for nationals of several countries, including El Salvador, Honduras and Haiti; reduced refugee admissions; cancelled the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA);² and placed a renewed emphasis on deportations, among other measures (Pierce and Selee 2017). These add to previous changes during the Obama administrations, such as the cessation of the 'wet foot, dry feet policy' in January 2017, a policy that allowed Cubans arriving in the US without a visa to become residents. Trump's policy changes ended up adding pressure to Mexico as a transit and destination country. For instance, the restrictions on Central Americans, Cubans and Haitians translated into a sharp increase in asylum requests in Mexico, which received 14,596 asylum applications in 2017, a 66 per cent increase in comparison with 2016 (ACNUR 2018; Commission of Assistance to Refugees (COMAR) 2017).

Using an actor-centred approach, this chapter analyses how 'key actors' within the migration governance system in Mexico make sense of this changing scenario and how these understandings are shaping policy responses, in order to further knowledge on migration governance in North America. By 'key actors' we mean those that have an influence on migration decision-making processes in the country, including political leaders, national officials, officials from regional and international organisations, and key societal interests such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics. As explored elsewhere in this volume (see Chapters 5 and 6), while processes of sense-making focus on individuals, emphasising internal and self-conscious processes, they also have a strong social dimension as events acquire meaning through interaction with others as a result of the sharing of information and ideas (see Weick 1995). As Weick et al. (2005: 409) argue, sense-making is a process that is

‘ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift, social and easily taken for granted’, and which tells us about the interplay of action and interpretation. The analysis of how policy-makers engage with ongoing circumstances from which ‘they extract cues and make plausible sense’ is particularly relevant in a complex and contested field such as migration where what may be plausible for one group may prove implausible for another group. This is clear in the case of Mexico where a changing regional scenario and diverse migration dynamics generate different readings of what is happening and how it should be managed.

This analysis is relevant in the context of regional migration governance, considered from the perspective of a multi-level approach, as it invites us to further understand the drivers of migration governance in key countries within specific regional governance systems. We know that the tensions between economic, security, humanitarian and social pressures within states make coherent migration policy-making difficult, as well as influencing cooperation at the regional and international level (Kunz et al. 2011; Betts 2011). We also know of deep divisions between sending and destination countries and the strong influence that the interests of major destination countries have in regional processes (Lavenex et al. 2016; see also Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume). However, we know less about how regional and local migration dynamics are framed and made sense of within ‘weaker’ states and how the framing of these events can also influence the regional approach (or the lack of it). While Mexico is a weaker state in relation to its northern neighbours, it has a strategic geopolitical role in the region and, as such, faces conflicting demands about migration management (Alba and Castillo 2012). At the same time, Mexico is experiencing a shift in its migration dynamics, recently being transformed from an emigration country to a transit, return and immigration country (Ataç 2016; Schiavon 2016). In this context, this chapter contributes to a vibrant body of literature on migration governance in Mexico and North America by exploring the drivers of migration governance in relation to uncertainty and change (see Marchand 2017; Domínguez and Iñiguez Ramos 2016; Palma Martínez and Mota Díaz 2013; Kunz 2011; Fitzgerald 2009; Kimball 2007).

How, then, does the Mexican migration governance system makes sense of these changes, and how do perceptions shape policy-making and the prospects of regional migration management? To answer these questions, the chapter draws on data collected through interviews with key actors during two sets of fieldwork in Mexico City. During our first visit in June 2016 we interviewed 16 key decision-makers (including government officials, parliamentary staff, representatives of international and regional organisations, NGOs and academics). We re-interviewed 10 of those participants a year later in July 2017 in order to understand the changes since our previous interviews and the impact of the new US government on Mexico migration policy (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Interview dates and expert categories

Date field visit	No. of interviews	Participants categories
June 2016	16	6 national officials; 2 parliamentary assessors; 3 international organisations; 3 NGOs; 2 academia
July 2017	10	3 national officials; 1 parliamentary assessor; 2 international organisations; 3 NGOs; 1 academia

This chapter focuses on the analysis of questions related to regional cooperation and Mexico's responses to a complex and uncertain scenario characterised by a hostile rhetoric from the US, the re-negotiation of NAFTA and Mexico's shift from a sending to receiving country of migrants.

NEW PRESSURES, OLD SOLUTIONS: DEPOLITICISATION AND MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

Mexico has long been the primary source of immigrants to the US, but the situation has changed in recent years with some scholars and practitioners identifying a 'near-zero net' migration from Mexico to the US, with the number of undocumented migrants declining sharply since 2008 (Passel and Cohn 2017; Domínguez and Iñiguez Ramos 2016). Indeed, more undocumented migrants are leaving the US than entering it (Massey 2018). By the end of the fiscal year 2015, the Border Patrol made 188,122 apprehensions of Mexican migrants at the US border. This was the lowest number since 1969, when there were 159,376 apprehensions (Gonzalez-Barrera 2016). The number decreased even further in 2017, when the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported 127,938 apprehensions of undocumented migrants from Mexico during that fiscal year (Homeland Security 2017). According to CBP, approximately 58 per cent of the total apprehensions in 2017 'were individuals from countries other than Mexico – predominately individuals from Central America' (2017: 2).

Despite this decline, Mexicans continue to be the largest immigrant population residing in the US and, as such, the main target of immigration control as they are also the largest group removed from US territory. Deportations from the US increased considerably under Obama's administration, reaching more than 3 million removals since 2009, most of them Mexican citizens (Chishti et al. 2017). The numbers of removals decreased slightly during the first year of Trump's presidency with 128,765 removals of Mexican citizens in 2017, a 14 per cent decrease in comparison with 2016 (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2017). Deportations picked up again in 2018. According to Mexican authorities, in the first semester of 2018, 109,296 'events' of depor-

tations of Mexicans from the US were registered (Secretary of the Interior (SEGOB) 2018), reaching the highest levels registered since Obama's presidency for a similar period.

This scenario has imposed a double challenge for Mexican policy-makers in relation to the protection of its migrant population in the US and to the increasing number of returnees. It has also generated a new political issue as the returnees have become the new focus of the Mexican migration policy. As interviewees explain below, the returnees have received media and political attention, as well as generating new resources and programmes:

This past year in particular, the return of migrants became popular in the media. First because Trump put it on the agenda and second because there are a number of political actors that found political capital in the narrative around the returnees and the Mexicans in the United States. (Interview with International Organisation staff, July 2017)

In all the negotiation tables where I sat this year, the idea has prevailed of moving the migration agenda to the issue of the return of Mexicans. Social programmes, reception at the airport, declarations from the Senate and from the Government, everything has shifted to return. This had a huge impact in the agenda of organisations working with international migration like us. Suddenly, international migration, undocumented migration and refugees are off the agenda. Even the Senate told us that now the entire budget will be allocated to support the returnees. (Interview with NGO staff, July 2017)

While the concern about returnees had already emerged in our interviews in 2016, it wasn't until a year later that it started to capture not only the interest of governmental and parliamentary actors but also most of the resources. As one governmental official told us in 2016, 'We've known about the returnees for a while now. But we have been very slow to react and plan specific policies to address this population'. The issue of the returnees has been part of Mexico-US migration history since 1954, when at least 2.9 million undocumented Mexican migrant workers recruited under the programme for farm guest-workers (the 'Bracero Program'), were deported under 'Operation Wetback' (De Genova 2004). During the last decade, the concern of policy-makers has increased together with the increasing numbers of returnees, both voluntary and forcibly deported. According to the National Dynamic Demographic Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Dinámica Demográfica (ENADID)), between 2009 and 2014, around 1 million Mexicans and their families returned from the US (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores 2016), together with the more than 2 million deported since that year. In 2013, the Mexican government created the Repatriation Process to Inside Mexico (Procedimiento de Repatriación al Interior de México (PRIM)) which consisted of two weekly flights to bring repatriated Mexicans from the US to Mexico City instead of leaving them in

border cities (Domínguez and Iñiguez Ramos 2016). In 2014, the Mexican government created the strategy ‘Somos Mexicanos’ (We are Mexicans), an initiative coordinated by the National Institute of Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM)). The strategy aims to support the ‘voluntary and involuntary’ return of Mexicans through a short-term coordinated process to facilitate their reintegration by providing access to documentation, health services, transportation and jobs (INM 2018). While there is little information about the assessment and scope of this programme, it has been widely advertised and its activities have expanded. According to an NGO staff member interviewed in 2017, ‘all the social programmes have now shifted towards the returnees and the government decided that the cornerstone of the programme is the INM, which is creating new partnerships with other sectors of the government’. As Marchand (2017: 12) explains, the INM, which is dependent on SEGOB, has been the primary government agency in charge of implementing border ‘controls, surveillance, and interdiction’. The agency has experienced several changes of its functions and responsibilities, now including the management and overall reception of the returnees. As the scope of the functions of the INM has expanded, it has also led to increased allegations of corruption inside the agency, as well as the development of several strategies to improve its accountability and that of the private companies to which the INM outsources services (Consejo Ciudadano del Instituto Nacional de Migración (CCINM) 2017; INSYDE 2013).

The Benefits of Bilateral Migration Cooperation at the Technical Level

Donald Trump’s rhetoric has made the returnees into a ‘crisis’ to be solved, and the internal Mexican response to that issue has resulted in a series of reactive measures that some actors have capitalised on as a valuable discourse. At the bilateral level, however, the Mexican government has carried out a different strategy based on the depoliticisation of migration (particularly in relation to Mexican emigration) that privileges bilateral negotiations at the technical level. Government officials interviewed in 2016 and 2017 emphasised the key importance of their relationship with the US and the need to ‘depoliticise’ the debates around migration at the regional and bilateral levels.

[Regional cooperation] is an unavoidable issue in our agenda with the United States. They are our main commercial partner, neighbour and friend, therefore we put a strong emphasis on that relationship. (Interview with governmental official, June 2016)

We need to depoliticise the issue of migration. We need to be pragmatic. When it is politicised, and we see it now in Europe, and we just saw it yesterday with Brexit, we don’t get anywhere. Look, it took us a few decades to reach a position

in which we could look at issues in a pragmatic way and we could reach solutions with the United States. For instance, we managed to sign a tool called 'Repatriation Agreements' just six months ago. (Interview with civil servant, June 2016)

The Updated Repatriation Agreements, negotiated over almost a year, between Homeland Security (DHS), Mexico's Secretariat of Foreign Affairs and Mexico's Secretariat of Government, agreed that the repatriations of Mexicans from the US will be set at specific times (mainly during daytime) and limited to 12 points (11 points at the border, plus Mexico City) (SEGOB 2016). 'By limiting the repatriation points, we can better allocate resources, and faster, as well as providing a better assistance', one of the officials working on the negotiation told us. Interviewees highlighted that the agreement was a clear example of the effectiveness of a 'policy of depoliticised policy'. As one high ranking official stated, 'when we depoliticise the rhetoric, when we leave out the affronts and the mutual recriminations, we are capable of getting things done and to ground practical solutions' (June 2016).

According to Kunz (2011) the depoliticisation of migration in the Mexico–US context emerged as part of the discourse of 'partnerships' in bilateral migration cooperation during the 1990s, after decades of a 'policy of no policy' on migration between both countries. For decades, the 'policy of no policy' was the recognition that migration issues were 'too political and sensitive' and were left out of the bilateral relationship (Kunz 2011: 284; see also Alba 2013). Kunz (2011: 285) argues that this notion of partnership allowed Mexico and the US to 'reframe migration governance as a technical management issue and thereby to depoliticise migration cooperation'. In 2016, Mexican policy-makers decided that the depoliticisation of migration was the only way forward to achieve progress in bilateral migration cooperation. In 2017 it was almost impossible to avoid the political salience of migration, which meant that the aim of the 'policy of depoliticised policy' was to keep in place the agreements reached with the Obama administration. One interviewee told us how there was great 'defensiveness' at the beginning of the Trump administration, until soon enough they realised that the dialogue at the technical level remained open:

This year we kept working with the US in the same way. I mean at the technical level, with low profile, there have not been changes. [...] At least we have made sure that those agreements remain in place and are being accomplished. (Interview with government official, July 2017)

The depoliticisation policy as part of a bilateral migration cooperation has also proved effective when working with Canada. In 2016, Canada announced that it would drop visa requirements for Mexican visitors, in exchange for Mexico opening its market to Canadian beef products (Kassam 2016). In both cases,

the current strategy is to keep open communication channels at the technical level, but no new proposals have been put on the table. From the perspective of Mexico, the bilateral approach has proven more efficient as they have recognised the limitations of reaching a regional agreement on migration, as explained below:

In general, the relationship with the US, and to a lesser extent with Canada, has been developed and institutionalised for several years. [...] What we are trying to work now in the region is thinking in Mexico–US, and Mexico–Canada, and Canada–US. Each has their own issues, and we are trying to improve those three bilateral relationships towards a regional perspective. However, migration is a complex topic and we haven't been able to talk about complete mobility and this will continue in the same way for several years. (Interview with Mexican civil servant, July 2016)

The depoliticisation of migration facilitates bilateral migration cooperation, which then helps to perpetuate weak regionalism in North America. From the perspective of Mexico, depoliticisation has allowed some progress despite the absence of regionalism in migration governance. This does not mean that other processes at the regional level are not relevant, but according to interviewees they have mainly developed as spaces of dialogue and not policy. For instance, Mexico has had a key role in the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), also known as the 'Puebla Process'. While some interviewees valued how the RCM has become an active space of dialogue, other participants criticised the slow progress within a forum that they consider useful 'to exchange good practices, but where nothing relevant has emerged in the last few years' (interview with civil servant, July 2017). Migration has been a contested topic in other major regional integration projects such as NAFTA (see Chapter 9 of this volume), and this did not change during the re-negotiation of the agreement.

When it comes to cooperation with its northern neighbours in relation to Central American migrants, Mexico has played a key geopolitical role, but the approach has been different. Here we see that depoliticisation has been replaced by path dependence, which has transformed and modernised Mexico's border control into a 'buffer state' useful to protect regional interests (Marchand 2017).

PATH DEPENDENCE: THE SECURITISATION OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

At the beginning of April 2018, Donald Trump announced that he was sending US military troops to the border with Mexico. The announcement, considered a symbolic political move, came as a response to the small budget approved in Congress for his infamous wall. Only \$1.6 billion of the requested \$25 billion was included in the budget (Smith 2018). This was not the first time a US

president had taken similar measures, as Barack Obama and George W. Bush had also deployed the army at the border during their mandates. The main difference was the associated rhetoric. In 2006, Bush insisted that the US was not going to militarise the southern border because ‘Mexico is our neighbour, and our friend’ (Dart 2018). Trump, instead, denounced a caravan of Central American migrants that was crossing through Mexico to the US and blamed weak border protection in order to justify the need for the troops until the promised wall could be put in place. President Peña Nieto of Mexico, with the support of the Senate and all political parties, responded two days later, stating that ‘nobody is above the dignity of Mexico’. He asked Trump not to address Mexico if his frustration was with ‘internal political affairs, his country’s own laws or his own Congress’. Despite this tough talk, President Peña Nieto emphasised that Mexico was always ready to reach agreements with the US, ‘as we have demonstrated until now, we are always willing to dialogue with seriousness, in good faith and with a constructive spirit’ (CNN Español 2018).

Two relevant points can be taken from this incident. First, Mexico is and has been willing to cooperate with the US. This has resulted in an increasing modernisation and securitisation of its own southern border, largely supported by the US itself (see Chapter 9; Marchand 2017). Second, Mexico is a transit, and increasingly a destination, country particularly for Central American migrants. It has been estimated that between 1995 and 2011, 200,000 unauthorised Central American migrants travelled through Mexico each year (Basok et al. 2015: 4). The ‘caravan’ to which Trump referred was actually a group of people travelling together to protect themselves, which highlights the serious human rights abuses migrants face during their journeys. In August 2010, for instance, 72 Central and South American migrants were massacred in the town of San Fernando in the state of Tamaulipas by the Zetas drug gang. According to one of the survivors, they were killed because they ‘refused to pay ransom money or to be hitmen’ (Tuckman 2010). This tragic event – and others – deeply affected Mexican public opinion and made visible the large scale of the transit migration through the country. It also contributed to the prompt adoption of a new Migration Law in 2011 (Alba 2013). However, increasing pressure from the US, new caravans from Central America, and the large number of people ‘bottled up’ in southern Mexico has created further insecurities for migrants and new challenges for migration governance in Mexico and in the region (Briscoe 2018).

Mexico, The New Destination

In recent years, Mexico has also become a country of destination. As a representative of an international organisation told us, ‘there are significant expulsion factors in Central America, and Mexico has become a country of

asylum, not only a transit country, as the asylum requests keep increasing'. Indeed, while the country received 1,296 asylum applications in 2013, in 2017 it received 14,596: 60 per cent of which were from Central American migrants (4,272 from Honduras; 3,708 from El Salvador and 676 from Guatemala) (COMAR 2017).³ The violence and poverty experienced in the countries of the so-called 'Northern Triangle' (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) has resulted in a large number of people displaced to the north.

Mexican policy-makers interviewed in 2016 and 2017 were trying to make sense of this new role as a destination country, which according to some interviewees they 'had not predicted'. The phenomenon has been read in different ways. For some, the large number of applications is overwhelming the Mexican COMAR and putting pressure on a weak asylum system, whereas others are concerned by the large number of undocumented migrants staying in the country. Finally, there is also concern, particularly among civil society, about the human rights abuses many migrants suffer at hands of organised crime and also the lack of coherence between Mexico's discourse, legislation and practice.

Mexico is in a difficult geopolitical position between Central America and the US, and the southern border is very difficult to control. Local authorities estimate that almost half of the people that managed to enter regularly, that then have not been detained and returned, have managed to reach the US. But also, many ended up in Mexico and due to the lack of an effective programme of regularisation or through lack of information and access to the asylum system, they ended up living in cities without documentation. And that is creating another set of social problems. (Interview with the representative of an International Organisation, June 2016)

At the official level, Mexico's discourse has been one of commitment to refugee protection and respect for migrants' human rights while trying to ensure orderly migration flows (see *Presidencia de la República* 2014). Indeed, Mexico has improved its asylum procedures and programmes, with higher rates of refugee status determination since 2016. That year, 63 per cent of applicants received asylum or some other form of complementary protection. In 2017, Mexico granted refugee status to 1,907 applicants and provided complementary protection to 918 people. More than 7,000 people were still being processed when the statistics were published (COMAR 2017). As one government official explained:

In the last couple of years Mexico has had a quite open vision. An approach focused on migrants' human rights. With that aim, the legislative framework has been simplified, despite that the process is still complex. But we are open to receiving them and we have facilitated the system for Central Americans, particularly for people coming from Guatemala. (Interview with government official, June 2016)

While Mexico has also been trying to implement some regional development agreements with Central America, such as the Mesoamerica Project and a guestworker program (González-Murphy 2013), Mexico has also detained and deported a large number of Central American migrants. In 2017, the country sent back 82,237 people, either by deportation or assisted return, 95 per cent of whom were from Central America (UPM 2017). One year earlier, Mexico sent 159,872 migrants back to their countries of origin. There is also concern among civil society organisations in relation to the large number of migrants detained. According to official data, between January 2013 and April 2017, 627,433 undocumented migrants were detained by Mexican authorities, most of them from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador (CCINM 2017: 9).

For more than a decade, Mexican policy-makers have been reacting to the increased number of migrants crossing the southern border with a series of disconnected policies at different levels, which have not managed to successfully deal with the humanitarian crisis caused by this displacement (Briscoe 2018; Marchand 2017). These responses, however, have modernised and securitised Mexico's southern border and increased the country's enforcement capacity, in line with the security interests of the North American region. When it comes to migration through and into the country, Mexican authorities have not only had to make sense of the volume, causes and consequences of this migration, they have also framed how they can use it to further their own interests as part of their negotiations with their neighbours, particularly the US.

Safe Third Country? Mexico and the Externalisation of Migration Governance

The large number of deportations and detentions in Mexico's southern border have been in great part facilitated by the 'Programa Frontera Sur', introduced by Peña Nieto in July 2014. The programme emerged as a response to the increased number of unaccompanied children and undocumented migrants coming from Central America. When the programme was launched, the president stated that the aim was to protect the rights of 'migrants that arrive and travel through Mexico, as well as ordering the international crossing paths, in order to increase the development and security in the region' (Presidencia de la República 2014). This took the form of boosted security at 12 points of entry with Guatemala and Belize, in addition to enforcements in other popular migration routes across the country (Castillo 2016). In practice, the programme was seeking to interrupt migratory flows from Central America and prevent migrants from taking the dangerous journey on top of 'La Bestia', a train that crosses Mexican territory going north (Marchand 2017). Basically, the programme was meant to stop migrants reaching the US. To a certain extent this has been successful, as shown by the data of deportations and detentions dis-

cussed above. However, this has been done to the detriment of migrants, who instead of being deterred from undertaking the journey are being dispersed, making them vulnerable to different abuses. As could be expected, the US has financially contributed to these policies, with funds provided to the INM for use at Mexico's southern border, usually through the 'Programa Frontera Sur' (Castillo 2016). This adds to the financial and technical support given by the US to Mexico through the Mérida Initiative and the Security and Prosperity Partnership (see Chapter 9 in this volume).

This bilateral cooperation on migration is likely to remain. Even during 2017, when, at the rhetorical level, Trump was constantly confronting Mexico, behind the scenes teams kept working at the technical level through high-level meetings dealing with transnational criminal organisations and also discussing migration issues. During his official visit to the US in May 2018, Mexican Foreign Secretary Luis Videgaray emphasised that with regards to migration both countries 'face common challenges. Mexico has stopped become [sic] – being simply an origin country; we are also becoming a country that receives migrants' (U.S. Department of State 2018). This statement shows how the new role of Mexico as a destination country has been framed to show the common challenges but also the similar position between both countries in relation to migration. Along this line, Luis Videgaray also reinforced Mexico's commitment to work with regional concerns where both countries share 'values and a vision'. As one civil servant explained, even with the adverse environment of the tense NAFTA re-negotiations, Mexico is always willing to collaborate:

Mexico has the responsibility to keep working with the United States and Canada as partners. We need to accomplish and rescue some of those trilateral and regional initiatives in relation to migration that we were working on. Right now, the United States looks at Mexico as the problem and not as part of the solution, which we are. (Interview with Mexican civil servant, July 2017)

Mexican government officials are fully aware of the country's geopolitical position and that it may use its key role in migration governance in North America as a bargaining chip in relation to broader discussions, such as the NAFTA re-negotiations and trade tariffs (Marchand 2017). The conflicting interests between the US as a receiving country and Mexico as a sending country (Rosenblum 2011) may no longer be so different. However, they are still deeply rooted in power inequalities and, in the case of Mexico, related to varied migration dynamics that are also part of the country's interests. Mexico seems to follow a path dependence that is not only determined by US pressures, but also by Mexico's own strategy of using the control of migration on its southern border to develop other agendas with the US. The result is that, in practice, Mexico is already contributing to externalising US border control

to its own borders, which also impacts regional migration dynamics. This approach has been criticised by academia and civil society alike:

The government has been a disaster in managing migration. They don't have the knowledge or the willingness and they are too conditioned to the pressure of the United States. Currently they are calling to trans-territorialise borders, similar to what the European Union has done. That means that you externalise borders extending your security space beyond the administrative border. That is the case of Mexico. We live conditioned. I am not sure if threatened, but yes deeply influenced by the security policy of the United States. (Interview with academic researcher, June 2016)

During NAFTA re-negotiations in spring 2018, the Trump administration was seeking to establish a 'safe third country' agreement with Mexico. Such an agreement would bar most asylum seekers who have passed through Mexico to later file a claim in the United States (Semple 2018). Peña Nieto left the Mexican presidency in November 2018 without taking a final stance on the proposal. However, in December 2018, the US Department of Homeland Security announced a unilateral policy establishing that asylum seekers should remain, or return to Mexico if they have already entered US soil, while their asylum cases are under consideration (Gomez 2018). While Mexico has not agreed to any of these policy proposals by the US, the new government under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced that the country will grant a 'stay for humanitarian reasons' to migrants transiting through Mexico with pending asylum applications in the US (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores 2018). It is too early to assess how migration governance in Mexico could change under the López Obrador administration. At the time of writing, Mexico has maintained its role of containing migration. The establishment (by the US) and normalisation (by Mexico) of a policy that impedes asylum seekers to either arrive or stay in the US can be assumed to not only affect the regional asylum system, but also the international refugee regime by furthering the externalisation of refugee protection.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown how Mexican policy-makers are making sense of migration governance in relation to the current challenges imposed by the migration policy changes in the US as well as the increasing pressures of diverse migration dynamics, in order to further understandings about Mexico's role on migration governance in North America. Mexico has largely been recognised as an immigration and transit country, but in the last couple of years it has also become a receiving country.

Through an actor-centred analysis focusing on how policy-makers make sense of these changes, two main overall responses were identified. First, increasing concern about returnees began to be perceived as a ‘crisis’ as a result of Trump’s hostile rhetoric. The result was that the ‘issue of returnees’ overtook the local migration policy scene, concentrating many of the actors, resources and procedures on this issue. At the regional level, Mexico has developed a ‘policy of depoliticised policy’ that privileges bilateral migration cooperation at the technical level, particularly in relation to Mexican citizens in the US and those returning back to the country. This approach reinforces the weakness of a regional approach by privileging bilateral negotiations.

Second, increased numbers of asylum applications have transformed Mexico into a country of destination. Trying to deal with these new migration dynamics has resulted in a series of disconnected policies and discourses aimed at protecting migrants’ rights while controlling migration flows. Beyond the number of migrants and the abuses they suffer, Mexico has capitalised on the new label of receiving country to strengthen its position using the control of its southern border as part of other negotiations with the US. By doing so, Mexico insists on depoliticising migration in relation to its own migrants, but it does the opposite in relation to external migration and the southern border. In this context, Mexico follows a path dependence by which it keeps securitising its border and de facto keeps protecting US and North American regional security interests (Marchand 2017).

Both strategies – the depoliticisation of policy-making when it related to Mexican migration, and path dependence to US interests in relation to managing immigration – show how decision-makers in Mexico make sense of migration dynamics and the pressures around them, but also how they frame and make sense of the cooperation with Mexico’s neighbours, particularly the US. The challenges posed by the Trump administration have not dramatically shifted Mexican migration governance. Instead, they have helped to consolidate a dual strategy that tries to promote Mexico’s interests while contributing to externalising migration governance ‘outside’ the North American region. Mexican actors’ perceptions and understandings emphasise uncertainty and contingency, falling back on tripartite bilateralism as the default governance mechanism. By doing so, Mexico contributes to maintaining the status quo of weak regionalism in North America.

NOTES

1. While the Mexican government has been reluctant to respond to Trump’s rhetoric, there have been some strong reactions from other sectors within the country and great criticism from public opinion (Marchand 2017). The reaction that has

- attracted most attention in the media is the one by former president Vicente Fox (Harwood 2018).
2. DACA is an immigration policy in the US by which some undocumented migrants that were brought to the country as children are allowed to receive a renewable two-year period of 'deferred action' from deportation. During this time, they become eligible for a work permit. On March 2018 the rescission of DACA was supposed to become effective, but several legal challenges and subsequent court rulings have kept the program alive, at least until 2019.
 3. The second largest group seeking asylum in Mexico were people displaced from Venezuela, with 4,042 applications (COMAR 2017).

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