

## THE WIDER WORLD

# Southern Border and Beyond

By Diane Chido

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There has been digital ink spilled over Vice President Kamala Harris' role in border security that seems to be misunderstood. Her political opponents are calling her a "failed Border Czar," but it is not accurate.

Beginning in March 2020, Vice President Harris began a process of negotiation with the three countries in South America from which large numbers of migrants were making the dangerous trek north to try to settle in the United States. These are El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and the region is collectively called the Northern Triangle, or sometimes pejoratively "The Triangle of Death," as these

countries have some of the highest murder rates in the world. These countries have been notoriously corrupt and beset by gang violence and extreme poverty. Young men are often conscripted into these gangs by force, leading their parents to send them north to escape. Poor governance in these countries has led to low economic prospects and great danger for their citizens, which underpin this mass movement of people.

*Map of Northern Triangle countries*<sup>[i]</sup>

Harris' task was strengthened on Feb. 2, 2021 by an executive order issued by President Joe Biden that stated, "(Vice President Harris) has worked with bilateral, multilateral, and private sector partners, as well as civil society leaders, to help people from the region find hope at home." Thus, Harris was never responsible for securing the border itself. That was the purview of the Customs and Border Patrol as part of the Department of Homeland Security.

Articles of impeachment were ultimately issued for the leader of that department, Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, for "high crimes and misdemeanors" by the Republican-led House of Representatives in February 2024, for an alleged "willful and systemic refusal to comply with the law" and "breach of public trust." The effort passed by one vote with three Republicans voting with all Democrats, 214–213. The resolution claimed that Mayorkas "repeatedly violated laws enacted by Congress regarding immigration and border security. In large part because of his unlawful conduct, millions of aliens have illegally entered the United States on an annual basis with many unlawfully remaining in the United States."<sup>[ii]</sup> The Senate determined that the charges were unconstitutional, and the Senate voted 51-49 against holding a trial, and the matter was dropped.

This indicates that those who are still claiming Harris is responsible for securing the southern border know well that it was never her responsibility. The often-repeated accusation that she has never visited the southern border to which she famously responded, "and I have never been to Europe," was meant to convey how incongruous a visit to the border would have been in carrying out the assignment she was given.

The 2021 executive order laid out the five pillars on which the "root causes" strategy is based:

- Pillar I: Addressing economic insecurity and inequality
- Pillar II: Combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law
- Pillar III: Promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press
- Pillar IV: Countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other organized criminal organizations
- Pillar V: Combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.

Not only political leaders of these three countries but also civil society and business leaders from within and outside the region supported economic activity to crack down on corruption and violence. This strategy was intended as a long-term effort to make the Northern Triangle a place where people could live safely and securely at home and not feel the need to migrate. It was not expected to stop migration on a dime.

As noted in a previous [essay](#) on migration, the reason for the recent surges is the ease of lawfully requesting asylum at ports of entry into the United States. Once people make this claim, they are released into the country to await an asylum hearing on the merits of their claim. Because there have been so many people making the claim, the asylum courts are backed up and people can wait up to three years for their hearing, living in the U.S. legally in the meantime.

American politicians on both sides of the aisle have known for decades that the asylum system is dysfunctional but fixing it has been a hot potato passed from one side to the other with nothing resolved. Then-President George W. Bush tried to make changes in this policy and discussed it in his 2007 State of the Union address, but there was no appetite in his own Republican Party to move on it. In addition, he was so despised by Democrats over the Iraq War at that point they were not going to support any political wins for Bush, even on this important issue.

Then-President Barack Obama was also unable to get support for the changes needed and issued his own executive order called the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals initiative to allow now about 800,000 young people who had come to America illegally as children to be able to stay in the country until 2017. Then-President Donald Trump planned to let the initiative end and begin deportations until he met several of these young people and was so famously impressed by them, he halted the deportation plan. In October 2022, DACA was reauthorized and is now called the DACA Rule.<sup>[iii]</sup>

To deal with the challenges at the southern border, the Senate introduced a bipartisan bill on May 17, 2024 that would, among other things, establish “an expedited process that authorizes asylum officers to adjudicate certain asylum claims. Among other provisions, these “provisional noncustodial removal proceedings” impose certain target timelines for determining asylum claims and limit review of denied claims. The bill also establishes a stricter threshold for individuals to remain in the United States pending adjudication of an asylum

petition.”<sup>[iv]</sup> The bill failed to pass by a vote of 43-50 with only four Republicans voting in favor of it after presidential candidate Trump blasted the bill even before the final text was issued, expressing on his Truth Social platform, “This Bill is a great gift to the Democrats, and a Death Wish for The Republican Party.”<sup>[v]</sup>

With no legislative path available to deal with the issue, on June 4, 2024, Biden issued another executive order refusing asylum to migrants who cross the border illegally and speeding up the asylum adjudication process. As illustrated in the chart, southern border encounters with U.S. Customs and Border Protection are nearing their lowest rate since 2021 with a visible decline beginning in June 2024.<sup>[vi]</sup> The figure for August 2024 at 107,503 is less than half than in October 2023 (240,931), the start of the 2024 fiscal year.

*Southwest border land encounters monthly, 2021-24*

Among many other initiatives since July 2021, the U.S. has invested over \$325 million in 19 projects across the three countries in areas including financial inclusion, healthcare, climate funding, and affordable housing. The U.S. has also facilitated \$57 million in private sector agricultural financing to directly help farmers modernize their growing techniques to address the pervasive issue of food insecurity. The U.S. Agency for International Development has supported the three national governments to receive and support nearly 150,000 returned migrants with reintegration services, including job training and placement, as well as psychosocial support.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Things are improving on the security front in El Salvador, due in large part to its recently re-elected President Nayib Bukele, who has mobilized the country’s military since 2017 to arrest over 78,000 suspected gang members, 7,000 of whom had to be released for lack of evidence. Many, including Biden, have criticized Bukele’s tactics using profiling to detain suspects and enabling the judiciary to support a constitutional change permitting presidential re-election, but the U.S. has changed its tune as the actions have proven successful in reducing crime and violence and increasing investment.

In a shift from Biden snubbing the “world’s coolest dictator,” during Bukele’s visit to Washington in 2021 and Harris announcing the same year that the U.S. has

“deep concerns about El Salvador’s democracy,” the U.S. sent a high-level delegation to Bukele’s second inauguration in June 2024.

*El Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele and First Lady Gabriela Roberto Rodriguez*

With the improved security environment and a moratorium on capital and funds flowing into the country, El Salvador had a huge 11.9% increase in its gross domestic product in 2021, a rebound from negative growth in 2020 and followed by 2.8% in 2022 and 3.5% in 2023. It has also invested in tourism and, in 2023, El Salvador had a 35% increase in tourism compared to 2019 and it is now the world’s fourth fastest-growing destination, and the fastest growing in the Americas.<sup>[viii]</sup> El Salvadorans are even beginning to return home, many of them investing in the future growth of the country.

In Guatemala, homicide rates have dropped but gangs, extortion, and transnational organized crime still pose a significant threat. The “root causes” strategy is working with Guatemala to mitigate these security challenges through efforts to professionalize its security forces, reduce organized crime, and developing violence prevention programs, but gender-based violence against women and girls are still driving Guatemalans to migrate.<sup>[ix]</sup> Guatemala’s economy has also been growing with a 3.5% increase in 2023 after a 4.1% rise in 2022, although remittances, discussed [here](#), still account for nearly 20% of GDP.<sup>[x]</sup>

Former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández was convicted of drug and weapons trafficking in a U.S. court in 2022 and faces up to 40 years in prison. He gained power in a 2009 coup that toppled the husband of the current president, Xiomara Castro. Hernández’ brother, a former member of the Honduran congress, is already serving a life sentence for drug trafficking. In 2023, Transparency International ranked Honduras only less corrupt in the region than Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.<sup>[xi]</sup>

Castro’s administration began in 2022 on a hopeful note, creating a Commission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras that provides tools to investigate money laundering. She has since focused mainly on street crime, which has given her a 55% popularity rating, but this does little to address the systemic nature of criminality.

According to the U.S. Department of State, Honduras “faces formidable challenges, including weak institutions, endemic corruption, narco-trafficking, pervasive poverty, food insecurity, high rates of violence including gender-based violence, impunity, citizen insecurity, reported difficulties for civil society, human rights violations and abuses, and inequitable access to economic opportunities and social services.”<sup>[xii]</sup> From fiscal year 2020 to 2023, the U.S. has provided \$785 million in bilateral, regional, and humanitarian assistance to Honduras.

Despite the shortcomings of its counterparts in the region, the Biden administration continues its long-term strategy to limit migration out of the Northern Triangle with the local partners it has. “Migration trumps everything else,” said Michael Shifter, a former president of Inter-American Dialogue in Washington.

“The ideal Latin American partner would be effective in its security policy while respecting human rights norms and practices and cooperating with the U.S. on migration. But rarely do all these desirable things go together, which poses tough choices for U.S. policymakers.”<sup>[xiii]</sup> So, while Harris was never the border czar, she has faced many challenges in effectively dealing with migration’s root causes.

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