TWO HEMISPHERIC MIGRATION CRISES AND PROSPECTS FOR MODEST NORTH AMERICAN COOPERATION

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Two migration crises in the hemisphere call out for North American cooperation. The first is the steady flow of Central American migrants through Mexico to the United States, with small numbers also arriving in Canada. The second is the flood of Venezuelans leaving their country for nearby countries in South and Central America. Creative, coordinated responses from the three countries of North America — Canada, the United States, and Mexico — are possible, but may be hampered by current political realities.

Dos crisis de migración en el hemisferio instan a la cooperación norteamericana. La primera es el flujo estable de migrantes centroamericanos a lo largo de México rumbo a los Estados Unidos, de entre quienes una pequeña cantidad también llega a Canadá. La segunda es la inundación de venezolanos que abandonan su país rumbo a países cercanos en América del Sur y Central. Es posible tener respuestas coordinadas, creativas, de los tres países de América del Norte (Canadá, Estados Unidos y México), pero pueden verse obstaculizadas por las realidades políticas actuales.

Deux crises migratoires dans l'hémisphère appellent à la coopération nord-américaine. Le premier est le flux constant de migrants d'Amérique centrale du Mexique vers les États-Unis, avec un petit nombre arrivant également au Canada. Le second est le flot de Vénézuéliens qui quittent leur pays pour les pays voisins d'Amérique du Sud et d'Amérique centrale. Des réponses créatives et coordonnées des trois pays d'Amérique du Nord – le Canada, les États-Unis et le Mexique – sont possibles, mais pourraient être entravées par les réalités politiques actuelles.

Two migration crises are looming in the hemisphere and the countries of North America — Canada, the United States, and Mexico — and they should have a common cause to join together to find a response. These efforts require joint thought and action from the three governments, and a coordinated response could lay the foundations of greater migration cooperation for years to come.

The first migration crisis — that of Venezuela, a country that is rapidly losing population — will require close coordination and calibration with other countries in Central and South America. The neighbouring countries have been the largest recipients of the ongoing flows of Venezuelans out of their country, and they are the most directly affected by this emerging crisis. However, the three North American governments have a direct interest not only in ensuring that these countries have the ability to handle these new flows, but also that this crisis does not gradually move northward towards North America.

The second migration crisis — from the three northernmost Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador — is, of course, far more directly in the North American neighbourhood. Tens of thousands of migrants are fleeing these countries in order to reach the United States, and growing numbers are staying in Mexico. There is a smaller number arriving in Canada or trying to cross from the United States northward.

Both of these migration crises lend themselves to thoughtful and measured responses that can both address the root causes of out-migration and deal fairly with those who are trying to leave their countries. Doing so would likely begin to create repertoires for problem-solving on immigration issues among the three countries of North America, something that has long been lacking.

Unfortunately, some of the preference for unilateral action among U.S. policymakers in the current administration will almost certainly undermine the possibilities for this kind of coordinated action, which may have to await a different political moment.

In the middle of a political crisis, Venezuela's economy has contracted three years in a row, according to the International Monetary Fund, with gross domestic product (GDP) shrinking by somewhere between a third to a half, while inflation has left many basic goods out of the reach of average citizens. Public hospitals often charge for basic medical supplies, and perhaps close to a third of the economically active population is now out of work. Given these pressures, roughly 1.6 million people have left Venezuela since 2015. Most of those who have left have moved to neighbouring countries in Latin America, but there is also a growing number of Venezuelans seeking asylum in the United States, Mexico, and, to a lesser extent, Canada.

Latin American countries have largely incorporated this new migration flow with little public debate or visible tension, but there are increasing signs of trouble. Panama and Chile have moved to place restrictions on new immigration from Venezuela, and Colombia has recently cancelled the issuance of new border mobility cards, one of the principal legal avenues for Venezuelans to enter the country (though officially only for short periods of time). As countries in the immediate region further restrict migration from Venezuela, there could be greater incentives to migrate to the three North American countries.

Moreover, a large percentage of Venezuelan migrants are either in unauthorized status or covered by temporary visas that are set to expire in relatively short periods. Should this temporary migration out of Venezuela become increasingly permanent, as current events suggest, there is reason to worry that it may generate a backlash in some of the countries of the region and create a new focus of political instability.

Cooperating with the South American countries that have received most of these migrants — Colombia, Peru, Panama, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, and Costa Rica — is both the right thing to do to maintain stability and growth in the hemisphere, but it also makes sense in terms of containing a migration crisis that could easily begin to move northward as it becomes harder for Venezuelans to stay in South and Central America. To date, each of the countries of North America has pursued its own policy in providing aid to the recipient countries of South America and in setting its own response to the growing number of asylum seekers, but this issue seems ripe for additional conversation and perhaps coordination.

Even more clearly, a regional issue is the question of Central American migrants leaving the three Northern Triangle countries. Over 180,077 Central Americans were detained at the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2017, with even greater numbers in the first months of fiscal year 2018 (similar to the numbers in fiscal year 2016).[1] Of these, 75,622 were members of family units and another 41,435 were unaccompanied minors, altogether almost two-thirds of those apprehended.

All three countries of North America have seen spikes in asylum applications from Central American migrants, with by far the largest number in the United States, rapidly growing numbers in Mexico, and a more gradual increase in Canada. There is also anecdotal evidence that an increasing number of Central Americans are choosing to stay in Mexico, though this is not yet reflected in official statistics, and that small numbers of Central Americans may be trying to cross into Canada from the United States.

Given the proximity of North America to the three sending countries in Central America — and the fact that these migrants are trying to reach North America — there should be a clear call to action between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. To some extent the three countries have collaborated under the aegis of the Alliance for Prosperity, the official inter-

1 Please note that these figures do not include those who turn themselves in at border ports of entry.

national effort to support economic development and rule of law in the three Northern Triangle countries, but efforts now appear to be flagging, with the U.S. government reducing its support in the budget in each of the last two years.

Moreover, there are good reasons for the U.S. and Canadian governments to help Mexico develop its asylum capacity and immigration institutions more broadly. While the Mexican government has few incentives — and limited capacity — to become a bulwark against these migration flows, collaborative investment in Mexico's immigration and asylum capacity would better prepare it to respond to the current challenge in a more humane and sustainable way.

Instead, the U.S. government has sought to outsource its immigration enforcement policy to Mexico by trying to pressure the Mexican government to sign a "Safe Third Country" Agreement, which would require migrants to apply for asylum in Mexico rather than the United States. This might be possible someday, but Mexico has very limited ability to assume the responsibilities under international law that this would entail with its current capacity, which suggests that the U.S. government has gone far beyond realistic goals in negotiations with its Mexican counterparts and ignored other alternatives that might be far more possible.

Instead, the three governments of North America might look jointly at what they can do to re-commit themselves to addressing the causes of outflows from Central America while also addressing capacity issues in Mexico to address migration flows over the long-term.

It seems unlikely that a North American strategy on migration — even a modest one — is possible. Efforts to pursue a "zero tolerance" policy on migration at the U.S. border and to separate families that were detained crossing has closed most of the political room that might have existed for the Canadian and Mexican governments to entertain greater cooperative efforts with their U.S. counterparts.

However, given the magnitude of the two migration crises brewing in the hemisphere, even quiet, more measured efforts to coordinate strategies and assess possibilities would be extremely helpful, and it is possible that these could sow the seeds of even greater coordination in the future.

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