

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Migration diplomacy in Mexico–United States relations: Decision-making under asymmetric structures

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Abstract

Research on migration diplomacy has shown that control over cross-border mobility can function as a power resource, enabling transit states to extract concessions from destination countries. However, transit states do not systematically activate this potential leverage, nor do they uniformly engage in rent-seeking behaviour. This article asks why transit countries occupying similarly advantageous geopolitical positions adopt divergent approaches to the use of migration power. Focusing on Mexico–United States relations during Donald Trump's first presidency, it shows that Mexico initially refrained from instrumentalising migration control and later relied on defensive rather than extractive uses of its leverage. To explain this variation, the article develops an analytical framework that conceptualises transit states' choices regarding the activation of migration power as strategic decision-making grounded in cost–benefit calculations under specific structural constraints. It shows that these evaluations are context-dependent and shaped by how actors perceive their scope of action. The framework examines how political, reputational, and implementation costs shape states' willingness to deploy migration leverage and how different aims – punitive, extractive, defensive, and deterrent – structure its use in practice. By shifting attention from rent-seeking behaviour to strategic restraint and defensive action, the article broadens the explanatory scope of the migration diplomacy literature.

Keywords: foreign policy; Mexico–United States relations; migration diplomacy; migration power; transit countries

Introduction

The migration corridor between Mexico and the United States is the largest in the world. For decades, Mexico was fundamentally a country of origin for migrants; however, in the twenty-first century, it evolved into a country of transit, destination, and return. Migration through Mexico began to increase significantly from 2014 onwards, driven by the flow of people from Central America fleeing violence, poverty, and the effects of climate change.¹ Pressure on migration routes has intensified further with the arrival of extra-continental migrants, particularly those from African and Asian countries. People from Venezuela and the Caribbean, especially Haiti and Cuba, also use Mexican territory as a transit route to the United States.²

¹International Organization for Migration, 'World Migration Report 2020', available at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf, accessed 3 February 2025.

²Caytlin Yates and Jessica Bolter, 'African migration through the Americas: Drivers, routes, and policy responses', Migration Policy Institute (October 2021), available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/african-migration-through-americas>.

The reconfiguration of Mexico's migration profile has heightened its geopolitical relevance within the regional system of human mobility, particularly regarding its relationship with the United States. Mexico has become a key actor in the governance of transmigration flows, granting it potential leverage over its northern neighbour by virtue of its capacity to regulate these movements. This particular form of influence, exercised through the control of human mobility, is referred to in the literature as migration power.³ This article analyses how such power was exercised in Mexico–United States relations during Donald Trump's first administration (2017–21).

The study contributes to the migration diplomacy research agenda, which examines the strategic use of migration as a foreign policy tool. Within this field, particular attention has been paid to the role of structurally weaker states from the Global South that manage to influence stronger countries by using migration as a power resource to secure political or economic concessions. Influential contributions – drawing on neo-realist premises – explain states' behaviour in terms of their position within the international migration system, whether as countries of origin, transit, or destination. They argue that states' interests are shaped by this structural position and their relative power. From this perspective, transit countries are mostly expected to capitalise on their geographical location to obtain rewards in exchange for migration control agreements. This pattern is well supported by empirical evidence. Paradigmatic and widely studied cases include Turkey, Libya, and Morocco's relations with the European Union.

The case of Mexico, however, draws attention to a less examined dynamic within this literature. Despite its influential geopolitical position and explicit incentives from the United States to pursue an aggressive migration containment policy, the Mexican government initially resisted instrumentalising its role as a transit country to extract benefits. That is, it rejected the possibility of using migration management as a strategic bargaining tool. Subsequently, Mexico yielded to external pressure but exercised its margin of influence in a defensive and deterrent manner, not to secure side payments but rather to minimise the costs that Trump threatened to impose on the bilateral relationship. Therefore, this case raises important analytical questions: what factors account for a transit country's strategic decision to refrain from maximising its migration power, even when structural conditions and external incentives appear to favour it? What are the scopes and limits of transit countries' migration power in the context of asymmetric relations with destination states?

This study advances the migration diplomacy literature by identifying the conditions under which transit states choose whether and how to activate or withhold their migration leverage. It develops a framework that examines strategic interactions between states through an understanding of power as influence between rational actors. The framework conceives decisions on whether and how to use migration power as cost–benefit assessments under specific structural constraints. It suggests that these evaluations depend on context and on how actors perceive their scope of action. This perspective helps to explain variations in the exercise of migration power across comparable settings.

The study's contributions are twofold. Theoretically, it broadens the explanatory scope of migration diplomacy by moving beyond a focus on the rent-seeking behaviour of transit states to include strategic restraint and the defensive uses of migration power. In doing so, it specifies implementation, political, and reputational costs shaping decision-makers' willingness to activate migration leverage and distinguishes among different aims in the instrumentalisation of migration, including punitive, extractive, defensive, and deterrent uses. Empirically, it applies the migration diplomacy framework to Mexico–United States relations during a period of exceptional political pressure. While migration between the two countries has been extensively studied, this specific analytical

³Irene Fernández-Molina and Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Understanding migration power in international studies', *International Affairs*, 100:6 (2024), pp. 2461–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae230>; Natalia Saltalamacchia and María-José Urzúa, 'Migration power in interstate relations: A conceptual approach', SSRN Working Paper (2024), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4863344>.

lens – focusing on migration as a tool of power politics – has rarely been employed in a Latin American context.⁴

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, it reviews the literature on migration diplomacy and power and sets out the study's methodological approach. Second, it outlines the proposed analytical framework. Third, it presents the case of Mexico–United States migration diplomacy during Trump's first presidency, which was used abductively to further elaborate the theoretical construct. The article concludes with a discussion of the main findings and their implications.

Migration diplomacy and power

This study contributes to the scholarly debate on the instrumental use of migration for foreign policy purposes.⁵ In particular, it analyses the relationship between transit and destination countries in the management of large-scale migration flows. These interactions have become increasingly important because of destination countries' policies for externalising migration control. To this end, destination countries, such as the United States, the European Union, and Australia, have relied on a combination of co-optation and coercion strategies to secure the cooperation of states located along migration corridors.

Existing research indicates that transit countries, within this dynamic, actively respond to external pressures rather than remaining passive. They understand that their geographic position grants them bargaining power to defend their interests and priorities.⁶ Numerous studies document cases in which transit countries secure economic, political, and security-related concessions in exchange for cooperation in migration control.⁷

This body of work has consolidated into a recognisable field of enquiry known as migration diplomacy.⁸ The term was first introduced by Thiollet,⁹ but its formalisation is largely due to Tsourapas¹⁰ and Adamson and Tsourapas,¹¹ who provided a precise definition and delineated its core strategic logics. These authors defined migration diplomacy as 'the strategic use of migration

⁴For a notable exception see Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration* (Cornell University Press, 2010), which includes case studies of Cuba and Haiti.

⁵Pioneering studies in this field include Michael S. Teitelbaum, 'Immigration, refugees, and foreign policy', *International Organization*, 38:3 (1984), pp. 429–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300026801>; Christopher Mitchell, 'International migration, international relations and foreign policy', *International Migration Review*, 23:3 (1989), pp. 681–708, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019791838902300315>; Fiona B. Adamson, 'Crossing borders: International migration and national security', *International Security*, 31:1 (2006), pp. 165–99.

⁶Lena Laube, 'Diplomatic side-effects of the EU's externalization of border control and the emerging role of "transit states" in migration diplomacy', *Historical Social Research*, 46:3 (2021), pp. 78–105, <https://doi.org/10.12759/HSR.46.2021.3.78-105>.

⁷Ahmet İcduygu and Damla B. Aksel, 'Two-to-tango in migration diplomacy: Negotiating readmission agreement between the EU and Turkey', *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 16:3 (2014), pp. 337–63, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12342060>; Peter Seeberg and Jan Claudius Völkel, 'Introduction: Arab responses to EU foreign and security policy incentives: Perspectives on migration diplomacy and institutionalized flexibility in the Arab Mediterranean turned upside down', *Mediterranean Politics*, 27:2 (2020), pp. 135–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1758451>; Michela Ceccorulli, 'Triangular migration diplomacy: The case of EU–Italian cooperation with Libya', *Italian Political Science Review*, 52:3 (2022), pp. 328–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.47>; Lorena Gazzotti, 'Terrain of contestation: Complicating the role of aid in border diplomacy between Europe and Morocco', *International Political Sociology*, 16:4 (2022), pp. olac021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olac021>.

⁸Juliette Tolay, 'Interrogating and broadening the emerging narrative on migration diplomacy: A critical assessment', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 51:1 (2022), pp. 354–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298221139589>.

⁹Hélène Thiollet, 'Migration as diplomacy: Labor migrants, refugees, and Arab regional politics in the oil-rich countries', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 79:1 (2011), pp. 103–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000293>.

¹⁰Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy in the Global South: Cooperation, coercion and issue linkage in Gaddafi's Libya', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:10 (2017), pp. 2367–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350102>.

¹¹Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy in world politics', *International Studies Perspectives*, 20:2 (2019), pp. 113–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky015>.

flows as a means to obtain other aims or the use of diplomatic methods to achieve goals related to migration.¹²

Within this literature, a central focus of analysis is the role of power relations between actors involved in migration governance.¹³ Greenhill's seminal work on coercive engineered migration demonstrated how population movements can serve as leverage ('weapons') in asymmetric state relations, anticipating dynamics later taken up by migration diplomacy studies.¹⁴ Building on this concern with power, both Adamson and Tsourapas¹⁵ and Adamson and Greenhill¹⁶ adopted a neo-realist-inspired perspective that emphasises how the structure of the international system – defined by the distribution of material capabilities – shapes state behaviour. From this view, a state's position in the global migration system, whether as a destination, transit, or origin country, conditions its likely interests and the strategies available to it in migration diplomacy. This position distribution tends to correlate with the power hierarchy of the international system. Thus, more powerful states – typically destination countries – seek to block undesirable migration flows and shift the costs of migration control to other states. Transit states with less relative power tend to leverage their geographic locations to negotiate benefits that would not otherwise be forthcoming. A key contribution of this literature is its emphasis on the fact that, despite structural power asymmetries, control over human mobility creates opportunities for less powerful countries to exert influence over stronger ones.

Empirical evidence indicates, however, that such opportunities do not always translate into action. Not all transit countries – with similar geopolitical or structural positions – are willing to use migration flows as a power resource to extract benefits. Scholars have documented cases of resistance by Algeria, Mali, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Timor Leste.¹⁷ Structural incentives help explain general patterns, yet they cannot account for the micro-level dynamics of migration diplomacy. The international structure creates a range of possibilities that either enable or constrain certain actions, but actors' specific responses depend on their strategic calculations and how they interpret the structure.¹⁸ Consequently, an agency-level analysis is required to explain variations in the behaviour of transit states.

Research within the migration diplomacy literature has considerably advanced our understanding of state agency in the strategic use of migration. This scholarship has explored the strategies through which states instrumentalise cross-border mobility, most notably cooperative or coercive approaches, also described as 'backscratching' and 'blackmailing'.¹⁹ It has examined when states

¹² Adamson and Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy', p. 116.

¹³ Christopher Rudolph, *National Security and Immigration: Policy Development in the United States and Western Europe Since 1945* (Stanford University Press, 2006); Maria Koinova, 'Polycentric governance of transit migration: A relational perspective from the Balkans and the Middle East', *Review of International Studies*, 48:3 (2022), pp. 461–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000693>; Fiona B. Adamson and Enze Han, 'Diasporic geopolitics, rising powers, and the future of international order', *Review of International Studies*, 50:3 (2024), pp. 476–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000123>.

¹⁴ Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration*.

¹⁵ Adamson and Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy'.

¹⁶ Fiona Adamson and Kelly Greenhill, 'People', in Mark Leonard (ed.), *The Power Atlas* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), pp. 84–105, <https://ecfr.eu/special/power-atlas/people/>.

¹⁷ Federica Zardo and Chiara Loschi, 'EU–Algeria (non)cooperation on migration: A tale of two fortresses', *Mediterranean Politics*, 27:2 (2022), pp. 148–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1758453>; Sadio Soukouna, 'L'État Malien entre négociations et résistances dans la formulation de politiques sur les migrations', *Anthropologie & Développement*, 51 (2020), pp. 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anthropodev.966>; Antje Missbach and Gerhard Hoffstaedter, 'When transit states pursue their own agenda', *Migration and Society*, 3:1 (2020), pp. 64–79, <https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.111405>; Orevia Olakpe, 'Views on migration partnerships from the ground: Lessons from Nigeria', *International Migration*, 60:1 (2022), pp. 28–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12974>; Maggy Lee, 'The externalization of border control in the Global South: The cases of Malaysia and Indonesia', *Theoretical Criminology*, 26:4 (2022), pp. 537–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13624806221104867>.

¹⁸ Keith Dowding, 'Agency and structure: Interpreting power relationships', *Journal of Power*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 21–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540290801943380>.

¹⁹ Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Migration diplomacy in the Global South'; Gerasimos Tsourapas and Sotirios Zartaloudis, 'Leveraging the European refugee crisis: Forced displacement and bargaining in Greece's bailout negotiations', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60:2 (2022), pp. 245–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13211>.

opt for one approach over the other²⁰ and under what conditions such influence attempts succeed in the context of labour migration or refugee management.²¹ A variety of mechanisms have been identified – from economic and ‘hypocrisy costs’²² to the ‘construction of deportability’²³ – that illuminate the causal pathways through which migration operates as a source of interstate leverage. However, key questions that remain under-theorised concern when and why transit countries choose to activate their migration power or refrain from doing so. Under what conditions do they opt for strategic restraint?

This article contributes to the migration diplomacy research agenda by addressing this less examined aspect of transit countries’ behaviour. It approaches this issue through an analysis of how power operates between states in concrete interactions. The article proposes a framework that disaggregates the power relationship into its constitutive elements – domain, power base, and costs – to explain how migration control functions as a source of influence in practice. The framework conceives the transit country’s decision to deploy or withhold migration leverage as a strategic cost–benefit calculation under specific structural constraints. It suggests that such strategic choices are context-dependent and shaped by actors’ interpretations of their structural environment.

Methodological note

The discussion proceeds deductively from the micro-level, agent-centred literature on power relations pioneered by Dahl and applies it to migration diplomacy.²⁴ This rationalist and empirically oriented tradition examines power through actors’ strategic behaviour and its observable effects. The framework also builds on earlier migration diplomacy insights, articulating them within a single analytical construct.

Empirically, the article employs a single, theory-refining case study – Mexico’s interaction with the first Trump administration (2017–21) – as a heuristic device to elaborate the cost–benefit theoretical account and nuance the framework by distinguishing between the punitive, extractive, defensive, and deterrent uses of migration power.²⁵ Mexico represents a paradigmatic case of a transit country in a structurally pivotal position within the world’s most intense migration corridor yet embedded in a markedly asymmetric dyad with the primary destination state. This provides a revealing setting for specifying the conditions under which transit states refrain from activating their migration leverage despite structural incentives to do so.

Process tracing is employed to reconstruct key episodes, sequences, and decisions, drawing on extensive media coverage, government press releases, memoirs, public opinion polls, official United States and Mexican data on border encounters and enforcement deployments, and budget data on the United States’ contributions to international migration organisations and Mexico’s spending on migration agencies. Mexico’s cost–benefit assessment relies on qualitative interpretation and counterfactual inference, supported by the triangulation of documentary, testimonial, and contextual evidence. It combines press reports, policy documents, public statements by key government figures, and interviews with high-ranking officials involved in decision-making. On this basis, the study reconstructs the anticipatory logic through which the Mexican government perceived potential costs.

²⁰Gerasimos Tsourapas, ‘The Syrian refugee crisis and foreign policy decision-making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5:3 (2019), pp. 464–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz016>.

²¹Gerasimos Tsourapas, ‘Labor migrants as political leverage: Migration interdependence and coercion in the Mediterranean’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:2 (2018), pp. 383–95, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx088>.

²²Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration*.

²³Nicholas R. Micinski, ‘Threats, deportability and aid: The politics of refugee rentier states and regional stability’, *Security Dialogue*, 54:6 (2023), pp. 529–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106211027464>.

²⁴Robert A. Dahl, (1957). ‘The concept of power’, *Behavioral Science*, 2:3 (1957), pp. 201–15, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303>.

²⁵On heuristic case studies aimed at abductively refining theoretical frameworks through empirical observation, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2004).

Migration diplomacy in transit–destination country relations: Decision-making in context

Migration power as a relationship

An agency-level inquiry into power relations must rest on a specific understanding of the concept. This study adopts a relational conception of power to explain why, under comparably asymmetric structural conditions, some transit countries activate migration control as an instrument of influence while others do not.²⁶

In his classic definition, Dahl posited power as a social relationship in which one actor (A) gets another (B) to do something they would not otherwise do.²⁷ By defining power as influence, this concept moves away from the idea of power as the mere possession of resources and situates it in the context of concrete relationships, where resources are only meaningful if they succeed in affecting the behaviour of the other.

Conceiving power as a relationship entails attending to not only the resources available but also the preferences that guide actors' behaviour.²⁸ This requires an understanding of the strategic context in which power is exercised. What counts as a power resource depends on the value it is expected to have within a specific relationship, according to how it is perceived by those involved.

From this perspective, power is expressed as an actor's ability to alter the behaviour of its counterpart by introducing an element that changes the latter's perception of costs and benefits. This ability does not reside in the resource itself but in the way it is evaluated within the relationship. Power is exercised by threatening or imposing costs or by promising or delivering benefits. The means by which A exerts influence over B are diverse: A may use financial resources (economic power), resort to its arsenal (military power), or activate resources in the realm of ideas (ideological power). In all cases, A introduces an element that has the potential to affect B's cost–benefit perception and induce a change in its behaviour.

In this regard, when the resource employed is control over human mobility, we can speak of migration power.²⁹ Saltalamacchia and Urzúa defined migration power as an actor's ability to influence another actor by affecting migration flows.³⁰ It is a relational phenomenon because it is actualised through interactions between agents. In itself, the ability to manipulate migration flows is not a power resource; it is simply a state attribute – something that a state does or does not possess. This capacity becomes a lever of power within the context of a particular relationship, wherein State A intentionally manipulates migration flows in a manner that State B perceives as either beneficial or detrimental to its interests, thereby prompting a change in B's behaviour.

This relational conception of power is articulated in the work of Baldwin. Building on Dahl's definition of power as influence, Baldwin suggested analysing its dynamics by breaking it down into elements that allow greater analytical precision.³¹ His approach aimed to make the study of

²⁶ Following Baldwin and Strange, the term 'relational' is used here to denote power as exercised within specific interactions between rational actors. It is not intended to invoke relationalist or constructivist approaches in international relations that conceptualise identities and interests as mutually constituted through social interaction. See David Baldwin, 'Power and international relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (Sage, 2013), pp. 273–97; Susan Strange, *States and Markets* (Blackwell, 1988).

²⁷ Dahl, 'The concept of power'.

²⁸ Stefano Guzzini, 'Power and cause', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 20 (2017), pp. 737–59, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-016-0002-z>.

²⁹ Here the term serves as an analytical shorthand, not a distinct theoretical category of power in IR.

³⁰ Saltalamacchia and Urzúa, 'Migration power', p. 2; Fernández-Molina and Tsourapas offer a broader definition of migration power as 'the production, primarily by state-based actors, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities, interests and identities of other state and non-state actors that participate in international migration governance'. They conceptualise how multiple forms of power are exercised within the wider domain of global migration governance. In contrast, this study focuses on the strategic management of migration flows to exert direct influence in bilateral relations. Therefore, it adopts a bounded definition, oriented towards the analysis of specific interstate interactions. See Fernández-Molina and Tsourapas, 'Understanding migration power', p. 2461.

³¹ David Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

power more systematic and to facilitate empirical investigation. In this respect, his framework is helpful for examining how migration power operates in the concrete interactions between transit and destination countries.

The following sections draw on three key aspects of power analysis suggested by Baldwin to guide the examination of how migration power is exercised. The first is the domain, namely, who the actors in the relationship are and who can influence whom. The second is the power base, which is understood as a resource that, when strategically activated, acts as a causal mechanism within the relationship and enables successful influence attempts. The third dimension concerns the costs borne by the actors exercising power. These dimensions are complemented by a typology of purposes that guide the use of migration power. Finally, I discuss the role of structural constraints.

Domain: Who can influence whom and when

This study analyses how migration power is exercised within a specific domain: the relationship between transit and destination countries along the corridors of large-scale migration flows. Both types of states may exert migration power over each other; however, this analysis focuses on when and how transit countries do so. For transit countries to control migration and effectively translate it into a power resource, certain conditions must be met.

First, receiving societies must perceive migration flows as highly threatening or undesirable, making containment a top priority. Indeed, a transit country's ability to contain migration becomes a source of influence only as a function of the destination country's preferences. The greater the value destination states assign to a transit country's control over migration flows, the greater the influence conferred upon it.³² This implies that migration power is co-determined. It is a relational phenomenon that exists only through how both parties interact and attribute instrumental value to the capacity to control migration. Both actors actively contribute to the realisation of this power by recognising, assigning strategic value to, or acting upon it.

The second condition is that the destination country lacks effective alternatives to achieve its desired outcome, namely, containing migration. This occurs when unilateral solutions (e.g., border militarisation, physical barriers, or mass deportations) are either insufficient or significantly more costly than securing the cooperation of the transit country. Consequently, the migration power of a transit country increases or decreases as a function of the destination country's available alternatives.

In summary, a destination country is more vulnerable to the use of migration power by a transit country when (a) it places high value on migration containment and (b) the alternatives for achieving this goal are either ineffective or more costly than inducing the transit country's cooperation.³³ When both conditions are met, an opportunity emerges for transit countries to use migration management as a lever to extract concessions, impose or avoid costs, or deter actions that threaten their interests on the part of destination countries.

Power base or the causal logic of migration power

Any analysis of migration power must specify how its effects are exerted. Baldwin defined the power base as the 'causal condition' that enables a resource to produce a change in the other actor's behaviour.³⁴ This notion opens the door to examining causal mechanisms, understood here as the

³²Tsourapas hints at a similar logic when noting that the 'strength' of transit states lies in the size of the refugee populations they host, insofar as destination states tend to value their collaboration more highly as those numbers increase. Tsourapas, 'The Syrian refugee crisis'.

³³On vulnerability of destination states in the context of labour migration interdependence, see Froilan T. Malit and Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'Weapons of the weak? South–South migration and power politics in the Philippines–GCC Corridor', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:3 (2021), pp. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab010>.

³⁴Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft*.

processes through which a resource such as migration control creates incentives or imposes costs that induce the destination country to alter its behaviour.³⁵

A relational approach requires examining the power recipient's perspective,³⁶ since its perception of costs and benefits determines how incentives translate into behavioural change. In the context of large migration corridors, the destination state's preference to restrict migration tends to remain stable, yet its salience and implementation shift as domestic politics, institutional constraints, or public opinion pressures alter the perceived pay-offs of migration management.

As noted above, scholars have proposed different causal mechanisms to explain how migration control, as a power base, can alter a destination country's behaviour. The literature's contributions can be systematised around two broad logics through which migration power operates.

First, power may work through strategic rationality understood 'as the ability to manipulate the utilities of the other through threats or promises.'³⁷ For example, a government that exploits migration to rally xenophobic support may exchange benefits with a transit country to reward its base. Similarly, if a powerful economic sector views mass migration as a threat to its interests, it may urge its government to make concessions to the state controlling the flows. In such cases, the power base lies in the ability to manipulate migration flows in ways that have political or economic consequences for destination countries.

Second, destination states may respond according to a normative rationality in which power works through the activation of pre-existing legal or moral obligations.³⁸ The principles of international law or humanitarian commitments may constrain options in the face of a migration crisis. For example, a state concerned about its prestige and norm compliance may accept another state's demands to avoid the legitimacy costs associated with being perceived as failing to protect human rights or ignoring the suffering of migrants.³⁹ In this case, the power base activates a resource that generates reputational costs for the destination country.

In summary, causal mechanisms explain how migration power translates into influence. Power analysis allows for a pluralistic understanding of causality in which different types of causes interact and overlap.⁴⁰ The reasons why a destination country accepts demands or makes concessions may stem from both the 'logic of consequences' (economic and political considerations) and the 'logic of appropriateness' (ethical considerations).

Costs for the actor exercising migration power

A transit country's decision to use migration as an instrument of influence depends on not only the destination country's vulnerability but also the implications of such an action for the power-wielding state. In other words, what is the price paid by the actor who chooses to instrumentalise migration flows? This dimension highlights that the exercise of migration power is neither cost- nor risk-free, which may limit its use or even determine its failure.

Transit countries that exercise power by controlling migration flows face three main types of costs. First, *implementation costs* include budgetary and bureaucratic burdens associated with enforcing migration control measures, providing assistance to mobile populations, or integrating them socially. Second, *domestic political costs* result from opposition by political forces, social organisations, or public opinion. These costs include the risk of instability, especially if containment policies leave large numbers of transmigrants in the territory, potentially fuelling xenophobia and

³⁵ Andrew Bennett, 'The mother of all isms: Causal mechanisms and structured pluralism in international relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 459–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113495484>.

³⁶ Guzzini, 'Power and cause'.

³⁷ Tuomas Forsberg, 'Power in international relations: An interdisciplinary perspective', in Pami Aalto, Vilho Harle, and Sami Moiso (eds), *International Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 222.

³⁸ Forsberg, 'Power in international relations'.

³⁹ Greenhill, 'Weapons of mass migration'.

⁴⁰ Milja Kurki, 'Causes of a divided discipline: Rethinking the concept of cause in international relations theory', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 189–216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021050600698X>.

protests. Third, *reputational costs* occur when the instrumentalisation of migration undermines the government's credibility or legitimacy in the eyes of relevant domestic or international actors. For instance, costs may emerge when a migration policy appears inconsistent with declared principles or political identity, or when it is perceived as compromising political autonomy.

Analysing these costs reveals that transit countries do not always choose to instrumentalise migration, even when they have the capacity to do so, because the expected benefits may not outweigh the costs associated with such a policy.⁴¹ In summary, the cost–benefit balance captures the trade-offs shaping transit countries' decisions to use migration control as an instrument of power and points to the limits of this strategy's effectiveness and sustainability.

Purposes and power dynamics

Migration power manifests when a transit country uses its capacity to control migration flows as a strategic resource in its interaction with a destination country. Yet exercising this capacity may serve different ends. Focusing on the purposes of action allows for a more nuanced understanding of when and how transit countries deploy their migration leverage. These purposes are associated with the type of power dynamic at play, which can be either unilateral or reciprocal.⁴²

In a unilateral power situation, one actor (A) is positioned to independently determine the sanctions it will impose on another actor (B), without the latter having any real ability to influence these decisions. There is no room for mutual accommodation. In the context of migration power, this dynamic can be observed, for example, when the transit country decides unilaterally to relax migration controls – or even encourage flows – to inflict costs on the destination country without bargaining.⁴³ This is a *punitive purpose*.

More common are reciprocal power dynamics, that is, situations in which 'not only can A exert pressure on B in order to get him to adopt certain specific policies, but B can do the same to A'.⁴⁴ In other words, both actors have leverage in their interaction, although to different degrees. Strategic negotiations are the clearest manifestations of reciprocal power.

In this context, the transit country may use migration containment for *extractive purposes*, that is, to obtain concessions from the destination country such as market access or military assistance.⁴⁵ Transit countries can pursue this objective when the opportunity costs of non-cooperation (abandoning the negotiation) are higher for the destination country than for themselves. In such circumstances, they are positioned to demand compensation in exchange for migration management.

Alternatively, migration power may be used in a bargaining setting for *defensive purposes*, that is, to avoid or mitigate costs that the destination country has imposed or is threatening to impose, such as economic sanctions. The transit country does not claim rewards but leverages its position

⁴¹ Analysing transit countries' costs echoes scholarship stressing the role of both external interactions and domestic political constraints in shaping migration policy. See Ilke Adam, Florian Trauner, Leonie Jegen, and Christof Roos, 'West African interests in (EU) migration policy. Balancing domestic priorities with external incentives', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46:15 (2020), pp. 3101–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1750354>; Melissa Mouthaan, 'Unpacking domestic preferences in the policy-“receiving” state: The EU's migration cooperation with Senegal and Ghana', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7:35 (2019), 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0141-7>.

⁴² John Harsanyi, 'Measurement of social power, opportunity costs, and the theory of two-person bargaining games', *Behavioral Science*, 7:1 (1962), pp. 67–80, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830070105>.

⁴³ Captured by Greenhill's notion of 'exportive engineered migration' and akin to Tsourapas's 'coercive migration diplomacy', though without the expectation of concessions.

⁴⁴ Harsanyi, 'Measurement of social power', p. 74.

⁴⁵ For instance, Norman shows that Morocco and Turkey used migration reform cooperatively to extract political and economic concessions from the EU, whereas Micinski's analysis reveals a coercive mode of extraction, as refugee-hosting states leverage threats of deportation to secure benefits. Kelsey P. Norman, 'Migration diplomacy and policy liberalization in Morocco and Turkey', *International Migration Review*, 54:4 (2020), pp. 1158–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319895271>; Micinski, 'Threats, deportability'.

to shape the terms of cooperation and reduce its burdens.⁴⁶ We expect this to happen when the opportunity costs of a breakdown in negotiations are higher for the transit country than for the destination country. The former's main concern is to avoid failure, prompting caution rather than the pursuit of further gains.

Within reciprocal power dynamics, where both actors adjust their behaviour based on the possible reactions of the other, transit countries may also use migration management with a *deterrent purpose*, that is, to prevent the destination country from taking hostile measures against them.⁴⁷ In international relations, deterrence consists of persuading a potential aggressor that the risks and costs of action outweigh the expected gains, thereby discouraging the intended action.⁴⁸ The literature identifies two forms of deterrence: by punishment and by denial.

In the context of migration power, deterrence by punishment occurs when the transit country threatens to withdraw migration cooperation to persuade the destination country to reconsider a hostile action. Alternatively, deterrence by denial refers to 'the capability to deny the other party any gains from the move which is to be deterred'.⁴⁹ In the latter case, the deterring country takes steps to de-legitimise the hostile action and ensure that it cannot be translated into a political victory.⁵⁰ For instance, this happens when the transit country pre-emptively enforces migration control in a manner that prevents the destination country's government from gaining any advantage through the imposition of sanctions aimed at compelling cooperation in migration. The essence of this strategy is to ensure that aggression becomes politically useless, thereby eliminating both the incentives and justifications for its implementation.

Migration power of transit countries within asymmetric structures

In addressing the questions of when and how transit countries exercise migration power, the analysis so far has focused on state agency and the dynamics of interstate interaction. Yet agency does not unfold in a vacuum: states act within structural contexts that shape the range of possibilities within which decision-makers interpret their room for manoeuvre and make strategic choices. In this sense, agency is situated: it is exercised in concrete interactions while being conditioned by structural configurations that enable and constrain actors' options.⁵¹ Understanding migration power as a form of situated agency provides a means of integrating the structural and agential levels of analysis within the migration diplomacy research programme.

Scholarship on this field has highlighted that such diplomatic practices commonly unfold within asymmetric international structures that favour destination countries. These states tend to occupy positions from which they can define regulatory priorities, set the terms of cooperation, and embed migration governance within broader institutional and normative arrangements that reflect their preferences. In other words, they hold structural power.⁵²

Transit countries, by contrast, may exercise migration power through flow control and border management; however, they do so within a context structured by institutional settings and incentives largely shaped by their counterparts. In this framework, migration control functions as a tactical and contingent tool of influence, whose activation depends on specific political junctures.

⁴⁶ Here it is useful to clarify the distinction between the non-use of migration power – strategic restraint – and its defensive activation. The former denotes a deliberate decision not to employ migration control as leverage, typically by declining to enter transactional negotiations, while the latter presupposes a bargaining setting in which migration control is used to minimise costs rather than to extract rewards.

⁴⁷ Kelly M. Greenhill, 'Asymmetric advantage: Weaponizing people as nonmilitary instruments of cross-domain coercion', in Jon R. Lindsay and Erik Gartzke (eds), *Cross-Domain Deterrence: Strategy in an Era of Complexity* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 259–89.

⁴⁸ Jack S. Levy, 'When do deterrent threats work?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 18:4 (1988), pp. 485–512.

⁴⁹ Glenn H. Snyder, 'Deterrence and power', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 4:2 (1960), pp. 163–78 (p. 163).

⁵⁰ Amir Lupovici, 'Deterrence through inflicting costs: Between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial', *International Studies Review*, 25:3 (2023), p. viad036, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad036>.

⁵¹ Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵² Strange, *States and Markets*.

This is relational power, expressed through concrete interactions yet constrained by the broader asymmetry that frames them. It rarely alters the underlying hierarchy but allows transit states to navigate it strategically.

Both ‘agents and structures are indispensable to any adequate social explanation’ and their relative influence ‘cannot be settled theoretically’ but must be established empirically.⁵³ Methodologically, researchers can explore how structural and agential dimensions interact in concrete instances of interstate negotiation.⁵⁴ The next section examines the Mexico–United States interactions in light of the proposed framework.

Migration and power politics in Mexico–United States relations

Domain configuration and causal condition: Threat perception and political pressure in the United States

Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2016 with a campaign centred on stoking fear about immigration. His rhetoric portrayed migrants as a threat to the personal safety of citizens and jobs of American workers. He accused the Democrats of pursuing an ‘open borders’ policy and neglecting the interests of native-born Americans. He pledged to deport millions of undocumented migrants and complete the wall along the border with Mexico. Throughout his presidency, migration remained a priority issue. Trump issued an unprecedented 472 executive orders related to migration policy and visited the border region seven times.⁵⁵

For the first year and a half, the Trump administration focused on implementing interior enforcement measures. To increase arrests and removal, the administration made all undocumented immigrants subject to deportation. Immigration checks were also stepped up at workplaces and on trains and buses near the border.⁵⁶ At the same time, Trump pushed for congressional approval to fund the expansion of the border wall. These domestic actions proved less effective than expected. Mass deportations were hampered by a lack of cooperation from state and local authorities with the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, particularly in cities with sanctuary policies.⁵⁷ Congress allocated limited funding to the wall, mostly for the maintenance of already built sections.⁵⁸

Regarding the Mexico–United States border, by the end of 2017, encounters with undocumented migrants had decreased by 43 per cent because of the deterrent effect of Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric. Migrants and human smugglers adopted a ‘wait and see’ attitude. However, in the spring of 2018, flows began to rise again, prompting Trump to intensify border control efforts through a ‘zero tolerance’ policy and family separation. This, in turn, contributed to the emergence of a new phenomenon: migrant caravans – groups of hundreds or even thousands of people travelling together to increase safety, visibility, and mutual support.

In 2018, five caravans departed from Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador for the United States.⁵⁹ They received significant media attention, partly because Trump – who was facing mid-term

⁵³Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, p. 280.

⁵⁴Tsourapas’s study on the Syrian refugee crisis offers an illustration of this point, as it shows how elites’ perceptions of their geostrategic relevance shaped the exercise of migration diplomacy. Tsourapas, ‘The Syrian refugee crisis’.

⁵⁵Jessica Bolter, Emma Israel, and Sarah Pierce, ‘Four years of profound change: Immigration policy during the Trump presidency’, *Migration Policy Institute* (February 2022), available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/four-years-change-immigration-trump>, accessed 13 October 2024.

⁵⁶Bolter, Israel and Pierce, ‘Four years’.

⁵⁷Muzaffar Chishti and Sarah Pierce, ‘Trump’s promise of millions of deportations is yet to be fulfilled’, *Migration Policy Institute* (29 October 2020), available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-deportations-unfinished-mission>, accessed 13 October 2024.

⁵⁸William L. Painter and Audrey Singer, ‘DHS border barrier funding through FY2021’, *Congressional Research Service* (2024), available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/R45888.pdf>, accessed 1 September 2024.

⁵⁹Marianne H. Marchand, ‘The Caravanas de Migrantes making their way north: Problematising the biopolitics of mobilities in Mexico’, *Third World Quarterly*, 42:1 (2021), pp. 141–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1824579>.

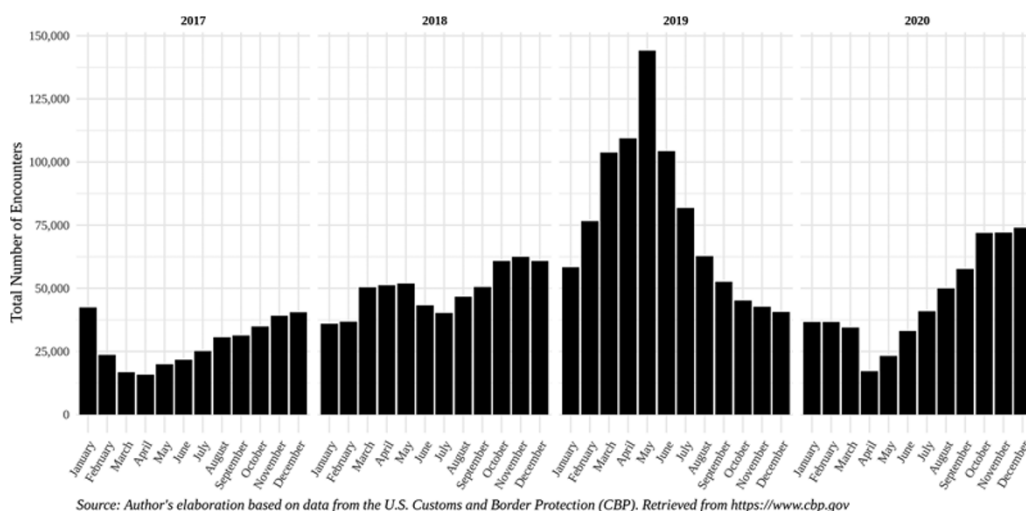


Figure 1. Encounters at the United States–Mexico border (2017–20).

congressional elections – described them as ‘an invasion of our country.’⁶⁰ In November, he ordered another unilateral action: the deployment of troops to the Tijuana–Mexicali border region.

However, by the end of 2018, encounters at the southern border of the United States had nearly returned to 2016 levels, and in early 2019, monthly records reached historic highs (Figure 1). Between January and June 2019, four additional caravans originating in Honduras were recorded. Clearly, the Trump administration was unable to achieve its objectives through unilateral actions alone. This called into question the president’s credibility and generated mounting public pressure.⁶¹ In response, the administration shifted its strategy towards externalising migration control and sought Mexico’s cooperation.

Thus, the perception of a migration crisis in the United States fuelled by Trump and the limited effectiveness of his unilateral measures created a window of opportunity for Mexico as a transit country to hold potential migration power. The Mexican government’s response to this political juncture reveals how this potential translated into concrete forms of influence.

Interactions between Mexico and the United States

From May 2018 onwards, the Trump administration, guided by the logic of consequences, opened up clear opportunities for Mexico to use migration management as a bargaining chip in its bilateral relationship. First, the United States government held discreet talks with the outgoing Enrique Peña Nieto administration to negotiate a Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA), which reportedly offered significant economic incentives in exchange for Mexico’s acceptance.⁶² Such an agreement would make all transmigrants who had not first applied for protection in Mexico, and were rejected,

⁶⁰Jordan Fabian, ‘Trump calls migrant caravan an invasion’, *The Hill* (29 October 2018), available at: <https://thehill.com/news/administration/413624-trump-calls-migrant-caravan-an-invasion/>, accessed 3 September 2024.

⁶¹Gallup opinion polls conducted during the first half of 2019 show that a large majority of respondents regarded the situation at the border with Mexico as either a ‘crisis’ or ‘major problem’. A similar large majority viewed mass undocumented migration as a ‘critical’ or ‘important’ threat to the vital interests of the United States, and a majority expressed being ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ concerned about undocumented immigration. Gallup, ‘Immigration’, available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>, accessed 2 February 2025.

⁶²Kirk Semple, ‘U.S. pushes plan to make Mexico handle asylum seekers’, *New York Times* (17 May 2018), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/17/world/americas/mexico-migrants-caravan-asylum.html>, accessed 10 November 2024; J. Jesús Esquivel, ‘Washington exige subordinación migratoria; Peña Nieto se doblega’, *Proceso*, 2168 (2018), p. 26; J. Jesús Esquivel, ‘Albazo de Videgaray: Aceptar que México sea el filtro migratorio de EU’, *Proceso* (28 July 2018), available

ineligible for asylum in the United States. However, as Peña Nieto's presidency was coming to an end, it was politically unfeasible for him to make decisions of this magnitude.

The second attempt came after the presidential election on 1 July in which Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) was elected with 53 per cent of the vote. The Trump administration offered to transfer US\$20 million to Mexico to fund an immediate increase in deportations from its territory.⁶³ The outgoing government stated that it was evaluating the proposal but ultimately did not accept it.⁶⁴ The president-elect's political team openly rejected the offer.⁶⁵

Even before the new administration took office on 1 December 2018, the Trump administration made another attempt to align the incoming Mexican government with its migration containment goals. In a private meeting, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo offered Marcelo Ebrard, Mexico's designated foreign minister, an explicit quid pro quo: the bilateral relationship, he said, 'is going to be very simple. If the border numbers go up, there will be problems. If they go down, the United States will be an incredible partner and will help Mexico with its priorities.'⁶⁶

The new government rejected this transactional approach. In his inauguration speech, AMLO outlined a regional development-based strategy to address the root causes of migration and proposed an investment agreement between Mexico and the United States to promote growth in Central America. He stated that he sought 'to address the migration phenomenon in this way and not through coercive measures.'⁶⁷ He also agreed with the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to task the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean with formulating a Comprehensive Development Plan to address the origin of migration. Finally, he appointed a prominent academic to head Mexico's National Migration Institute (NMI), whose migration paradigm stood in stark contrast to the punitive policies promoted by Trump.

Frustrated by Mexico's position, the Trump administration resorted to an exercise of unilateral power: it implemented a measure known as the Migrant Protection Protocols or 'Remain in Mexico'. The directive stipulated that individuals arriving at the border to seek asylum in the United States would be returned to Mexico and required to remain there while their cases were processed in US immigration courts. In a private meeting in late 2018, Pompeo warned Ebrard that if Mexico refused to accept these migrants, the United States would shut down the border.⁶⁸ Under pressure, the Mexican government accepted the measure but publicly framed it as a unilateral US decision with which Mexico agreed to cooperate solely on humanitarian grounds.

'Remain in Mexico' began operating in certain border areas in January 2019. In practice, this imposed a significant burden on Mexico, which was unprepared to accommodate thousands of expelled migrants. This tightening of migration pressure coincided with another crucial bargaining front, the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement initiated by the Trump administration. Migration-related discussions thus unfolded within a particularly delicate structural environment in which the United States not only exerted direct pressure on this issue but also controlled the timing and conditions of an agreement central to Mexico's economy.

at: {<https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2018/7/28/albazo-de-videgaray-aceptar-que-mexico-sea-el-filtro-migratorio-de-eu-209504.html>}, accessed 15 November 2024.

⁶³ Gardiner Harris, 'U.S. plans to pay Mexico to deport unauthorized immigrants there', *New York Times* (12 September 2018), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/12/us/politics/us-mexico-deportation-funds.html>} accessed 1 May 2025.

⁶⁴ Secretaría de Gobernación, 'Aclaración respecto de la cooperación en materia migratoria con Estados Unidos', press release, Government of Mexico (5 October 2018), available at: {<https://www.gob.mx/segob/prensa/aclaracion-respecto-de-la-cooperacion-en-materia-migratoria-con-estados-unidos-177638>}, accessed 3 February 2025.

⁶⁵ Vanessa Arriaga, 'México no va a ser policía de migración para EU: Sánchez Cordero', *Diario de México* (13 September 2018), available at: {<https://www.diariodemexico.com/mi-nacion/mexico-no-va-ser-policia-de-migracion-para-eu-sanchez-cordero>}, accessed 12 February 2025.

⁶⁶ Jared Kushner, *Breaking History: A White House Memoir* (Broadside Books, 2022), p. 131.

⁶⁷ Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Mensaje a la Nación del Presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, en la sesión del Congreso General, en la Toma de Protesta Constitucional* (Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública, 2018), available at: {<https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/12/5609/5.pdf>}, accessed 20 November 2024.

⁶⁸ Mike Pompeo, *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the America I Love* (Broadside Books, 2023).

Despite threats from the United States, the Mexican government did not budge from its original position. The Ministry of the Interior remained steadfast in implementing a human rights-based migration policy. It responded by issuing thousands of humanitarian visas that allowed migrants to stay in the country for one year and work legally as well as offering them the opportunity to apply for refugee status in Mexico. However, many migrants continued their journey northward, and in May 2019, encounters with undocumented migrants at the border peaked at 144,116 – the highest monthly figure in the decade.

On 30 May 2019, Trump issued a public threat to Mexico: as of 10 June the United States would impose a 5 per cent tariff on all goods imported from Mexico, which would gradually increase until the Mexican government succeeded in stopping the northward flow of migration. In principle, this threat was another act of unilateral power with no initial room for compromise. In response, AMLO sent a Mexican delegation led by Ebrard to Washington, DC, to begin a negotiation process. On 7 June, after three rounds of discussions, both sides announced a political agreement.⁶⁹

The United States' opening position was the immediate signing of a STCA.⁷⁰ Despite acute pressure, Mexico avoided this commitment, which was considered costly because of its binding and permanent nature. Instead, Mexico agreed to intensify migration control by deploying Armed Forces along its borders.⁷¹ In addition, Mexico committed to expanding the implementation of the 'Remain in Mexico' programme. The United States offered some concessions – it agreed to accelerate the processing of asylum applications to reduce the waiting times for migrants. A reference to joint efforts in the development of Central America was also included as a symbolic element through which Mexico sought to frame the agreement as part of a shared responsibility strategy for managing migration to the region. A period of ninety days was designated for the evaluation of the results.

This scenario tested Mexico's ability to operate within an asymmetric international structure. Mexico manoeuvred to transform an act of unilateral power into a strategic negotiation characterised by a dynamic of reciprocal, albeit unequal, power. It was a reactive position as Mexico adjusted its conduct in response to the threat but managed to retain a degree of agency by shaping the nature of the concessions. This room for manoeuvring stemmed from the United States perceiving Mexico's immediate cooperation in containing migration as a critical necessity. Mexico leveraged its influence, or migration power, as a transit country to avoid two major costs: the imposition of tariffs and the formalisation of a STCA.

On 10 September 2019, Ebrard met Trump in the White House to review the results. Indeed, encounters with undocumented migrants at the border had decreased by 56 per cent (Figure 1). The following day Trump acknowledged that Mexico was delivering on the agreement and the issue of tariffs was set aside.⁷²

As a result of this bilateral dynamic, migration policy came to be regarded as a matter of national security and foreign policy in Mexico. In September 2019, a presidential decree established the Interministerial Commission for Comprehensive Migration Affairs to coordinate the actions of different agencies in managing migration flows. Although migration was the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, it was decided that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) would lead it. This represented an implicit recognition that migration policy would henceforth be shaped by not only domestic considerations but also international commitments and external pressures.

⁶⁹ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 'Declaración conjunta México-Estados Unidos' (7 June 2019), available at: <https://www.gob.mx/sre/documentos/declaracion-conjunta-203701>, accessed 4 October 2024.

⁷⁰ Interview with senior official 1 at the MFA at the time, Mexico City, 10 June 2025.

⁷¹ The term Armed Forces refers to the Ministry of National Defence (SEDENA) and the National Guard. Although created as a civilian force, the National Guard was composed largely of military personnel from the outset. In 2022, it was formally placed under SEDENA's operational command.

⁷² Jorge Monroy, 'AMLO sostuvo llamada telefónica con Donald Trump', *El Economista* (11 September 2019), available at: <https://www.economista.com.mx/politica/AMLO-sostuvo-llamada-telefonica-con-Donald-Trump-20190911-0092.html>, accessed 4 October 2024.

At the initiative of the United States, migration policy became a key instrument of influence and negotiation within the bilateral relationship.

Throughout the remainder of the Trump administration, Mexico continued to deploy its armed forces in an effort to curb transmigration. Between September 2019 and September 2020, border encounters were relatively low. Trump left open the possibility of demanding a STCA. Moreover, in the second half of 2019, the process of finalising the new trade agreement continued, and by December it was pending ratification by the US Congress. The Mexican government understood that the migration card was a resource to neutralise Trump's hostility and could even be leveraged to promote a more fluid bilateral relationship.

Formal negotiations were forsaken after the open transactional diplomacy phase. Mexico shifted towards deterrence by denial, that is, maintaining migration control with the aim of nullifying political arguments and incentives that might generate future pressure from the United States. By the end of Trump's presidency, Mexico had succeeded in avoiding the STCA, which was imposed on Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador between July and September 2019. The trade agreement was ratified and enacted in July 2020.

Strategic assessment of the transit country

As discussed above, between 2018 and mid-2019, Mexico declined to enter negotiations with the United States to secure benefits in exchange for aggressively containing migration flows. The government was reluctant to use Mexico's position as a transit country as a power resource to influence Trump's behaviour. This can be explained by the cost–benefit assessment involved in such a transactional dynamic.

Migration was central to AMLO's electoral campaign and one issue through which he sought to differentiate himself from previous administrations.⁷³ He pledged to prioritise human rights and development over coercion. This approach was enshrined in the National Development Plan and officially launched during the first month of his administration.⁷⁴ Given these commitments, the government could anticipate political costs if it were to change course and adopt a repressive migration policy. Such a reversal would have emboldened opponents and risked alienating part of the government's own support base, who identified the administration with defending vulnerable groups.⁷⁵ The backlash that followed subsequent measures of migration enforcement – criticised by legislators from AMLO's own party⁷⁶ and opposition figures⁷⁷ – illustrated the political risks the government could reasonably expect from the outset.

Reputational costs were also anticipated, both domestic and international. Domestically, they were tied to the notion of political independence. Yielding to foreign pressure – particularly from a government hostile to Mexican migrants – was seen as undermining Mexico's autonomy.

⁷³See his book: Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Oye, Trump* (Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2017).

⁷⁴Gobierno de México, 'Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019–2024' (30 April 2019), available at: {<https://framework-gb.cdn.gob.mx/landing/documentos/PND.pdf>}; Secretaría de Gobernación, 'Derechos humanos y cooperación con Centroamérica, base de política migratoria 2018–2024', press release, Government of Mexico (19 December 2019), available at: {<https://www.gob.mx/segob/prensa/derechos-humanos-y-cooperacion-con-centroamerica-base-de-politica-migratoria-2018-2024-sanchez-cordero>}.

⁷⁵This point was also raised in the interview with senior official 3 at the MFA at the time, Mexico City, 28 October 2025.

⁷⁶The President of the Chamber of Deputies, a senior figure of the ruling party, expressed unusually strong dissent within the governing coalition. 'Muñoz Ledo, el opositor al plan migratorio de AMLO', *Expansión* (13 June 2019), available at: {<https://politica.expansion.mx/congreso/2019/06/13/munoz-ledo-el-opositor-al-plan-migratorio-de-amlo>}, accessed 21 September 2025.

⁷⁷Criticism from leaders of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) was widely reported in the press. For instance: 'Ni Peña Nieto tuvo una negociación tan pésima e indigna: PAN', *El Universal* (10 June 2019), available at: {<https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/politica/ni-pena-nieto-tuvo-una-negociacion-tan-pesima-e-indigna-pan>}, accessed 20 September 2025; 'Estiman positivas las gestiones', *La Jornada* (8 June 2019), available at: {<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/06/08/politica/004n2pol?partner=rss>}, accessed 20 September 2025.

AMLO's rhetoric consistently reaffirmed the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, rejecting the idea of Mexico acting as the United States' migration enforcer.⁷⁸ Officials framed this as a sovereignty cost: the INM Commissioner cautioned that Mexico's migration policy 'could not be subordinated to the electoral interests of the United States',⁷⁹ while the Undersecretary of the Interior emphasised the need to preserve 'autonomy'.⁸⁰ The Senate likewise insisted that Mexico's migration policy 'must remain an exercise of sovereignty, not the product of external pressure or lobbying'.⁸¹ Accepting a STCA was therefore perceived as contradicting nationalist principles⁸² and exposing the administration to criticism for failing to defend Mexican interests.

Internationally, similar reputational risks were foreseen. Endorsing an agreement that used migrants as a bargaining tool was perceived among diplomats as jeopardising Mexico's legitimacy to safeguard the rights of its citizens abroad. As a country of emigration, Mexico had historically demanded dignified treatment for its nationals. AMLO himself had warned that inconsistencies in this regard would 'demolish our moral authority to defend our fellow countrymen north of the Río Bravo'.⁸³ Members of the Mexican Foreign Service – particularly those versed in migration diplomacy – believed that agreeing to stringent containment or an STCA would harm Mexico's international prestige. They viewed excessive concessions to Washington as setting an undesirable precedent and weakening the country's credibility as a consistent advocate for migrants' rights.⁸⁴

Finally, implementation costs loomed large. Government officials were aware that Mexico lacked the material and administrative capacities to achieve the level of containment sought by the United States or to handle a massive influx of asylum applications.⁸⁵ As later became evident, implementing such policies required substantial institutional and budgetary adjustments that the government was not prepared to undertake at the time.

However, Trump's ultimatum in May 2019 marked a turning point in Mexico's position, forcing it to recalculate costs and benefits. A bilateral trade war would have been catastrophic, given that 77.8 per cent of Mexico's exports went to the United States, and imports from that country accounted for 45.2 per cent of the total.⁸⁶ Internal estimates by the Ministry of Economy suggested that tariffs could wipe out 'around two million jobs' and 'push people onto the streets', further fuelling migration pressures.⁸⁷ The government also anticipated that this scenario would effectively

⁷⁸ Agencia Reforma, 'No haremos el trabajo sucio a EU sostiene AMLO', *El Sur* (15 April 2018), available at: <https://suracapulco.mx/impreso/6/no-haremos-el-trabajo-sucio-a-eu-sostiene-amlo-y-propone-mover-el-inm-a-tijuana/>, accessed 2 October 2025.

⁷⁹ Manu Ureste, 'Política migratoria: gobierno promete dejar atrás perfil policiaco', *Animal Político* (19 December 2018), available at: <https://animalpolitico.com/2018/12/politica-migratoria-derechos-humanos/>, accessed 2 October 2025.

⁸⁰ Manu Ureste, 'Política migratoria de México no puede estar subordinada a la de Trump', *Animal Político* (11 November 2018), available at: <https://animalpolitico.com/2018/11/politica-migratoria-mexico-eu/>, accessed 18 March 2025.

⁸¹ Senado de la República, *Posicionamiento del Senado sobre el Acuerdo de Tercer País Seguro* (LXIV Legislatura, Junta de Coordinación Política, August 2019), p. 11.

⁸² MFA official 3 observed that 'It is very difficult for any Mexican government, whatever its political orientation, to accept a formal agreement that in some form carries the perception of subordination or of extending another country's migration policies onto our own territory'.

⁸³ Gobierno de México, 'Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019–2024', p. 35.

⁸⁴ Interviews with senior MFA officials at the time: official 1 (second interview), Mexico City, 24 October 2025; official 2, Mexico City, 31 October 2024; official 3 also pointed to regional costs, noting that 'if they see you as the policeman of the Americans, you also open that front to the south', referring to the potential loss of trust among Latin American partners if Mexico accepted a STCA.

⁸⁵ A senior official at the National Migration Institute noted that the Institute was unarmed and lacked the personnel required for large-scale containment, relying instead on persuasion and regularisation (interview, Mexico City, 11 September 2025). MFA official 1 observed that 'our system could not cope', adding that accepting a STCA would have risked 'incurring international responsibility for failing to protect asylum seekers'. MFA official 3 also highlighted the long-term implementation costs of SCTAs, noting that such schemes 'generate permanence' by anchoring migrant communities within the country and can create 'budgetary dependence on external donors'.

⁸⁶ World Bank, 'Mexico Trade Summary 2019', World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), available at: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MEX/Year/2019/SummaryText>, accessed 5 March 2025.

⁸⁷ Interview with senior official at the Ministry of Economy at the time, Mexico City, 20 September 2025.

Table 1. Deployment of SEDENA and National Guard personnel under the migration containment plan (2018–24).¹

Period	SEDENA personnel	National Guard personnel	Total
1 December 2018–31 July 2019 ²	15,176	15,000	30,176
1 September 2019–31 August 2020 ³	4,885	Not reported	
1 September 2020–31 August 2021	13,663	2,386	16,049
1 September 2021–31 August 2022	14,013	9,445	23,458
1 September 2022–31 August 2023	14,653	7,335	21,988
1 September 2023–31 Aug 2024	15,193	3,437	18,630
Average per reporting period (2018–24)			22,060

¹This refers to the 'Migration and Development Plan at Mexico's Northern and Southern Borders'.

²Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), 'First Activity Report, 2018–2019'; (2019).

³For all subsequent periods: Second to Sixth Annual Reports of the President to Congress.

nullify the free trade agreement – a long-term consequence.⁸⁸ Moreover, a direct confrontation with the Trump administration carried risks in other areas of the bilateral relationship. Mexico was compelled to carefully consider the systemic implications of migration-related decisions in a context of asymmetrical interdependence.

The cost of mass unemployment was perceived as significantly higher than the cost of tightening migration policy.⁸⁹ Consequently, the government implemented the Northern and Southern Border Migration and Development Plan, which relied on an unprecedented and large-scale deployment of Mexico's Armed Forces to detain undocumented transit migrants. In 6 June 2019, 6,500 troops were assigned to the southern border and 15,000 to the northern border,⁹⁰ representing approximately 6.6 per cent of total military personnel.⁹¹ Following this initial deployment, a militarised migration control plan remained in place for the rest of the term (Table 1). This was consistent with the logic of deterrence by denial.

The AMLO administration sought to mitigate the political and reputational costs of the agreement with the United States by manipulating its meaning. In the president's daily press conferences, migration control was framed as a policy aimed at protecting migrants and as a matter of national self-interest. As evidenced by a discourse analysis, the president employed euphemisms to obscure the punitive dimension of containment and legitimise it before a domestic audience. For example, detentions were referred to as 'rescues' of migrants, and deportations were described as 'return of persons' or 'assisted return'. Bilateral tensions and commitments made to the United States were downplayed to emphasise that the containment plan was merely the enforcement of Mexico's national migration law and an action against criminal human smuggling networks. Simultaneously, AMLO consistently reminded the public that Mexico was addressing the social dimension of migration through development cooperation with Central American countries. He maintained an affectionate tone when referring to migrants ('our Central American brothers') and urged the Mexican public to reject xenophobia.⁹²

⁸⁸'If you are hit with general tariffs of 20–25 percent, the treaty becomes a dead letter... that is what was at stake'. Same interview.

⁸⁹From the Ministry of Economy's perspective, the government faced 'two bad scenarios' and had to decide 'which was worse'. The prospect of 'millions losing their jobs within months seemed almost impossible to bear. Nothing could be as terrible as that'. Same interview.

⁹⁰Nuty Cárdenas Alaminos, 'La militarización de la política de disuasión migratoria en México', *Estudios Fronterizos*, 24 (2023), p. e126, <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2315126>.

⁹¹Calculated by author using World Bank data. World Bank, 'Armed forces personnel (number) – Mexico', available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1?locations=MX> accessed 5 March 2025.

⁹²Alexia Raquel Ávalos Rivera and Cosette Celecia Pérez, 'El discurso oficial mexicano sobre la migración. Un análisis de las mañaneras de AMLO', *Revista Comunicación*, 1:18 (2020), pp. 99–118, <https://doi.org/10.12795/Comunicacion.2020.i18.06>.

Criticism from opposition parties and civil society organisations focused on human rights violations against transmigrants, the militarisation of migration containment, and the government's alignment with an American president who mistreated Mexican nationals. Nonetheless, the president's rhetorical framing appeared effective. Opinion polls showed majority support for migration control, deportation of transit migrants, and the use of the Armed Forces in these tasks.⁹³ In this context, the continuation of aggressive migration control – and, with it, the pursuit of deterrence by denial after the critical juncture of 2019 – proved to be politically viable.

In its interaction with the United States, Mexico's primary objective was to minimise relative costs. Unlike other transit countries, such as Turkey and Libya, it did not seek direct financial compensation for acute migration enforcement. Interviews suggest two explanations for this stance. Two officials emphasised the reputational costs that demanding side payments would have entailed, noting that such a move would have undermined the Mexican government's humanist discourse and the image of a sovereign state guided by principles rather than transactions.⁹⁴ Others interpreted Mexico's cautious approach as a response to asymmetry in the negotiating context, recognising that the opportunity costs of a breakdown in negotiations were considerably higher for Mexico than for the United States.⁹⁵ This perception reflected a situated awareness of constraint: decision-makers internalised the imbalance and opted for a defensive use of migration power aimed at avoiding escalation rather than extracting rewards.

Nevertheless, there were indications that Mexico obtained indirect benefits from its subsequent deterrent stance. Following the June 2019 migration agreement, the United States began directly funding the operations of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Mexico. This multilateral channel avoided political scrutiny while strengthening the operational capacity on the ground. During the first two years of the Trump administration, no humanitarian funding was allocated to its southern neighbour. In contrast, the IOM received US\$1.4 million and US\$21 million in 2019 and 2020, respectively, to support migrant services and the voluntary return of migrants in Mexico.⁹⁶

For its part, UNHCR's operational expenditure in Mexico quadrupled between 2017 and 2020, rising from US\$9.6 million to US\$40.4 million, financed almost entirely through voluntary contributions from the United States in the last two years of the period.⁹⁷ This helped to reduce the financial burden on the Mexican state, whose expenditure in the areas of 'migration policy and services' and 'assistance to refugees in the country', managed by the NMI and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, remained relatively stable at an average of US\$240 million per year between 2017 and 2020.⁹⁸

⁹³ Alejandro Moreno, 'Los migrantes centroamericanos y la opinion pública mexicana', *Reporte CESOP*, 126 (2019), pp. 5–10, available at: <https://portalhcd.diputados.gob.mx/PortalWeb/Micrositios/73e4cf13-4327-46e0-b1d9-a96e73877945.pdf>, accessed 26 January 2025; 'Washington post-reforma Mexico poll', *Washington Post* (17 July 2019), available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/washington-post-reforma-mexico-poll/801f58a6-ab67-4da6-bd1d-39659863c4c7/?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_9, accessed 26 February 2025.

⁹⁴ All interviewees concurred that Mexico never sought financial rewards. One official explained that 'that would have meant a paradigm shift, Mexico would no longer be humanist, but transactional', something 'difficult for a nationalist government, especially at the start of its term'. Another described that approach as 'undignified'.

⁹⁵ One interviewee described the situation as 'a reflection of the asymmetry of the relationship ... when you have a gun-wielding madman in the room, you're just glad if he lowers the gun – you don't go on to ask him to sit down and behave'. Another explained that during negotiations 'there was never an exchange proposal because at that point we knew the United States would not have accepted it'.

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State, 'ForeignAssistance.gov', available at: <https://foreignassistance.gov/>, accessed 10 November 2024.

⁹⁷ UNHCR, 'Mexico', UNHCR Global Focus, available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/mexico>, accessed 8 November 2024; U.S. Department of State, 'ForeignAssistance.gov'.

⁹⁸ Calculated by author using data from SHCP (Mexican Ministry of Finance), 'Public Accounts: Expenditure by Programmatic Category [Annual reports 2017–2020]', Government of Mexico, available at: <https://www.cuentapublica.hacienda.gob.mx/>, accessed 2 October 2024.

The AMLO government seemed to obtain reciprocity in other political aspects of the bilateral relationship. First, Trump's anti-Mexican rhetoric subsided. For instance, a review of his posts on the social media platform X shows that from June 2019 onwards, he ceased attacking Mexico.⁹⁹ Several gestures of goodwill followed. For instance, in April 2020, Trump intervened on Mexico's behalf within the OPEC+ framework by assuming a production cut of 250,000 barrels per day to unblock the negotiations. This move saved Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) from a more significant production cut and was presented by AMLO as a diplomatic victory.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, AMLO requested Trump's assistance in facilitating the sale of ventilators to Mexico amid a global shortage. Trump granted the request, ensuring a shipment from American suppliers.¹⁰¹ In October 2020, the Drug Enforcement Agency arrested Mexico's former Minister of Defence, Salvador Cienfuegos, for drug trafficking charges. One month later, the Department of Justice unexpectedly dropped the charges and returned him to Mexico. Security experts have linked this unusual decision to Mexico's cooperation on migration issues.¹⁰² Taken together, these developments suggest that migration control served as a real, albeit limited, source of influence insofar as the United States recognised its strategic value and adjusted its stance towards Mexico.

In summary, despite its initial reluctance, Mexico was induced by the United States to adopt a transactional stance on migration. During the negotiations, it defensively used its migration power to minimise costs and condition concessions. Subsequently, it maintained migration control to deter future pressure within a structurally asymmetric bilateral relationship. Migration was not used as a bargaining chip to extract explicit side benefits but rather as a tactical tool to preserve a degree of autonomy in an adverse context.

Conclusions

This study built on the migration diplomacy approach to analyse how transit countries use migration as a power resource in their strategic interactions with destination states. It developed an analytical framework that draws on the structural insight that states' behaviour is shaped by their position within the global migration system while integrating an agency-centred perspective to explain variation in the conduct of transit countries. In particular, the study examined how transit states assess the costs and benefits of activating or withholding their migration leverage, conceiving this calculation as situated within specific relational and structural contexts.

The framework was applied to Mexico–United States relations during the first Trump administration and demonstrates that a transit country with potential migration power – stemming from its geographical location and the vulnerability of the destination state – may choose not to exercise it, or to turn it into a defensive or deterrent tool. The case functions heuristically to refine the framework and show its capacity to account for different strategic choices made under asymmetric conditions.

⁹⁹ John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [database], University of California–Santa Barbara, available at: {<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Mexico&from%5Bdate%5D=01-20-2017&to%5Bdate%5D=01-20-2021&person2=200301&category2%5B%5D=423>}, accessed 15 April 2025.

¹⁰⁰ Pedro Domínguez, 'En acuerdo de la OPEP nos fue requetebién, afirma AMLO', *Milenio* (13 April 2020), available at: {<https://www.milenio.com/negocios/amlo-en-acuerdo-de-opep-a-mexico-le-fue-requetebien>}, accessed 2 February 2025.

¹⁰¹ Presidencia de la República, '31 nuevos ventiladores arriban a México desde Nevada', press release, Government of Mexico (25 July 2020), available at: {<https://www.gob.mx/amlo/prensa/31-nuevos-ventiladores-arriban-a-mexico-desde-nevada>}, accessed 3 April 2025.

¹⁰² 'La migración influyó en libertad de Cienfuegos, afirma exzar fronterizo', *El Informador* (22 November 2020), available at: {<https://www.informador.mx/mexico/La-migracion-influyo-en-libertad-de-Cienfuegos-afirma-exzar-fronterizo-20201122-0015.html>}, accessed 2 February 2025; 'Liberación de Cienfuegos fue un regalo de Donald Trump para AMLO: Mike Vigil', *Heraldo de México* (19 January 2021), available at: {<https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/nacional/2021/1/19/liberacion-de-cienfuegos-fue-un-regalo-de-donald-trump-para-amlo-mike-vigil-246849.html>}, accessed 2 February 2025.

During the study period, Mexico found itself in a favourable position to exercise migration power, given the political centrality that Trump attached to containing flows and the limited effectiveness of his unilateral measures. The domestic pressure stemming from his promise to drastically reduce immigration led him to seek an arrangement with Mexico in line with the logic of consequences. However, the Mexican government was initially reluctant to use migration management as an instrument to influence bilateral interactions. Despite the United States offering incentives and proposing a transactional relationship, the Mexican government rejected this dynamic and advanced an approach based on economic development and respect for human rights. This position reflected an assessment of the political, reputational, and implementation costs involved in instrumentalising migration as a power resource.

The tariff threat issued in May 2019 altered Mexico's cost–benefit equation. Faced with the risk of an economic crisis, the Mexican government entered into transactional diplomacy, not because it recognised value in instrumentalising migration, but because the opportunity cost of not doing so was perceived as prohibitive. Mexico employed its migration power – that is, its margin of influence – for defensive purposes: to reduce costs and shape the nature of the concessions agreed upon within a dynamic of reciprocal yet unequal power.

Later, Mexico employed its migration power under the logic of deterrence by denial, with the aim of pre-empting further coercion. Over time, this approach seemed to generate indirect benefits within the bilateral relationship. These benefits were not the result of explicit negotiations but stemmed from the stabilising effects of sustained migration control, through which Mexico fostered goodwill and reduced incentives for renewed pressure.

Theoretically, the study makes three contributions. First, it brings to light forms of transit state practice that are less visible in the literature, most notably strategic restraint and the defensive and deterrent uses of migration power that complement the more familiar punitive and extractive purposes. Second, it highlights the importance of accounting for the costs borne by the power-wielder itself – political, reputational, and implementation costs – that shape whether migration power is exercised. By shifting attention to these internal constraints, the framework advances our understanding of why transit countries with potential leverage may refrain from activating it.

Third, the analysis highlights the inherent limitations of the migration power of transit countries within asymmetric international structures. It suggests that this is a contingent form of power that emerges in specific conjunctures and operates within the confines of discrete interactions. Although transit countries may obtain benefits or avoid costs in particular negotiations, their control over migration flows does not grant them the capacity to alter the structural dynamics of the relationship. The ability of destination countries to mobilise other resources, set priorities, and control institutional frameworks – for instance, by forcing the renegotiation of a trade agreement and defining the legitimate terms of cooperation (as in linking migration and trade) – reflects a form of structural power that constrains, yet does not eliminate, the margin of influence available to transit countries.

Finally, the framework also underscores that migration power is co-determined. It cannot be understood without considering how the destination country frames migration as a threat and seeks to externalise its management. Recognising this co-determination helps to make visible the destination countries' co-responsibility in what is often denounced as the commodification of migrants' lives by transit countries or refugee rent-seeking. This point, also noted by Tolay,¹⁰³ is theoretically grounded in the relational notion of power. In this sense, the relational approach serves as a critical tool. It compels us to question not only transit states but also receiving states, which actively shape the conditions under which such instrumentalisation occurs.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210526101831>.

¹⁰³Tolay, 'Interrogating and broadening.'

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