



**BORDER SECURITY AND NON-MILITARY CHALLENGES:
ILLCIT FLOWS, MIGRATION, AND US-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS**
March 2, 2026
READING NOTES

This session examines the interconnected and entangled issues of border security, illicit transnational flows, and the actors responsible for those flows, including drug cartels, traffickers, and regimes hostile to the US. The implications for US-Latin American relations and US national security and foreign policy, more broadly, will also be explored.

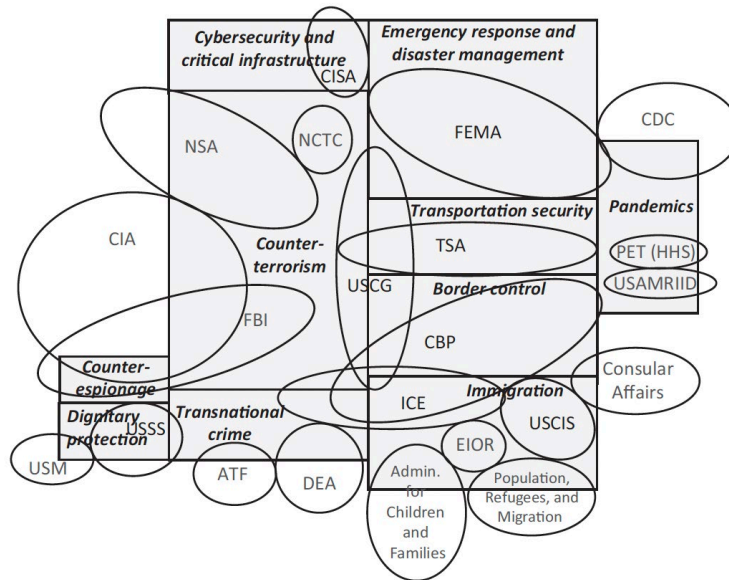
MIGRATION AND BORDER SECURITY

In four chapters from the edited volume *Beyond 9/11 Homeland Security for the Twenty-First Century*, the authors explain the unique challenges of border security today. In the first of the three, **Chappell Lawson and Alan Bersin** trace the emergence of homeland security as a concept familiar to the American public to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Published in 2020, with almost two decades since the founding of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the authors seek to evaluate the impact of efforts to “secure the homeland” from “bad” people since 2001. Homeland security encompasses a broad range of distinct tasks: border security and immigration, domestic counterterrorism, emergency response and disaster relief, protection of critical facilities, protection of high-level officials, response to disease outbreaks, combating transnational crime, and counterespionage. Almost immediately after 9/11, Congress created a new cabinet-level position, DHS, to oversee these tasks. However, many missions remained within the purview of existing agencies such as the FBI, FEMA, and the Secret Service. DHS focused primarily on border security, immigration, transportation security, disaster relief, and the protection of critical facilities and individuals through the agencies it oversaw, such as Customs and Border Protection, ICE, and the Coast Guard.

Although some of DHS’s varied responsibilities require close coordination between agencies, e.g., ICE and CBP, many have no overlap in mission or reason to coordinate. As the authors write, “DHS looks more like a holding company than an integrated business.” DHS’s lack of a clear mission and the apparent lack of connection between its constituent agencies have been criticized since its conception. However, DHS has brought clarity to bureaucratic responsibility for homeland security and has improved its operations since its formation. DHS can also be critiqued for its disproportionate focus on terrorism. Despite the extreme rarity and relatively low death toll compared to, say, natural disasters, counterterrorism receives the most bureaucratic and financial support within the department. Finally, homeland security resources may be better allocated to recovery efforts than prevention, which may be elusive.

Figure 1.1 (below) illustrates the overlapping missions and agencies involved in homeland security.

Figure 1.1. The U.S. Homeland Security Enterprise.



In the next assigned chapter, former Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for Border, Immigration, and Trade Policy, **Seth M.M. Stodder**, offers a “rethink” of how borders should be conceived in an increasingly globalized world. Although we live in a world with tremendous transnational trade, Stodder argues borders remain central to the international system. To maintain border security, the United States provides CBP with broader powers to investigate travelers. CBP examines travelers and their possessions at points of entry (POEs) to prevent illegal entry into the United States or smuggling of contraband. It has the widest authority of any law enforcement agency, since it may perform searches absent probable cause, with the exception of invasive personal body searches.

In addition to expanded powers to law enforcement operating at the border, cooperation with international partners and the private sector has been critical to US border security since 9/11. For example, the US established C-TPAT, a partnership between approved importers and CBP to ensure the continued smooth flow of trade while heightening border security measures. This program and other similar partnerships with the private sector to segment cross-border flows between those that were and were not likely to be a potential security threat massively improved the flow of cross-border trade without compromising security. International partners were crucial to the security of maritime shipping destined for the United States through the Container Security Initiative (CSI). To enable these programs to effectively manage risk, the government began to pre-screen partners with new risk assessment tools using data that shipping companies provided ahead of time. The most important international partners for border security are Canada and Mexico, which share data through the National Targeting Center and coordinate responses to transnational terrorist threats. The author concludes by noting the rarity of terrorist incidents after 9/11 speaks to the success of these efforts, though terrorism-related deaths have increased, not decreased, since 9/11 and the formation of DHS.

In the third selection, **Chappell Lawson** explains how the US government segments cross-border flows by risk category. Border security needs to balance the risk of dangerous people or things entering the country with decreasing economic activity or excessive demands on taxpayer resources. Universal inspection was rejected for trade after the negative post-9/11 experience, with the exception of air passengers. Universal inspection imposes significant costs on travel and trade networks. The alternatives to universal inspection are no inspection, random inspection, and selective inspection. Random inspection has some deterrent effect and is used by CBP and TSA. Selective inspection requires a framework for identifying shipments and persons that warrant suspicion. Law enforcement must often rely on their experience and conspicuous pieces of information about a shipment or person, its novelty, or the absence of a legitimate explanation for the shipment or person’s trip to the United States. Algorithmic methods for targeting that fuse the data available to the government for screening still have a high false-positive rate, more than 97%, meaning only 3% of those targeted merit targeting. This is inherent to the work of screening, because of the high volume of cross-border travelers and shipments relative to “bad” actors. Lawson

recommends that the government evaluate the cost-efficacy of more intrusive and less selective inspection methods before adopting them going forward, given uncertain benefits and clear direct and indirect economic costs. He also advocates for more integrated data-sharing between federal, state, local, and foreign government agencies to facilitate more effective targeting. However, for maritime shipments, the volume of cargo assumed to be low-risk means the system will be imperfect.

Doris Meissner, Amy Pope, and Andrew Selee, in the final selection from this volume, examine DHS's role in immigration and border policy. One of the principal motives for creating DHS was to merge disparate functions in the DOJ and Treasury for immigration and customs, respectively, into one department. Within DHS, CBP, ICE, and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) carry out the border security and immigration functions. As of the publication of the book, the US spent 25% more on immigration enforcement than on all other federal law enforcement functions combined. (That number climbed steeply following passage of the Trump Administration's "Big Beautiful Bill" in 2025. According to US government figures, ICE is now the highest-funded law enforcement agency in the country, and its funding grew from about \$10 billion in base budget in 2024 and 2025 to \$85 billion to be spent over four years, following the bill's passage.)

In historical perspective, the United States did not begin enforcing immigration laws in earnest until the late nineteenth century, eager as the country was for more laborers and a larger population. While initial immigration laws were written ostensibly to keep out undesirables such as "idiots, lunatics, convicts," discriminatory legislation, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act make clear that there were noteworthy exceptions. In the early 20th century, a previously tacit connection between great power competition and immigration was made more explicit, specifically out of the fear that immigrants from rival countries would work to undermine the United States and/or inculcate Americans with "problematic" ideologies. In the late 20th century, events like the 1983 Beirut Barracks Bombing and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing shifted attention from espionage on behalf of enemy nation-states to the importance of border security to preventing attacks by non-state actors, but this did not emerge as a core concern in border security until after 9/11.

After the formation of DHS, the job of tracking potentially threatening persons entering the United States was split between ICE before entry, CBP at the border, and USCIS upon entry into the United States. Although DHS helps coordinate these agencies, its limited ability to connect the dots remains a national security concern, and these agencies tend to be plagued by slow, outdated processes. The most successful effort has been to extend borders outwards through initiatives like the Visa Waiver Program, where travelers are screened well before travel to the United States by a consular officer. This program was strengthened after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. However, international partners, especially European countries with strict privacy laws, undermine the program's ability to screen effectively. Refugee screening is an area that has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, despite being the most thorough of any class of person entering the United States. The screening process includes biometric data collection, interviews with USCIS officials, and biographical background checks. The inefficient process is difficult to justify, considering bad actors can easily enter the United States in other ways. At the Southwest border, DHS has focused on partnering with Latin American countries to identify Special Interest Aliens traveling from one of thirty-five countries in the Middle East and North Africa with significant terrorist activity. The more general goal of managing illegal immigration requires a close relationship with Mexico, since it can control the flow of migrants trying to reach the United States from Central America. Through US-VISIT, DHS employs biometric data to manage travelers who may overstay their visa in the United States. Although this matches 97% of traveler exits to their entry with biometric data, DHS has no means of acting if a person overstays their Visa. The authors conclude by recommending greater inter-agency coordination, diplomacy to improve Mexican and European support on southwest border security and the Visa Waiver Program, respectively, and an end to unactionable biometric data collection.

In three chapters of *More or Less of Nearly Everything*, **Ben Rohrbaugh** examines the history and future of border security policy. Chapter Five traces the evolution of border management from an early industrial-era model focused on customs revenue and territorial control to the twentieth-century nation-state approach centered on migration enforcement and forward-deployed security. Historically, borders were lightly enforced spaces where governments collected tariffs at key nodes and relied on military force only when lawlessness escalated. This model worked when travel and trade were slow, limited, and geographically constrained, but it was overwhelmed by the explosion of mobility driven by rail, automobiles, and air travel. The chapter shows how technological change and colonial competition sharpened the definition of national borders and made the precise location of sovereignty far more important than it had been in earlier periods.

The twentieth-century model emphasized physical control of the border line through patrols, visas, passports, and hardened ports of entry, with security measured by visible enforcement and slower processing. This approach treated security and

facilitation of cross-border transit and trade as competing goals. It relied heavily on officers making rapid judgments at points of entry, often with little advance information. While this model occasionally succeeded through officer intuition, such as in the case of the would-be Millennium bomber, it proved poorly suited to detecting modern threats such as terrorism and transnational crime. The chapter argues that relying on a single point of inspection and minimal information sharing left borders vulnerable and made them political flashpoints rather than effective security systems.

In Chapter Six, **Rohrbaugh** examines the post-9/11 shift in border security policy. After 9/11, the twentieth-century border model appeared inaccurate. A new risk management model emerged that treated borders as flows of people and goods rather than fixed lines. Drawing on examples such as attempted airline bombings and attempted smuggling, the chapter shows how threats increasingly exploit the speed of global travel and supply chains, making interception at the physical border too late. To address this, risk is assessed before people and things arrive at the border using advances in surveillance technology, data availability, international intelligence integration, and partnerships with industry.

In Chapter Seven, **Rohrbaugh**, takes a closer look at migration and US border security policy. Rohrbaugh argues U.S. migration enforcement remains rooted in a twentieth-century framework that is increasingly mismatched with contemporary migration patterns. The US-Mexico border is a unique problem, due to the length of the border, historically tense relations between the US and Mexico inhibiting cooperation, and the economic incentives for US employers to take advantage of the desperation of migrant laborers from less developed Mexico. In 1992, Border Patrol began to monitor ports of entry in San Diego and El Paso to prevent illegal crossings rather than find and expel illegal crossers after they entered the United States. Border Patrol also expanded from 3,000 agents in the early 1990s to 21,000 today. The result of these enforcement actions is a decline from more than 1.5M apprehensions per year in the 1990s to approximately 500,000 in the 2010s. However, once migrants enter the United States, apprehension is unlikely, with ICE functioning more as a deterrent than an effective enforcement tool.

In 2013, the type of migrant crossing the Southwest border changed. Instead of economic migrants from Mexico, a growing share of migrants were refugees fleeing gang-controlled territories in Central America. The Trump administration entered office three years later with stated plans to staunch this new type of migration, but despite being “appallingly cruel,” illegal border crossing grew in 2018 and 2019, only slowing after the administration used tariffs to compel the Mexican government to ramp up its enforcement efforts, among other bilateral activities.

Despite elite (and public) consensus on the need for immigration reform, progress has stalled. Two changes are needed. First, there needs to be an expansion of pathways for legal immigration including based on humanitarian criteria. Second, refugee intake needs to be done somewhere other than the Southwest border. Instead, Rohrbaugh proposes asylum locations throughout Central America where intake can be processed, and so there is not a two-tiered asylum process, one for those who cross the border and one for those who do not.

MIGRATION AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Javier Corrales and Will Freeman argue in the *Journal of Democracy* that the biggest threat to democratic governance in Latin America is organized crime. Criminal groups undermine democracy by intimidating candidates and voters or corrupting governance. Latin America successfully moved past military dictatorships with institutional reforms in the 1990s. Today, organized crime groups in Latin America operate as both states and firms. As states, they represent a significant military force, capable of coercing the government and population. As firms, they use the international market for funds and resources to supply their military power (e.g., guns from the United States). States struggle to rein in these groups because the risk to the state of clashing with organized crime is high, while the cost, tolerating their illicit activity, appears relatively low. Latin American states have at various times combatted, tolerated, or become one with organized crime. Notable narcostates include Panama (1983-1989) and Honduras (2014-2022). In addition to weakening democracies directly, organized crime groups increase the risk of reactionary strongmen promising to crush criminal groups with an iron fist taking power (e.g., Bukele in El Salvador). At this time, organized crime groups are too heavily armed and the state too heavily coopted in many Latin American countries, so the best route forward is negotiation and criminal justice reform to weaken organized crime’s power over time.

Gonzalez et al. describe a new era in Latin American migration. After solidarity and cooperation in response to mass migration in the early 2010s, the region is increasingly moving to bilateral deportation-based approaches. In South America, countries opened their doors to Venezuelan migrants after the 2014 economic collapse and protests. However, limited institutional capacity to manage and integrate migrants has led to initial acceptance giving way to political backlash against migrants. Mexico and Costa Rica have changed from pathways to destinations for many migrants as they have expanded their refugee systems. In the Caribbean, efforts at regional integration have been mired by the reluctance to accept Haitians fleeing their collapsing country. The South American response to emigration from Venezuela offers an example of the possibility for the region to manage migration, but it needs to be anchored in stronger, more permanent institutions.

Selee et al. analyze the little-discussed increase in migration within Latin America since 2010. The number of immigrants in Latin America doubled between 2010 and 2022, from eight million to 16 million, largely due to displacement crises in Venezuela and Haiti. However, economic migration within Latin America has also increased. Venezuelans have generally been received more openly than Haitian migrants in the region due to language differences and racial discrimination. Although Latin American countries still lack the institutional capacity to integrate migrants, the growth of migration within Latin America, not just to North America, was unimaginable just two decades ago.

One year into the second Trump administration, Muzaffar Chishti and his co-authors examine the administration's immigration policy. With a promise of mass deportations, the administration has worked quickly, using 38 of 225 executive orders to change immigration policy (there were 220 executive orders in Trump's entire first term). Congress has cooperated, and the Supreme Court revoked Temporary Protected Status for 600,000 Venezuelans. The effect has been dramatic. Unauthorized arrivals at the US-Mexico border fell to the lowest levels since the 1970s. ICE arrests have quadrupled since Trump took office, and 622,000 non-citizens have been deported in the first year, but this number is well short of the 1 million promised. It is also lower than the 778,000 repatriated during the final year of the Biden administration, though this figure includes those turned away at the border and those deported. The administration claims 1.9 million self-deportations, though it provides no evidence for this figure. 1.5 million refugees have lost legal protections, and the CBO anticipates a decline in legal immigration with negative long-term economic implications. ICE was also cleared to arrest unauthorized immigrants at "sensitive" locations like schools and hospitals.

Congress has supported President Trump via the Laken-Riley Act and "Big Beautiful Bill." The Laken-Riley Act mandated detention without bond for noncitizens arrested or charged with theft-related crimes. The \$170 billion allocated for DHS's immigration-enforcement operations represented a quintupling of expenditure on immigration enforcement. Despite the shock and awe of mass arrests, a decline in those turned away at the border (possibly evidence of deterring would-be unauthorized travelers) means that Trump has fallen short of both his 1M deportation goal and the Biden administration's 778,000 deportations/repatriations in 2024. ICE has expanded its "digital dragnet" by buying private sector data as well as data across law enforcement and now social service (Medicaid, Social Security, etc.) databases. Palantir has been contracted to build Immigration OS to apply this data to enforcement efforts.

President Trump has massively expanded the application of force in immigration enforcement efforts. In an unprecedented move, the military was deployed to New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Texas for border enforcement at a cost of \$1.3 billion in 2025. ICE has conducted numerous high-profile raids across the United States, detaining unknown numbers of immigrants. The National Guard was deployed to Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland until the Supreme Court ruled Trump lacked the authority to federalize the National Guard in December. Trump has also sought to use the Federal budget to pressure non-cooperative state and local jurisdictions into supporting his agenda. For example, the administration threatened to withhold FEMA disaster relief funding unless states cooperated with ICE, until a federal judge ruled this unconstitutional in September 2025. Cooperation from local law enforcement has been central to ICE's deportations, with 52% of ICE detentions coming from jails, especially in cooperating states like Texas and Florida.

The Trump administration has also redefined American citizenship. In addition to seeking to end birthright citizenship (pending a Supreme Court decision this year), it has sought to ban immigrants with "anti-American" sentiment, end asylum for those seeking refugee protection, and ban immigration from certain countries. The administration has banned or restricted immigration from 39 mostly African countries, while simultaneously offering a \$1 million "gold card" pathway

to permanent legal residence and citizenship through naturalization, and encouraging immigration from Nordic countries and South Africa. This shift has transformed USCIS from a benefits-granting agency to a fraud-detection and enforcement agency requiring its own police force. H1-B visas now require a \$100,000 application fee. Refugee resettlement was suspended on Trump's first day in office, except for a small number of South African refugees. Finally, the administration has sought to impose hardships and encourage self-deportation with an offer of a flight ticket and a \$1,000 payment to unauthorized immigrants. Although it remains to be seen how permanent these changes to immigration policy will be, they have already had a dramatic and long-lasting impact on immigration and the lives of immigrants in the United States.

Jeanne Batalova explores the question of the composition of the population of current US immigrants. America has the world's largest foreign-born population at 47.8M people and is currently near a historical high at 15% of the population. Roughly half of foreign-born people in America are naturalized citizens, 25% are lawful permanent residents, and another 25% are unauthorized immigrants. Increasingly, immigrants are from Latin America and Asia instead of Europe. Immigrants tend to concentrate in Texas, Florida, California, and New York, though other states like Illinois and Georgia also have large immigrant populations.

Will Freeman explains the impact of Maduro's capture in Latin America and likely next steps for the Trump administration. The capture's swift and seamless nature has led to speculation that regime insiders betrayed Maduro. Freeman argues that toppling Venezuela's regime is unlikely, but Trump may secure access to oil and assistance with deporting Venezuelan refugees in the United States. Within the Trump administration, JD Vance and Stephen Miller favor the more modest aims, whereas Marco Rubio seeks to have the regime toppled. The Trump administration is incentivized and likely cooperate with, and limit the demands of the new Venezuelan leader, Delcy Rodriguez. Trump officials view her as pragmatic, are worried about the chaos of regime change, and she is likely to meet some demands. The biggest consequences of Maduro's capture may be felt in Cuba instead of Venezuela. Cuba is dependent on Venezuelan aid, especially for energy, and both Russia and China are unlikely to fill the void. If Rodriguez agrees to demands to end aid, it may spell the end of the regime in Havana. Trump has also threatened Colombia, though it is unlikely to follow through on this threat, given reliance on Colombian cooperation for counternarcotics operations and the likelihood that the leftist President will be supplanted by a conservative in the May elections. Also telling has been the muted response from other Latin American leaders. Aside from Brazilian President Lula's condemnation, Latin American leaders have remained silent, recognizing US hegemony in the Western hemisphere.