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## Pushing the US-Mexico border south: United States' immigration policing throughout the Americas

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**Abstract:** In the last 30 years, the USA has constructed a complex architecture throughout Latin America aimed at stopping migrants in transit before they reach US borders. This article identifies several components critical to this transnational policing. One component is the development of security 'partnerships' with transit countries, through which the USA provides funding, equipment, and training for migrant interdiction. Another component is a vast international expansion of Department of Homeland Security networks aimed at detecting and intercepting the illicit mobility of people and things. A third component entails the significant stretching of US military presence throughout Latin America and the Caribbean through a variety of means. This paper argues that as the USA extends its border policing activities through time and space, it conceals its direct role in migration policing activities that violate human rights and fuel illicit activities, distracts from policy failures, and evades international obligations.

**Keywords:** border; detention; deportation; deterrence; security; immigration; smuggling; corruption; Mexico; Central America; policing; human rights; USA.

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## 1 Introduction

In testimony to the US Senate in February 2017, then-Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) John Kelly stated, “Border security requires a layered approach that extends far beyond our shores, throughout the hemisphere, in partnership with our neighbors to the south and north” (Kelly, 2017). While public, political, and media attention to US border enforcement is overwhelmingly focused on the physical border with Mexico in recent decades, the USA’s patrolling and policing of immigration have increasingly expanded farther and farther afield in what amounts to “a multilayered, extraterritorial extension of the border” throughout the Americas and beyond [Miller and Nevins, (2017), p.147; Coleman, 2007]. In this article, I argue that through its transnational policing, the USA simultaneously claims power and conceals unpalatable consequences of its actions.

Since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 opposing European colonisation in the Americas, the United States has intervened – politically, economically, and militarily – in countries throughout the region. Indeed, the US Government has long been willing to overlook human rights abuses, condone violence, and ignore vulnerable populations in the western hemisphere. Border and migration policing outside of its own territorial border, couched in discourses of deterrence and security, are a contemporary form in which these aggressions and their consequences are obscured.

The *deterrence* narrative, first strongly articulated by the administration of President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, relies on the belief that making immigration more difficult and costly will deter future migrants. Key Reagan-era deterrence policies were increased border policing and harsher penalties, including detention and deportation. In response to Cuban and Haitian migration, Reagan also interdicted migrants at sea and detained them at US-held Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (Flynn, 2014; Mountz and Loyd, 2014). In the 1990s under President Bill Clinton, the Border Patrol adopted a strategy of ‘prevention through deterrence’, which entailed increased patrolling, surveillance, and detention near the US-Mexico border (Núñez-Neto, 2008; Martin, 2012; Meissner et al., 2013; Flynn, 2014; Bruzzone, 2016). In addition to continuing the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations’ Guantánamo detentions, the Clinton Administration also extended the deterrence logic south of the US-Mexico border by land, orchestrating and funding the interception and detention of migrants en route to the USA, in transit countries throughout Latin America (Flynn, 2014). After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the USA, belief and investment in deterrence-focused strategies became even more central to the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations’ approaches to immigration enforcement, particularly as immigration was increasingly conflated with terrorism in public and political discourse, and conceptualised as a security threat (Núñez-Neto, 2008; Flynn, 2014; Bruzzone, 2016).

Repeatedly throughout US history, concerns over national *security* have been used to rationalise discriminatory, racialised, and violent actions and policies toward immigrants. Outstanding earlier examples include the Chinese exclusion laws of the 1880s, forced ‘repatriation’ of 500,000 Mexicans and Mexican-American US citizens in the 1930s, and the internment of over 30,000 Japanese and Japanese-American US citizens during World War II (all examples which starkly illustrate the racist foundations of national identity as well as of those particular policies). Today, ‘security’ continues to serve as a powerful justification for exceptional US actions, especially toward particular racialised groups

(Nevins, 2010). In the contemporary security milieu, however, the USA's efforts to protect internal security are no longer confined within national territorial borders. Instead, the government routinely looks beyond national borders in efforts to anticipate, intercept, and prevent security threats at and inside its own borders (Bigo, 2001; Coleman, 2007; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2012, 2014). Any type of illicit mobility is portrayed as suspect and criminal, and all migrants – with a special emphasis on those categorised as non-white – are considered to be potentially nefarious, capable of any illicit act from minor crimes to terrorism (Coleman, 2007; Nevins, 2010). The framing of immigration enforcement in rationales of deterrence and security makes the geographic sprawl of US immigration and border policing in the region seem necessary and matter of course.

This article explores the extra-territorial sprawl of US policing. In so doing, the article contributes to theoretical discussions about how borders are being displaced from fixed territorial lines through immigration enforcement strategies. The USA is far from alone in its efforts to prevent migrants from reaching its physical boundary. The expanding architecture of US immigration enforcement is akin to 'externalisation' strategies used by European countries to thwart entry of asylum seekers into their own national borders (Collyer, 2007; Hyndman and Mountz, 2008; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). Some states have routinised offshore interdiction and processing of migrants bound for their territorial borders (Mountz, 2010; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2012). Australia, for example, has excised parts of its territory for migration purposes, to create a legal wall against the claims of landed asylum seekers, and contracted third countries (such as Indonesia and Nauru) for detaining asylum seekers (Mountz, 2010, 2011; Hodge, 2015). Meanwhile, alarmist narratives of out of control migration prevent recognition of and reconciliation with the forces of neoliberal globalisation and the resulting inequalities driving migration across national borders from poorer to richer nations (Bigo, 2002; Nevins, 2008; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). In all of these efforts, states deploy a language of chaos and crisis to reconfigure how borders are experienced and understandings of sovereignty (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014).

Amidst such geographically expansive enforcement strategies, scholars argue that sites for the reinforcement of borders proliferate (Coleman, 2007; Walters, 2008; Jones, 2012; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2012; BurrIDGE et al., 2017), and have called for a broader consideration of places and processes within border studies (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Johnson et al., 2011). At the same time, scholars caution against thinking of borders as everywhere and anywhere. Jones and Johnson (2014), for example, point to how borders work selectively to differentiate particular groups of people. BurrIDGE et al. (2017) caution that conceptualising borders as ubiquitous risks portraying the state as all-powerful, and makes it impossible to imagine alternative futures. Instead, they suggest a re-conceptualisation of borders as polymorphic, a framing that pushes consideration of how border-making processes can be manifest in multiple forms yet not everywhere, used unevenly to categorise and divide, and work to expand state power. This article builds on this scholarship by exploring how extra-territorial migration policing practices extend US power while simultaneously obscuring and eluding responsibility for violent consequences of this policing.

In what follows, I first provide an overview of the extension of US policing of unauthorised mobilities in Latin America. Largely through the formation of 'international partnerships', the State Department, DHS, and the US military have vastly expanded their border policing capacity beyond US territorial borders. Then, I discuss inconvenient

realities and consequences obscured within this expanding enforcement net by identifying six truths embedded within it. I show that US extra-border policing deflects attention from strategy failures, contributes to increased violence for migrants en route, fuels illicit activities, evades responsibility for international obligations to vulnerable populations, facilitates state violation of migrants' human rights, and infuses an assumption of immigrant criminality into Mexican and Central American border policing. The article concludes by considering how these truths contribute to theorisation of the border and bordering practices.

Information was gathered through media accounts and publicly available documents and reports. My goal is to sketch a partial framework of US policing activities south of the US-Mexico border; it is by no means a comprehensive accounting. As a case in point, one important source is congressional testimony, in which leaders of departments and agencies aim to impart enough information to the US Congress to explain and justify their expenditures. Often, discussion of particular activities and initiatives is framed as representative examples, suggesting that they are just sharing a small piece of more extensive operations. In addition, the US Government (particularly the military) is known to engage in 'black' (secret) operations – within and outside the USA – undisclosed to the public (Paglen, 2009); it is likely that these operations include border policing activities. Incomplete as it may be, however, the picture assembled indicates a complex and extensive architecture of US influence and intervention.

## **2 Pushing out power**

I now review some of the activities of the three departments within the USA federal government most directly and deeply involved in extra-territorial endeavours to control human mobility: the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Defence. The goals, pursuits, and budgets for all three departments are determined through the office of the President of the USA (executive branch) and the Congress (legislative branch) working together, albeit at times through a contentious process of negotiation. Then, I offer an initial analysis of ways in which the new administration of President Donald Trump is both continuing and modifying US strategies for extra-border immigration policing.

In their approaches toward monitoring and curtailing migration, all three government departments promote both international and inter-agency cooperation. The Department of State has emphasised the importance of bolstering security and stability in migrant-sending countries, through broad initiatives. A central component of this strategy has been the development of regional security 'partnerships' with origin and transit countries, which often include the provision of resources for border and migration policing. The DHS has cultivated an extensive international presence, through – like the Department of State – working with regional partners for the explicit purpose of detecting and intercepting the illicit mobility of people and things. The Department of Defence oversees US military activities throughout Latin America. Under the direction of the Southern Command, the military coordinates multi-nation exercises and operations, trains other countries' police and military forces in security and border patrolling, and provides advisors and equipment. The strategies and actions of these three departments work collectively to solidify and extend US presence throughout the region, far beyond US borders.

### 2.1 *State Department: regional security initiatives*

The US Government has long invested in strategies to involve ‘partners’ in policing its borders, in order to stop US-bound migrants in source and transit countries before they ever reach the US-Mexico border (Coleman, 2007). One early (and still existing) example of US efforts to enlist other nations in controlling migration south of its border is the Regional Conference on Migration, formed in 1996 under US leadership, with Canada, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Central American states as additional members, as a forum to share information and ‘best practices’, engage in joint policing efforts, and train immigration authorities (Falconí and Ordoñez, 2005). Since the early 2000s, however, the USA has concentrated on the formation of ‘regional security initiatives’, through which the USA supplies money, equipment, and training to partner nations. Though led by the State Department, other departments and agencies within the US Government are involved in funding and implementing this support. While many of these initiatives target a broad set of illicit mobilities, particularly of drugs, the mobility of US-bound migrants has consistently been a focus. The USA has formed regional security initiatives throughout the Americas, such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative and the Colombian Strategic Development Initiative. Here, I discuss the two largest, most significant regional ‘partnerships’: with Mexico and Central America.

Given that the US-Mexico border is the primary entry point for illicit migration to the USA, the USA developed the earliest of these security partnerships with Mexico. With US support, as part of *Plan Sur*, in 2001 Mexican police and military began stopping and deporting migrants from southern Mexico – largely near the Mexico-Guatemala border – by implementing checkpoints, growing detention capacity, and raids (Jaramillo, 2001; Flynn, 2002). In 2008, under President Bush, the USA and Mexico intensified cooperation through the Mérida Initiative (which initially included assistance to Central America as well). As of November 2016, Mexico had received \$1.6 billion through Mérida, for the stated goals of fighting organised crime, modernising Mexico’s borders, reforming Mexico’s criminal justice system, and protecting civil and human rights (Meyer and Seelke, 2015; Seelke and Finklea, 2017). With its focus on transnational criminal organisations and drug cartels, Mérida established an important discourse of ‘shared responsibility’ for fighting illicit transnational activity (Gallaher, 2015), along with funnelling substantial equipment and training for militarising Mexican borders and policing mobility.

In 2014, the USA increased pressure on Mexico to assist in dealing with the ‘surge’ in unaccompanied children (UACs) and families from Central America. That summer, Mexico’s President Enrique Peña Nieto launched *Plan Frontera Sur*, the Southern Border Plan, as a new component within the Mérida Initiative. Presented as an effort to protect migrants travelling through Mexico, *Plan Frontera Sur* channelled personnel and other resources for policing migration to Mexico’s borders with Guatemala and Belize. This has included equipment and training for ground and air surveillance, establishment of twelve naval bases on rivers, development of three ‘security cordons’ extending 100 miles north of the Guatemalan and Belize borders, more immigration agents cooperating with police and military in the southern border region, and more checkpoints [Seelke and Finklea, (2017), p.10; Isacson and Kinosian, 2017]. As one journalist put it, with *Plan Frontera Sur*, the US Government “effectively outsourced border control, and shifted the frontier 3,000 kilometres south, with layers of new controls that stretched up

through Chiapas (at the border with Guatemala) to the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, to the skinniest portion of Mexico, where traffic was easiest to control” (Nolen, 2017).

The US Government has also steadily expanded its security partnerships with Central American countries, beginning in 2001 with *Plan Venceremos* (we shall overcome) in Guatemala, operating in tandem with Mexico’s *Plan Sur*, through which north-bound migrants were stopped, detained, and deported by a wide range of Guatemalan officials (not just police and immigration officials) (Flynn, 2002). Under President Bush, the 2008 Mérida Initiative included the seven Central American nations, but in 2010 under President Obama, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) was created to separate out attention to this region, with particular focus on the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Assistance provided by the USA includes equipment – ranging from boats, aircraft, and ground vehicles, to communications and surveillance devices – and training in security and border inspection activities (Meyer and Seelke, 2015). Between 2008 and 2015, the US gave \$1.2 billion dollars in assistance to Central American countries through Mérida and CARSI (Meyer and Seelke, 2015). One example of how CARSI support has played out in targeted actions on the ground is Operation Rescue Angel, which took place in 2014 in Honduras. An elite Honduran force, trained by the US Border Patrol, stopped buses nearing the Guatemalan border and searched them for US-bound unaccompanied minors and children travelling with a parent, to prevent them from continuing their journey (Carcamo, 2014).

The US State Department has funnelled additional monies to Latin America aimed at improving security and stability, some of which goes toward migration and border policing. For example, in 2015, the State Department gave over \$20 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to improve asylum systems and screening in the Americas [Meyer et al., (2016), p.18]. The US Agency for International Development (USAID, within the State Department), has contracted with the for-profit International Organisation for Migration to establish new or renovate existing ‘reception’ centres in Central American countries for detention of apprehended migrants and processing and care of deported migrants (Meyer et al., 2016). Also in 2015, the Obama administration launched an additional massive plan intended to increase security and stability in Central America, asking for \$1 billion to pay for a more all-government approach to reforming and improving general conditions in the region (Biden, 2015; Congressional Research Service, 2017). Due to congressional delays, funds only began to be disbursed in early 2017, and with proposed cuts to foreign aid in President Trump’s pending budget the future of this Central American initiative is uncertain (Congressional Research Service, 2017). However, the funding of security, border, and migration policing portions of US assistance does not appear to be in doubt; for example, on 1 February 2018, the US Government under Trump agreed to disburse \$125 million of aid to Honduras, a majority of which will go to Honduran security forces (Gynther and Shahshahani, 2017).

## 2.2 DHS: international ‘partners’

While the US public generally hears about activities of the DHS inside the USA and at the country’s territorial borders, the DHS also spearheads a wide range of extra-territorial policing initiatives. Formed in 2002 as a response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the DHS oversees a number of agencies broadly classified as having to do with

public security, including functions in border control, immigration, anti-terrorism, cyber security, and disaster response. Fully subscribing to the view that protecting the ‘homeland’ requires an elastic understanding of national borders, many DHS agencies routinely engage in activities outside of the USA. As with the regional security agreements, a common emphasis is on ‘partnerships’. Here, I discuss select activities under the auspices of the US Coast Guard, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The general mission of the United States Coast Guard (USCG), which came under the auspices of the DHS in 2002, has significantly broadened from its original focus on maritime law enforcement and safety. Activities shifted to include migrant interdiction with the high-profile Cuban and Haitian sea migrations in the early 1980s under President Reagan. The USA now has over 60 bilateral agreements regarding maritime law enforcement (US Coast Guard, 2017a); some of these allow the USCG to pursue and board flagged vessels, patrol territorial waters with sea and aircraft, investigate suspected illicit activities, and enlist other nations in interdiction and prosecution efforts. The USCG categorises its activities as non-homeland security missions or homeland security missions; the latter includes migrant interdiction (US Coast Guard, 2017b). Migrant interdiction also often occurs in the course of other actions, and is considered an important cost-saving mechanism by preventing migrants from reaching the USA, where they are legally entitled to more rights and protections.

ICE also has an extensive global presence, initiated by ICE’s predecessor, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. In 2016, the then-ICE director proudly reported that the “ICE currently deploys approximately 250 Special Agents, 11 Deportation Officers, and 176 support staff to 62 offices in 46 countries” (Saldaña, 2016); 23 of these offices are in the Western Hemisphere. The branch of ICE that appears to be most actively developing these international relationships is Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). On its government web page, HSI is described as the “critical investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security”, whose “international force is the department’s largest investigative presence abroad and gives HSI one of the largest international footprints in U.S. law enforcement” (ICE, 2017b). HSI International Operations coordinates with foreign counterparts and “builds international partnerships through outreach and training” (ICE, 2017a).

In 2011, as part of his Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime, President Obama sought to aggressively expand ICE’s international presence through the Illicit Pathways Attack Strategy (IPAS). IPAS’s stated goal was to “extend operating borders”, with a focus on human smuggling and trafficking (ICE, 2017c; Peaco, 2012). As part of IPAS, ICE’s HSI formed Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIUs). For TCIUs, HSI personnel select and train foreign country “law enforcement officials, customs officers, immigration officers and prosecutors” [Kubiak, (2016), p.3] to work together with HSI personnel as a unit, with the goal of “enhanc[ing] transnational efforts against all forms of illicit trafficking with a particular focus on human smuggling” [Kubiak, (2016), p.3]. Selected foreign personnel are brought to train in the USA, in Glynco, Georgia. As of 2016, there were nine units in the TCIU program, including in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama, with plans to expand to additional countries (Kubiak, 2016). As an ICE official explained in congressional testimony in April 2017, “[TCIU] efforts, often thousands of miles from the U.S.-Mexico border in countries like Colombia and Panama, essentially act as an outer layer of security for our Southwest Border” (Ayala, 2017).

ICE also leads specific extra-territorial initiatives to target human mobility, in cooperation with international partners as well as with other US Government agencies. For example, Operation Citadel, initiated in the summer of 2015, targets transnational criminal organisations. Led by HSI, Citadel works through TCIUs in Mexico, Central America and South America to go after human smuggling networks, and it involves inter-agency cooperation with the US Coast Guard, CBP, Department of Defence, Department of Justice, Department of State, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (Ayala, 2017; ICE, 2016; Kubiak, 2016). Operation Mesoamerica was one 15-month multinational investigation within Citadel, and involved cooperation with HSI attaché offices in Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama, including the participation of the national police and attorney general offices of some of these countries (ICE, 2016).

CBP is another agency within the DHS that openly conceptualises the US border as elastic. In its 2016 Global Engagement Strategy document, the then-CBP commissioner stated that the agency “will continue to reinforce the principle of extending the ‘zone of security’ in order to transcend the physical borders of the United States” [US CBP, (2016), p.2]. CBP has also been growing its international presence. It now maintains offices in 21 cities around the world (Miller and Nevins, 2017). The agency claims that on a typical day, CBP conducts operations in 51 countries and employs over 900 people working internationally [US CBP, (2017), p.1]. The CBP’s Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) has trained and provided equipment to border and security forces throughout Latin America, including in Belize, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Peru [Miller and Nevins, (2017), p.151].

### *2.3 Department of Defence: US Southern Command and ‘friendly networks’*

The US military has long maintained an active presence throughout the Americas, with an infamous history of intervention and influence on internal affairs of many countries. It continues to push out this presence today, now largely through the language of mutual security and the development of ‘partners’ and ‘friendly networks’.

The US Southern Command, based in Florida, oversees US military activities throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and adjacent waters, coordinating regional operations of the US Navy, Army, Air Force, Marines, Special Operations, and three joint task forces. The US military maintains permanent locations for personnel and equipment, in a number of places throughout the Americas. Major installations are the base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; the Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras (which it shares with the Honduran Air Force); and two Cooperative Security Locations, in Aruba and Curacao (The Netherlands Antilles), and Comalapa, El Salvador (US Southern Command, 2017a). Additional smaller facilities are in Antigua and Barbuda; the Bahamas; Colombia; Peru; and possibly in Costa Rica (Costa Rica has been denied by the US military) (Wright, 2015).

While the maintenance of designated physical locations is clearly critical for its approach to the Americas, the US Southern Command, like the State Department and the DHS, places tremendous emphasis on partnerships with other governments. As Admiral Kurt Tidd, current Commander of the Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), explained in congressional testimony in April 2017,

“...USSOUTHCOM is becoming a more agile organization and redoubling our commitment to – and integration with – our partners. This isn’t a matter of altruism; it’s a matter of our national interests, because in this uncertain world our security partnerships are more important than ever before. Trust and understanding can’t be surged when crisis hits, and complex threats can’t be addressed by any one nation or agency. Mr. Chairman, it’s simple, really: our security partnerships help create a layered defense of our homeland by keeping our shared home stable and secure.” [Tidd, (2017), p.4]

Southern Command also works simultaneously to develop and strengthen relationships with other US Government departments and agencies (Tidd, 2017). The overarching aim is to build, as one official put it, ‘friendly networks’ that facilitate nimbleness and efficiency in addressing conceivable challenges (Ferdinando, 2017; Tidd, 2017). The official explained, “With most of the challenges – be they security, even humanitarian issues or disasters – you need a network...It needs to be across borders and across institutions. It has to be transnational. It has to be interagency. The ‘friendly network’ is critical for all of the challenges” (Colonel Barbara Fick, quoted in Ferdinando, 2017).

The provision of training and equipment and the coordination of joint exercises are key mechanisms for developing and maintaining these transnational networks. Some military units and exercises are focused on building specific capacities, such as drug and migrant interdiction skills, in select nations. For example, Commander Tidd’s 2016 report to Congress detailed the activities of Special Operations Command South (among numerous other components of the Southern Command), which included training special military and police units in ten nations “to improve their capacity to conduct ground and maritime interdiction, broaden and reinforce their civil affairs programs, engage in Military Information Support Operations (MISO), and develop their intelligence capacities” in order to “develop self-sustaining capabilities to better protect themselves, contribute to regional security and stability, and collaborate with U.S. and other forces” [Tidd, (2016), p.34]. Miller and Nevins (2017) describe operations of US-trained border security forces on the Mexico-Guatemala border, Guatemala-Honduras border, and Guatemala-El Salvador border. Units receive training from the Border Patrol’s BORTAC unit (discussed above) and the US military, often including time in Fort Benning, Georgia, at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (Miller and Nevins, 2017). This Institute was formerly known as the School of the Americas, where a number of ruthless Latin American dictators and military units responsible for broad human rights violations, violence, and mass murders were trained.

Southern Command also facilitates multi-nation training exercises. The annual Tradewinds (since 1984) is a “Caribbean-focused training exercise which helps participants better respond to natural disasters and land and maritime threats, including illicit trafficking” (US Southern Command, 2017c), and involves 19 nations, many US military components, and over 2,500 personnel. UNITAS, conducted annually since 1960, is a similar exercise for participating nations from Central and South America, which focuses on developing partner naval forces and collective capabilities to respond to maritime threats and illicit activities (US Southern Command, 2016). Additionally, the Southern Command contributes military support for broad inter-agency, multi-national operations. One example is Operation Martillo, launched in 2012 as part of the Obama administration’s Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime and the CARSI. Martillo has entailed the direct participation of 14 countries (throughout Latin America,

plus Canada, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom) in monitoring and interdiction of illicit activities, goods, and people (US Southern Command, 2017b).

This overview provides specific examples hinting at the vast scope of US extra-territorial policing, in both physical extent and range of activities. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all of the activities conducted through these initiatives and partnerships are ill-intentioned or without benefit. To the contrary, some of these activities provide important humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. And certainly, strategies to slow or stop migration must address the fundamental causes of migration, which requires attention to daily insecurity, instability, violence, and poverty. However, as previous scholarship has made clear, development aid does not necessarily reduce emigration, and in fact can even contribute to migration patterns (De Haas, 2007; Clemens, 2014). In addition, I emphasise that it is also critical that we keep in mind broader conceptual work taking place. Across all these agencies of the US Government, human mobility is regarded as a dire security threat. In this milieu, migration is conflated with crime, terrorism, and other illicit and immoral acts and all migrants are potentially dangerous. Narratives of crisis are leveraged in ways that facilitate significant, creeping geographical and operational extensions of power (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). This conceptual framework also justifies and normalises a militarised approach to human mobility, and excuses extreme responses. Furthermore, whatever the specific activity, location, or intent, all of these activities – from training to medical aid to military support – work to develop relationships, form dependencies, and establish and reinforce hierarchies. In short, whatever the immediate goals and outcomes, through these discourses and activities the USA claims the right to operate outside its own borders, and establishes mechanisms for doing so.

### **3 Changes under Donald Trump: continuing histories of US intervention**

It appears that under the administration of President Donald Trump, US extra-territorial efforts to police borders and human mobility are only intensifying. In June 2017, the US co-hosted (with Mexico) a conference in Miami, called ‘The Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America’. Attendees included high-level Trump cabinet members such as then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and then-DHS Secretary John Kelly, Southern Command leaders, heads of state of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and other regional countries, and an international collection of business leaders and multinational corporations interested in investing in the region. The two principal themes of this conference – prosperity and security – are indicative of the Trump administration’s general approach.

The first day of the conference focused on ‘prosperity’, and included opportunities for Central American government leaders to meet a range of private investors. Just as the Trump administration is aggressively cutting the State Department budget, endangering US non-military aid to the region (Isacson and Kinosian, 2017; Lakhani, 2017), in remarks at the conference, Secretary of State Tillerson encouraged Northern Triangle Governments to embrace partnerships with the private sector (Tillerson, 2017). Critics charge that such an emphasis on private investment over public aid works to cement private influence on governments in ways that will only further destabilise the region and potentially increase Central American migration (Gynther and Shahshahani, 2017;

Lakhani, 2017; Paley, 2016). The second day of the conference focused on ‘security’, and here promoting security clearly meant forwarding regional agreements and partnerships with aims such as fighting transnational criminal organisations, strengthening border security, sharing policing methods, and pushing Mexico and Central American countries to do more (CISPES, 2017; Whitefield and Charles, 2017). This is part of the Trump administration’s military-led approach to regional security. At the same time as it cuts State Department aid to the region, the administration is working to significantly increase the Defence Department’s budget, a shift that will likely put the US military firmly in charge of US aid disbursement to and relationships with Latin American governments (CISPES, 2017; Isacson and Kinoshian, 2017; Lakhani, 2017). One implication of this will likely be a greater militarisation of responses to unauthorised human mobility (Isacson and Kinoshian, 2017; Lakhani, 2017).

Human rights activists, some members of Congress, and scholars have protested these Trump era shifts toward a more military focus on regional security, and the push for private instead of government investment (CISPES, 2017; Gynther and Shahshahani, 2017; Lakhani, 2017). While Trump does appear to be accelerating them, these shifts are generally consistent with the USA’s approach toward Latin America for decades, of military and economic influence and intervention. Indeed, the Trump strategy shows alarming points of convergence and continuation with troublesome histories of US interference in Central American governments and militaries, including its support of repressive, violent, and corrupt regimes (Gynther and Shahshahani, 2017; Isacson and Kinoshian, 2017; Miller and Nevins, 2017).

#### **4 Concealing consequences, evading responsibility**

Whether through ‘regional security initiatives’, ‘partnerships’, ‘friendly networks’, or encouragement of broad privatisation, the USA is actively building out its border enforcement architecture. Beyond extending – conceptually and geographically – US power, these extra-territorial efforts do additional work on and in space. I argue that this extension of policing obscures and evades responsibility for its inconvenient, embarrassing, and contradictory consequences. In this final section, I identify six truths hidden by and in the displacement of US borders through immigration policing, and then consider how identification of these truths contributes to scholarly understanding of the spatiality of contemporary bordering practices.

First, the elasticisation of the US southern border largely hides from public discussion the reality that US ‘deterrence’ policies do not necessarily deter migration. That is, while US extra-territorial policing may be effective in terms of preventing migrants from reaching US borders, they do not stop migration attempts altogether. If you consider US-supported enforcement efforts in Mexico and Central America, it becomes clear that a better term for how these policies work is ‘displacement’ [Wong, (2015), p.147]. The geographical dislocation of policing from US borders facilitates equivocation on this important distinction. By treating the physical border as elastic and expansive, policymakers are able to hide the mismatch between stated policy objectives (deterrence) and actual policy consequences (continued US-bound migration that does not reach the US border). Without closer inquiry, shifting numbers can erroneously be read as proof that US policing efforts are stopping migration. For example, after the so-called 2014 ‘surge’ of Central American children and families arriving at the US-Mexico border, in

2015 the DHS reported a 30% decrease in Border Patrol apprehensions (DHS, 2015), and the number of minors apprehended at the border fell by almost half [Smyth, (2015), p.3]. Then-DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson claimed that these 2015 apprehension numbers reflected “a lower level of attempted illegal migration at our borders” (DHS, 2015). Just as Secretary Johnson was touting lower US migrant apprehension numbers for 2015, however, they skyrocketed in Mexico. After the implementation of *Plan Frontera Sur* in 2014, the number of Central Americans detained in Mexico increased 71% [Isacson et al., (2015), p.2; Martínez, 2015]. Mexico now apprehends more Central Americans migrants in transit than the USA (Ureste, 2015). Consideration of the numbers in Mexico, therefore, suggests that US-bound migration is not decreasing; it is instead being stopped before reaching US borders. Recognition of this diversion is important because it begs the twin recognition that the USA is pushing off to elsewhere the challenges it faces related to immigration, instead of solving them, and ignoring persistent factors driving human mobility, such as violence and extreme global inequality (Nevins, 2010).

Second, this pushing south of policing is having violent and deadly consequences for migrants en route to the USA. As Mexico increased border enforcement at certain well-crossed points, migrants have forged new paths to avoid capture, taking more dangerous and arduous routes, into the highlands and jungles of Chiapas, more rural areas, and up the Pacific coast by sea (Boggs, 2015; Chaca, 2015; Flannery, 2015; Isacson et al., 2015). Away from the established shelter system, migrants now find themselves at higher risk for robbery, assault, rape, kidnapping, entanglement with gang activity, and death (Boggs, 2015; Chaca, 2015; Isacson et al., 2015; Barahona, 2016). By officially looking away from these realities, the USA ignores its complicity with these violences.

Third, the externalisation of immigration policing is fuelling a general increase in illicit activities. Studies have repeatedly shown that tougher border controls force determined migrants to depend on human smugglers, contributing to the development of smuggling networks, and driving up smugglers’ fees as well as risk and duration of migrants’ journeys (e.g., Salt and Stein, 1997; Kyle and Liang, 2001; Spener, 2004; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2012). This appears to be exactly the response to *Plan Frontera Sur* and other policing initiatives in the region (Isacson et al., 2015; *Traficaban Migrantes Asiáticos*, 2017). In Central America and Mexico, other illicit industries are growing along with human smuggling, including drug smuggling, illegal adoptions, and sex trafficking (Sandoval, 2013; Isacson et al., 2015). Government corruption is also on the rise, from simple bribes to more complex links between police, migration officials, and organised crime and gangs (Sandoval, 2012; Boggs, 2015; Isacson et al., 2015; Smyth, 2015; *Traficaban Migrantes Asiáticos*, 2017). Strategies supposedly aimed at targeting criminal activities end up encouraging them.

Fourth, in pushing immigration enforcement south, the USA is funding and sanctioning state violation of migrants’ rights. Despite the framing of *Plan Frontera Sur* as a plan to protect migrants, reports show a steep increase in complaints of abuse at the hands of Mexican officials. In addition to government corruption, state employees have displayed a new impunity toward migrants, targeting them with physical violence and cruelty in efforts to stop their journeys (Isacson et al., 2015; Smyth, 2015). A Mexican immigration lawyer said that the Southern Border Plan had produced a “climate of legalised anarchy” [quoted in Smyth, (2015), p.4]. For example, Mexican immigration officials have been accused of intentionally burning a field of grass in which migrants

were hiding (Smyth, 2015), using violent force to prevent migrants from boarding *La Bestia*, a train on a popular migrant route (Isacson et al., 2015), and detaining and beating indigenous Mexican citizens and accusing them of being Guatemalan migrants (Lakhani, 2016). In addition, there are even fewer safeguards in place than in the USA to protect migrants in Mexican and Central American detention facilities, and detainees report generally deplorable conditions, entailing extended durations (sometimes years), lack of information, and physical and mental mistreatment (Sin Fronteras, 2014; Isacson et al., 2015; Ureste, 2017). Despite reports of these problems, the US Government continues to fund and otherwise support the programs and initiatives that create them, and in so doing the USA enables and conceals flagrant violation of migrants' rights by its interlocutors.

Fifth, through its outsourcing of policing, the USA evades responsibility for vulnerable populations. One key responsibility that the USA is circumventing is respect for rights of asylum seekers, both the right to submit a petition for asylum and the right to have a petition fairly assessed. For example, in 2014 Mexico only granted refugee status to 16% of those asking for it, and it was clear that most migrants seeking refugee statuses were not even allowed to submit claims (Boggs, 2015). The US Government's strategy also avoids the negative optics (and press) that come from uncompassionate treatment of children by displacing that treatment south, out of sight of the US public. Minors are far less likely to receive asylum in Mexico than in the USA, for reasons including lack of support, detention in prison-like facilities, and inadequate screening mechanisms (Human Rights Watch, 2016). While the USA deported three out of every 100 minors it apprehended, Mexico deported 77 out of every 100 [Villegas and Rietig, (2015), p.1]. The US Government also avoids accountability for what happens to all of these deportees in Northern Triangle countries, where, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "neither national nor local authorities have, at this point, the capacity to reintegrate children in a safe manner" [quoted in Meyer et al., (2016), p.22]. In addition to handing off the dirty work of deportation and detention to other countries and undermining international obligations to migrants, the USA can feign ignorance of the consequences. These extra-territorial practices of bordering, then, work to significantly erode protections for migrants, and indeed human rights in general, in effect chipping steadily away at national and international rights frameworks and institutions designed to protect human rights in the aftermath of the second world war.

Sixth and finally, the expansion of the USA's extra-territorial border policing has entailed the marrying of immigration enforcement with criminal policing in Mexico and Central America. While this linking has increasingly been the case in the USA in the past two decades, as sometimes signalled by the term 'cimmigration' (Stumpf, 2006), it is a relatively new approach to immigration south of the US border. For example, this logic of criminalising human mobility has been methodically transferred to Mexico through the Mérida agreement (Gallaher, 2015). Because the Mérida Initiative foregrounds law enforcement training, any Mexican agency involved in law enforcement – including their own immigration agents – are taught tactics designed for policing drug traffickers, which can then be used against migrants. By funding and organising this training, the USA has effectively colluded in egregious human rights violations (Gallaher, 2015), including against migrants. In other words, by funding Mexico's drug war – already plagued with corruption, violence, and an air of impunity – the Mérida agreement has significantly

added to the dangers faced by migrants traversing Mexico.<sup>1</sup> The elasticisation of the border thus geographically extends the racialisation and criminalisation of immigration now endemic to the US approach to enforcement (Coleman, 2007; Nevins, 2010; Gallaher, 2015).

Identification of the truths obscured in the expanding US enforcement architecture contributes to understanding the conceptual and spatial work being done by contemporary bordering practices. As borders become increasingly displaced from fixed territorial lines, they serve various functions in support of the existing world order. Through extra-territorial immigration policing, countries like the USA reinforce their own sovereignty while pushing migrants and the dirty business of keeping them away out of sight. That is, the USA employs physical distance to create conceptual and moral distance from human rights violations associated with violent policing practices, and evades responsibility for international obligations, while simultaneously claiming the moral high ground of a liberal democratic state. Through these extended bordering practices, the USA also ignores consequences of severe racialised inequalities rooted in globalised capitalism. This expansive policing, therefore, works to prop up neoliberal ideals of free markets and individual opportunity, while ignoring the devastating consequences of a global capitalist order.

Paradoxically, I suggest, the building of increasingly extensive and permanent enforcement architectures will do the opposite of reducing migration. As I have argued with Deirdre Conlon regarding detention facilities in the USA (Hiemstra and Conlon, 2017), the development of bureaucracies to support particular immigration enforcement tactics serves to ensure the continuation of the very practices that are supposedly being policed. In Mexico and Central America, the USA is solidifying a network of public and private entities dependent on the policing of immigrants en route to the USA. These entities become invested in the elasticisation of the US territorial border, disincentivising efforts to respect human rights, contest US hegemony in the region, and address the political and economic structures driving migration. Instead of effectively stopping or reducing illicit migration, then, the displaced border – uneven, selective, polymorphic (Burridge et al., 2017) – actually works to ensure continued human mobility.

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## **Notes**

- 1 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this important point.