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Conservative immigration analysts: Trump tariffs could worsen border crisis

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Conservative immigration experts warned Friday that President Trump's threat to impose a tariff on Mexican imports would have "devastating" consequences if Mexico retaliates by shutting down its immigration and drug enforcement operations, worsening the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Business groups have expressed major concerns about the penalty's effect on North American trade, but those affiliated with Trump's own party say the proposal is a mistake and the fall-out would not be limited to trade issues.

Former Senate Judiciary Chairman Chuck Grassley balked at the idea in a statement Thursday.

So did officials from the Heritage Foundation, which has consistently backed Trump's policies.

"These tariffs are the wrong policy for addressing the crisis at the border. Mexico can and should do more. Our nations can only be secure and prosperous if we work together, and the president should press to make this partnership stronger. This policy, however, is not the way to do so," wrote James Carafano, vice president of the Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, and Jack Spencer, vice president of the Institute for Economic Freedom.

The tariff could prompt a meltdown of U.S.-Mexico relations and put more pressure on an already overburdened immigration system if Mexico were to choose to respond to the U.S. by ceasing its enforcement operations, some conservatives believe.

"It is entirely possible that this could actually backfire on the president if Mexico decided not to cooperate with the administration," said David Bier, immigration policy analyst for the CATO Institute in Washington. "If the Mexican government wanted to retaliate, it could do so and it could do so in a way that could really hurt the president's interests on immigration, on drug enforcement, or on trade, for that matter."

Trump reportedly assessed the tariffs out of anger over the border crisis and was backed by White House immigration hawks. White House counselor to the president Kellyanne Conway said Friday, "Tariffs are a good way to get a trading partner's attention, and apparently, the president did."

Under the leadership of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico has dramatically stepped up efforts to prevent Central Americans and others traveling through the country to make it to the U.S.-Mexico border. Migrants must obtain temporary visas through the Mexican government in order to do so.

Mexican media outlets report several times a week on operations carried out by Mexico's federal immigration agency, the Institute of National Migration. INM routinely interdicts then deports migrants who lack legal documents and are traveling in caravans or smugglers' groups.

Roger Noriega, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who was former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs and a former U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States, said the Obrador administration has taken a "radical position" helping the U.S. fight drug cartels, even if Trump does not believe so.

"Quite frankly I don't think we can take Mexico's cooperation on immigration or drugs for granted ... if he [Obrador] were to lower his guard against that threat it would be bad for Mexico but devastating for us, as well. Until now, that populist president has kept his head for his own country's sake. But, even those Mexicans who depend on US trade will not tolerate disrespect or bullying," Noriega wrote in an email.

Bier said Mexico is "bending over backwards" to stop those who are illegally in Mexico instead of letting them go on to the U.S. The cost of Mexico's efforts to help the U.S. is unknown. The decision to stop helping the U.S. would give Mexico a way to recoup some tariff losses. It could also trigger more people to flee Mexico and Central America.

If Mexico were to stop its enforcement efforts, Mexicans and non-Mexicans likely would not face any law enforcement pushback while traveling to the U.S.

Prior to the mid-2010s, the large majority of people arrested at the southern border were single male adults from Mexico trying stealthily to enter the U.S. In the past few years, that majority has flipped and is now comprised of Central American families who illegally cross, seek out Border Patrol agents, and then claim a credible fear of return.

Over the past seven months, apprehension rates on the southern border have spiked to a 12-year high. Customs and Border Protection has said it lacks the physical and legal mechanisms to stop the rising flow of people from entering, and it doesn't have the infrastructure, resources, and manpower to handle the 92,000 who were taken into custody in April.

Trump's imposition of tariffs could put the U.S. back in a situation where the southern border is facing an influx of unemployed Mexican workers on top of the Central American family crisis, said Bier. At that point, Mexico's willingness to come to the table to talk may be too little too late.

"Each episode of this kind takes its toll, as our enforcement personnel and diplomats have to reason with their counterparts," Noriega wrote. "And, over time it diminishes our credibility as a reliable, rational partner that is capable of forging agreements and sustaining cooperation. We're beyond diminishing returns now and are cutting into our core credibility as a partner. Frankly, like so many sensitive national security issues, this behavior has gone from ridiculous to reckless."