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Why infrastructure will never resolve our border challenges

Matthew Rooney

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Coverage of the U.S. southern border tends to suggest that it represents a threat to our country, but the fact is our border is an asset for America.

The cultural and economic exchange that occurs along our border has helped our society become an innovative manufacturing powerhouse that is the envy of the world. Immigrants are an important factor in this success, but so is our rule of law – which includes a secure border. Unfortunately, the rhetoric and proposals regarding immigration often focus narrowly on border security as something that depends on infrastructure at the border itself.

The reality is border infrastructure will never resolve the challenges that exist at our border. If we want a more secure border, we have to think in terms of a series of perimeters – the first of which lies in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

The Northern Triangle countries – Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – have seen a sharp increase in emigration in recent years. Migrants from these countries are often escaping violent gangs, domestic abuse and political corruption. Furthermore, many young people are not able to find work after leaving school, as those very same factors drive business costs and create an unstable political situation.

People leave home because they have no choice, and the chance of opportunity in America is worth the risk. Further, American farmers and businesses want and need more workers – both high- and low-skilled.

U.S. farmers seasonally need hundreds of thousands of farmworkers to harvest the crops that we all eat. Tech and industrial companies need high-skilled workers. These migrants are not taking American jobs. When it comes to agricultural jobs, Americans only accept one in 20, according to a [recent study from the Cato Institute](#). And [economists agree](#) high-skilled immigrants create jobs and economic growth in the countries they arrive in.

We have two challenges putting pressure on our border: migrants forced from their homes because of unsafe conditions and lack of economic opportunity, and American businesses needing more workers. We also have two solutions: help address the violence and economic

stagnation in the Northern Triangle and reform our immigration system to improve the legal pathways for immigrants.

In February, the Bush Center released [Smart Border Policy For The 21st Century](#), a plan to address root causes of migration. The central pillar of the policies proposed is a regional economic cooperation strategy between the United States and Central America to encourage Central American industry to join the supply chains created by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and a digital services agreement between the Northern Triangle and the United States. These agreements would open the region to more investment while giving us leverage to push the political actors to make needed reforms.

When it comes to legal immigration, our current visa process is too complicated for many to navigate. Visa caps should be raised, and pathways should be clarified and publicized so would-be migrants have a clear idea of what processes and materials are necessary to migrate.

These reforms, combined with more efficient border enforcement, will send a clear message to potential migrants that compliance with the legal immigration system offers the possibility of admittance to the U.S. – while unlawfully crossing the border is a guarantee of deportation.

Our current immigration and border security systems have locked the United States into a constant cycle of migrant surges. If we want to achieve stability at our southern border, we need to look at what is driving them.

Safer and more stable Northern Triangle countries will reduce migrant flows, while reforming the U.S. immigration system will direct potential migrants toward legal pathways.

If we continue to address migrant issues only at the border, the cycle of surges will also continue. To stop it, we must proactively engage with its root causes.