

# **SECURING BORDERS, SECURITIZING CLIMATE CHANGE**

THE EMERGENCE OF A CLIMATE SECURITY DISCOURSE  
IN U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH CENTRAL AMERICA



**Maxwell Cory Nathanson**

St. Antony's College  
School of Geography and the Environment  
University of Oxford

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*For June and Milo, and a kinder, greener future*

*In loving memory of Harvey and Judy Cohen, who made everything possible*

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Beyond this orientation, I found that much of the policy incoherence defining the relationships between climate change, national security, and various determinants of economic opportunity quickly fractures into confused complexity. Climate change is endlessly fascinating and challenging to research because it demands a simultaneous focus on the biophysical, scientific realities of a warming world in tandem with the politics of industrial systems and societal adaptation. I struggled significantly in pursuing research that I felt would do justice to the variety of factors influencing what I came to see was a more cohesive narrative than was popularly understood. Climate change demands we think bigger without losing sight of the evidence.

Accordingly, one of my supervisors described this thesis as “unapologetically interdisciplinary and wide-ranging.” Those responsible for my success are similarly spread across borders, professions, languages, and geographies. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the privilege to have pursued this degree and for the immense support I found along the way. I am so lucky.

My life has been forever changed by supervision from and intellectual partnership with Diane Davis. Any ideas of value in this thesis directly stem from her incisive brilliance and refusal to settle for the window dressing that so often reinforces the status quo. Diane, it is still difficult to acknowledge that you took a chance on me, even from a distance. I will always be humbled to advance your incredible legacy—better understanding the contours of power, development, and the fascinating, heartbreaking relationships between the United States and its neighbors. In addition, I have greatly benefitted from the expertise and keen attention to detail of my supervisors Cameron Hepburn and Benjamin Franta. Their deep, critical understanding of climate change has comprehensively and patiently shaped this project. It has been a deep honor to learn from them.

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## **Abbreviations**

CARSI: Central America Regional Security Initiative

CAFTA-DR: Central America/Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement

CBP: U.S. Customs and Border Protection

CIR: U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform (1994-1997)

DHS: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

DoD: U.S. Department of Defense

DoJ: U.S. Department of Justice

DRR: Disaster Risk Reduction

FEMA: U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency

HA/DR: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response

IIRIRA: U.S. Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996

ICE: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

INA: U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

IOM: International Organization for Migration (United Nations)

IRCA: U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986

NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement

NCA: Northern Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador)

RCS: U.S. Strategy for Combating the Root Causes of Migration in Central America

SMO: Safe Mobility Office (U.S. State Department)

TCO: Transnational Criminal Organization

TPS: Temporary Protected Status

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USAID: U.S. Agency for International Development

USCIS: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

USG: U.S. government

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## **Statement of Originality**

I carried out the work in this thesis at the School of Geography and Environment, Smith School of Enterprise and Environment, University of Oxford between October 2021 and June 2025 under the supervision of Professor Cameron Hepburn, Professor Diane Davis (Harvard University), and Dr. Benjamin Franta. My research was generously supported by a Rotary Global Grant, a European Union Horizon 2020 research and innovation grant, the Oxford Programme on the Sustainable Future of Commodities and Infrastructure, and the Oxford Smith School of Enterprise and Environment. I declare that no part of this thesis has been submitted in support of another degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Oxford or any other university. Except where otherwise stated, the work in this thesis is all mine.

## Abstract

This thesis investigates why and how U.S. officials have framed climate change as a national security threat and used this discourse as part of a broader effort to justify deterring—discouraging and criminalizing—migration from Mexico and Northern Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) since NAFTA. Scholars have long found migration deterrence in this geography to be a U.S. government priority. The U.S. has typically pursued deterrence through militarized border security. I find that the Biden administration leveraged elite concern about climate change causing migration to support a narrative that investing in the so-called root causes of migration to deter human mobility was a softer, more humanitarian expression of U.S. power. I argue that the Biden administration employed this climate security discourse, through its Root Causes Strategy, to mediate between major political constituencies concerned with climate change while managing right-wing immigration narratives. To do this, the Biden administration framed climate adaptation investments as climate resilience measures to help entrench migration deterrence as a longstanding objective of the post-NAFTA landscape facilitating U.S. multinational investment. This balancing act succeeded in weaving climate change into justifications for positioning U.S. multinational investment as a migration deterrent. However, the contested lenses of climate security discourse undercut both climate adaptation and migration deterrence while increasing political tensions between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America.

Chapter 1 outlines my research design, which uses historical analysis, policy tracing, and 48 elite interviews to critically interrogate why and how adaptation and resilience narratives—subtly shaped by fossil fuel industry rhetoric to favor migration deterrence—shape U.S. policies. Chapter 2 reviews literature in security studies, political ecology, border criminology, and migration studies, positioning my research within interdisciplinary debates around the use of climate security discourse within U.S. economic frontierism. Chapter 3 details my analytical framework for climate securitization. Chapter 4 explores the historical evolution of this discourse and lays the empirical groundwork for my analysis, tracing U.S. national security policies in the region since NAFTA. Chapter 5 details how Biden officials built on these regional foundations, co-opting the Pentagon’s ‘threat multiplier’ framing of climate change as a security threat to align climate adaptation programs with migration deterrence through the Root Causes Strategy for Central America. Chapter 6 highlights the political dynamics of this discourse by introducing the concept of ‘safe spaces’ to argue that officials used climate programs to advance politically contentious migration policies under an apolitical narrative. Chapter 7 reviews implications of this discourse by analyzing the response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020. I find deterrence policy exacerbates a bureaucratic ‘missing middle’ between disaster response and development. By assuming deterrence strengthens national security, the ‘missing middle’ compounds vulnerability and weakens resilience. During maximalist U.S. deterrence regimes like the Trump era, humanitarian protections and regional mobility schemes are imperative, regardless of U.S. participation. States should use the climate emergency process from the Inter-American Court on Human Rights to safeguard climate adaptation and humanitarian assistance from deterrence.

## **Introduction: The Promise and Pitfalls of Climate Security Discourse**

President Joe Biden's administration frequently used the language of national security in reference to climate change. On President Biden's first day in office, he brought the United States back into the Paris Agreement, citing the global damage from Donald Trump's climate denialism.<sup>1</sup> President Biden used his first United Nations climate change meeting (COP26 in Glasgow) to announce the President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience, or PREPARE. PREPARE was the "...cornerstone of the U.S. foreign policy response to address the increasingly devastating impacts of the global climate crisis, improve the ability of vulnerable communities around the world to confront them, and, as a result, bolster stability and security."<sup>2</sup> In the PREPARE Action Plan, released in September 2022, Jake Sullivan, President Biden's National Security Adviser, wrote: "The climate crisis is fundamentally and increasingly a national security crisis."<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, President Biden was also grappling with another national security challenge that had long transfixed U.S. presidents before him: the U.S. southwest border with Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Economic and political collapse in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Haiti, Cuba, and Ecuador combined with climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic to increase poverty and violence across the Western

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. State Department. 2021. The United States Officially Rejoins the Paris Agreement. Press Statement, February 19, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-officially-rejoins-the-paris-agreement/>.

<sup>2</sup> The White House. 2022. PREPARE Action Plan. September 2022. Page 5. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PREPARE-Action-Plan.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Page 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ngai, M. 2004. Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Hemisphere.<sup>5</sup> These push factors, coupled with the explosion of fentanyl and human smuggling markets, drove never-before-seen levels of migrants toward the United States.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, people made the decision to migrate under their own free will; other times, they relocated under the coercion of powerful gangs and drug cartels.<sup>7</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection recorded 249,741 encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border in December 2023, the most ever in a single month.<sup>8</sup> Fearing a backlash in the 2024 presidential election, the Biden administration cracked down on immigration in the following months, controversially curtailing access to asylum and pressuring Mexico to prevent migrants from using its land and transit networks to reach the United States.<sup>9</sup> While these efforts were successful in reducing the number of encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border, they resulted in untold humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the political response created a chaos that Donald Trump exploited with the draconian promise of mass deportations in his successful return to the White House in 2025.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bozmoski, M.F., Brizuela de Ávila, M.E., and D. Sadurní. 2021. Addressing Instability in Northern Central America: Restrictions on Civil Liberties, Violence, and Climate Change. Atlantic Council Issue Brief. *Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center*.

<sup>6</sup> Penichet-Paul, C. 2023. Illicit Fentanyl and Drug Smuggling at the U.S.-Mexico Border: An Overview. *National Immigration Forum*. Explainer, October 25, 2023. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/illicit-fentanyl-and-drug-smuggling-at-the-u-s-mexico-border-an-overview/>.

<sup>7</sup> Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press.

<sup>8</sup> Gramlich, J. 2024. Migrant encounters at U.S.-Mexico border have fallen sharply in 2024. *Pew Research Center*. October 1, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/01/migrant-encounters-at-u-s-mexico-border-have-fallen-sharply-in-2024/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> International Rescue Committee. 2024. What do President Biden's border policies mean for asylum seekers? November 1, 2024. <https://www.rescue.org/article/what-do-president-bidens-border-policies-mean-asylum-seekers>.

<sup>11</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. 2024. Trump on Immigration: Tearing Apart Immigrant Families, Communities, and the Fabric of our Nation. June 6, 2024. <https://www.aclu.org/publications/trump-on-immigration>.

Having identified these twin challenges to U.S. national security—climate change and migration to the U.S.-Mexico border—the Biden administration framed its approach as tackling both issues at the same time as part of its broader national security policy. The first report that the administration released on the implementation of PREPARE stated: “In Central America, persistent droughts over the past decade coupled with the impacts of severe storms and hurricanes have undermined smallholder agriculture and contributed to outmigration from the region.”<sup>12</sup> The Biden administration’s public messaging presented climate action as one important factor, among many others, for discouraging and criminalizing—i.e., deterring—migration to the United States.

This thesis argues that U.S. national security officials fused concerns about national security, climate change, and migration deterrence. In framing climate adaptation and resilience as critical national security investments, the Biden administration leveraged concern about climate change as an important component of the case to stop U.S.-bound migration. While U.S. officials have used national security framing to prioritize migration deterrence for decades, their inclusion of climate change language as part of these efforts is an important evolution in the study of both migration and climate change within national security paradigms.

My starting point for this research originates in the Biden administration’s use of this new language to describe the relationship between climate change and national security, developing the shorthand ‘climate security.’ In 2022, Congress created a statutory definition of so-called climate

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<sup>12</sup> The White House. 2023. Helping the World PREPARE: A Primer on U.S. International Adaptation and Resilience. Page 4. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Helping-the-World-Prepare.pdf>.

security as a security ‘threat multiplier’, or an aggravator to traditional security threats.<sup>13</sup> While the term ‘threat multiplier’ had existed in U.S. national security circles since 2007, the 2022 legislation codified its use and granted it widespread legal and political legitimacy.<sup>14</sup>

The U.S. government defines ‘climate security’ as:

The effects of climate change on the following: (a) the national security of the United States, including national security infrastructure; (b) subnational, national, and regional political stability; (c) the security of allies and partners of the United States; and/or (d) ongoing or potential political violence, including unrest, rioting, guerrilla warfare, insurgency, terrorism, rebellion, revolution, civil war, and interstate war.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the 2022 legislation, the Biden White House also released a U.S. climate security strategy, among other initiatives.<sup>16</sup> These actions formally defined and codified the phrase ‘climate security’ in law and policy at the highest levels of government. This government action solidified ‘climate security’ as a standalone specialization, what Josh Busby called an ‘emergent practice.’<sup>17</sup>

However, the inclusion of climate security in policy documents does not guarantee its conceptual and analytical legitimacy. Its official definition is vague, broad, and lacks clear policy goals. As

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<sup>13</sup> H.R.6605 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Climate Security Intelligence Act of 2022." Congress.gov, Library of Congress, 4 February 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/6605/text>.

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, S. and P. Baudu. 2023. Climate Change as a “Threat Multiplier”: History, Uses, and Future of the Concept. *Center for Climate & Security* Briefer 38.

<sup>15</sup> H.R.6605 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Climate Security Intelligence Act of 2022." Congress.gov, Library of Congress, 4 February 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/6605/text>.

<sup>16</sup> The White House. 2024. U.S. Framework for Climate Resilience and Security. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/US\\_Framework\\_for\\_Climate\\_Resilience\\_and\\_Security\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/US_Framework_for_Climate_Resilience_and_Security_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Busby, J. W. 2021. Beyond internal conflict: The emergent practice of climate security. *Journal of Peace Research* 58(1): 186-194.

Kathryn Friedman wrote: “...quite simply, if climate security is everything, then it risks being nothing.”<sup>18</sup> Despite these challenges, the discourse surrounding climate security—that climate change is a threat multiplier—quickly spread across the U.S. national security establishment.<sup>19</sup> The idea of climate change as a threat multiplier has become so prominent that much of the U.S. national security establishment and many scholars view the discourse of climate security as a larger national security doctrine for climate change.<sup>20</sup>

I center two main pillars that underpin climate security logic: climate resilience and climate adaptation. Encouraged by the fossil fuel industry, both terms imply the inevitability of climate change and the need to respond to its effects, rather than mitigating its causes.<sup>21</sup> Resilience is the theoretical character of a society able to successfully rebound from external shocks.<sup>22</sup> Adaptation

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<sup>18</sup> Friedman, K. 2024. What is Climate Security? Establishing the Foundation for a Collaborative Regional Center Inquiry. *Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies Special Report*. Page 2. [https://tedstevensarcticcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/DOPSR\\_Cleared\\_Friedman\\_Climate-Security\\_2024.pdf](https://tedstevensarcticcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/DOPSR_Cleared_Friedman_Climate-Security_2024.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> I include officials from military, diplomatic, development assistance, and intelligence agencies (such as the Executive Office of the President, the Departments of Defense and State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Development Finance Corporation, Export-Import Bank, among others) and also include federal agencies with significant foreign and border security remit such as the Departments of Homeland Security, Treasury, Justice, Agriculture, Energy, and Transportation. I also consider the influence of legislative, civil society, and private sector leaders that frequently engage with executive branch officials about foreign policy.

<sup>20</sup> Goodman, S. and P. Baudu. 2023. Climate Change as a “Threat Multiplier”: History, Uses, and Future of the Concept. *Center for Climate & Security Briefer* 38.

<sup>21</sup> Franta, B. 2022. Big Carbon's Strategic Response to Global Warming, 1950-2000. Stanford University PhD Thesis. Accessed at: <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hq437ph9153/Franta%20-%20Big%20Carbon%20strategic%20response%20to%20global%20warming%201950-2020%20-%202022-08-25-augmented.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Watts, M.J. 2015. Now and Then: The origins of political ecology and the rebirth of adaptation as a form of thought. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G., and J. McCarthy (Eds.). 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*.

is the mechanism by which we can allegedly reorient society to manage the effects of climate change.<sup>23</sup> Climate resilience is achieved through climate adaptation.<sup>24</sup>

In the U.S. national security establishment, officials drove this industry-driven logic to its logical conclusion. In this view, climate change cannot be mitigated and is therefore a fundamental ‘threat multiplier’ for traditional security threats. In other words, climate change will compound the effects of security threats to the United States.

### Research Question and Argument

In this thesis, I critically examine why climate change emerged as a reference point for national security officials in the United States and how this has shaped their policies and discourses around migration and the pressing challenges presented at the U.S.-Mexico border. I specifically interrogate the Biden administration’s emphasis on Northern Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—as a region of origin for U.S.-bound migrants that is also extremely vulnerable to climate change.<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> I explore the following research question: Why have U.S. national security officials employed a climate security discourse in their engagement with

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<sup>23</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>24</sup> The White House. 2024. U.S. Framework for Climate Resilience and Security. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/US\\_Framework\\_for\\_Climate\\_Resilience\\_and\\_Security\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/US_Framework_for_Climate_Resilience_and_Security_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Office of the Director of U.S. National Intelligence. 2021. National Intelligence Estimate: Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to US National Security Through 2040. [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE\\_Climate\\_Change\\_and\\_National\\_Security.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE_Climate_Change_and_National_Security.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> While I focus on U.S. national security officials’ preoccupation with migration from Northern Central America—often referred to as the Northern Triangle, comprising Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—I consider this preoccupation in tandem with the centrality of Mexico for these judgments: as a border country on both sides, a transit country, as well as a significant country of origin for U.S.-bound migrants. This full regional perspective encompasses a wide array of economic, security, and immigration policy detailed through the case study of the migration corridor in its entirety.

Northern Central America since NAFTA, and how has this discourse shaped political dynamics between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America?

My analysis is based in part on 48 original, semi-structured interviews with senior- and mid-level officials from the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, as well as private sector and civil society representatives. The U.S. officials included those from The White House, State Department, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, Agency for International Development, and Congress, during the Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations.

The two empirical chapters following the analytical framework unpack the initial portion of my research question: *why* elites employed climate security discourse in their engagement with Northern Central America. Chapter 4 details the historical evolution of climate security discourse in the U.S. national security establishment. Chapter 5 discusses the implementation of U.S. policies justified in the name of climate security in Northern Central America, particularly as embedded in the embrace of the Biden Root Causes Strategy (introduced on p. 29).

The final two empirical chapters investigate the second part of my research question: *how* climate security discourse shaped political dynamics between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America. Chapter 6 outlines the political dynamics of climate security discourse within the Biden Root Causes Strategy. Chapter 7 explores the implications and impact of these policies.

My research question stems from the deep extent to which U.S. officials have incorporated climate security language into formal policy engagement with Northern Central America, during the

Obama and especially Biden administrations. Within the boundaries of this case study, the conceptual ambiguity around climate security in the U.S. national security establishment allowed senior officials to co-opt its primary motivator—concern about the effects of climate change—for strategic reasons. Within the boundaries of my case study, officials used key components of climate security discourse to frame longstanding national security concerns about migration. Most important was the label that climate change is a ‘threat multiplier’ for irregular migration.

My main argument is that, within U.S. engagement with Northern Central America, officials primarily used climate security discourse to support the political goal of deterring migration to the United States. In tandem, harnessing concern that climate change is an additional push factor for migration allowed U.S. officials to prescribe climate adaptation investments as part of their desired border security outcomes. Officials encouraged adaptation through targeted investments by multinational firms alongside U.S. foreign assistance.

In other words, these officials used concern about climate change as an additional vehicle to pursue their migration goals. This expanded the political foundation for the national security priority of deterrence. Climate security discourse allowed the Biden administration to frame climate adaptation investments as climate resilience measures, but the primary goal was to deter migration.

Migration is a central part of the complex empirical story that is specific to this context. This empirical story helps provide analytical understanding to my research question by showing how the Biden administration harnessed a convergence of political interests that allowed senior officials to steer the climate security narrative in strategic ways. Migration was a longstanding regional

concern. However, Biden's prioritization of climate action created an opening for officials to co-opt that attention by using national security framing to link adaptation, and the resilience alleged to follow, to migration deterrence. Climate security language became another way to justify stopping migration.

My argument is spatially- and temporally-bound to this specific case study. Within this context, climate security discourse and migration deterrence are not exclusive to each other. Rather, my research illustrates how their strategic alignment by Biden officials allowed the Democratic Party to pursue migration deterrence through seemingly progressive means (concern about climate change), as opposed to the focus on militarization and border security that is more typically associated with the Republican Party. As a result, my work is a theoretical contribution to the study of why and how climate change is securitized and deployed for political ends. This thesis is also an empirical contribution to understanding how the language of climate security can serve as a political smokescreen for special interests within the U.S. government.

Chapter 1 discusses how my research design provides a narrow, in-depth understanding of the complex interactions between climate change, national security, and migration within the specific case study of the Biden administration's engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America, shaping U.S. policy in the post-NAFTA landscape. In Chapters 2 and 3, I outline how this research extends securitization theory (beginning on p. 49) by demonstrating that climate security discourse does not operate solely through militarized responses (as classical securitization suggests) but also through bureaucratic, diplomatic, and economic governance mechanisms. Unlike traditional security threats, where officials justify exceptional actions as needed to confront emergency

measures, climate security discourse has become an instrument for normalizing migration deterrence within mainstream policymaking. In these ways, national security in the contemporary era is increasingly concerned with the climate-migration nexus as it is about the links between migration, economic growth, and conflict. This research also contributes to political ecology literature by underlining how climate adaptation narratives have been co-opted by national security officials to justify private sector expansion rather than emissions reductions.

This merging of climate and security concerns for migration can be understood as a relatively new focus for the United States. Within this case study, U.S. officials leveraged climate concerns to justify migration deterrence, broadening bipartisan support and making it more palatable to the political left. As I detail in Chapter 4, in previous eras, officials' perception of national security was overwhelmingly concerned with the economic might and frontier of the United States (not to mention Cold War political alignment), a priority that in prior periods required more of an openness to immigrant labor. As subsequent geopolitical waves led to the ever-increasing criminalization of migration—the rigid policing accompanying the implementation of NAFTA; the xenophobia resulting from 9/11; the economic resentment of globalization after the 2007 financial crisis; the championing of the far right by Donald Trump; and the expansion of state control to arrest Covid-19—Democrats had to play catchup to stay politically viable in the United States. First under Barack Obama and then with Joe Biden, the idea of climate security became a powerful catch-all narrative to help tie together various political factions. For party leaders, this discourse seemingly helped smooth the path without presenting onerous tradeoffs; the appearance of climate and humanitarian action without sacrificing corporate and centrist political support.

U.S. officials embraced climate security language partially due to fears that climate change would play a role in driving mass migration to the United States. Chapter 4 outlines how this dynamic helped legitimize climate security discourse in U.S. national security circles, influencing officials, foreign governments, civil society stakeholders, and the public. U.S. officials then used the political narratives, prioritization, and timely relevance placed on climate change adaptation to promote national security policies for migration that overwhelmingly focused on deterrence. As I further demonstrate in Chapters 5-7, policy vehicles such as the Root Causes Strategy, the Partnership for Central America, the Safe Mobility Offices, the Global Fragility Strategy, and PREPARE in part leveraged concern about responding to the effects of climate change as a critical national security priority. As a result, these policy tools provided U.S. officials new moral justification, bureaucratic channels, financial resources, and political cover to pursue migration deterrence as an overriding national security prerogative under the narrative of climate adaptation and resilience. Overall, national security officials used the perception of climate change as a national security threat to legitimize migration control as a form of climate adaptation.

One element of this dynamic is that the Biden Root Causes Strategy created what I call, in Chapter 6, ‘safe spaces’ for U.S. officials. These safe spaces allowed officials to feel they could pursue technical climate policies aimed at reducing migration without seeming overly political. Focusing on climate change adaptation gave these officials a comfortable way to address migration issues. Nonetheless, by linking the idea of climate security to migration, U.S. officials exacerbated political tensions with Mexico and Northern Central America.

These political dynamics rested on approaches to fragility, or significant breakdowns in security. Fragility is the legal foundation for political interventions within U.S. foreign assistance. As a result, fragility is a key framework that officials used to shape their climate security language. My interviews illustrate that fragility was an important legal justification that national security officials used to anchor climate security rhetoric and policies.

Climate security discourse and fragility are not mutually exclusive. In this case study, however, fragility emerged as a primary tool that officials used to influence climate security strategies aimed at deterring migration. I argue that officials adopted the fragility framework to justify their emphasis on reducing migration through Root Causes investments in climate adaptation. Officials often presented those investments as apolitical, technical interventions rather than political actions.

In addition, I use a case study of the response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota to outline the outcomes of officials using climate security discourse to prioritize migration deterrence. A principal outcome is the ‘Missing Middle’ of humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR), which reinforces a gulf between short-term response funds and long-term development agendas. Ultimately, the outcomes when officials used climate security framing to prioritize migration deterrence within disaster responses were mixed at best. These policies not only reduced overall climate resilience but also failed to deter migration. As I outline in Chapter 7, they instead pushed vulnerable populations into increased precarity.

The elements of climate security discourse are developed in succession following the research design, literature review, and analytical framework foundations laid in Chapters 1-3. The

sequential ordering is the following: framing climate change as a threat multiplier allowed officials to pursue root causes policies through these safe spaces. This discourse and its related policies and political dynamics reinforced the Missing Middle between disaster response and development.

Despite the concrete wins on climate and expanding legal immigration pathways that the Biden administration did achieve (including the Inflation Reduction Act and expanding humanitarian parole programs), to pull off the rhetorical dance of climate security, U.S. officials, whether intentionally or not, recycled false and harmful narratives about climate change that were developed by the fossil fuel industry. Officials' approach to migration deterrence reflects the fossil fuel narrative that humanity must adapt to climate change, rather than make severe reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The U.S. government has built the leverage and power of national security into climate security discourse through this adaptation focus. As a result of the adaptation emphasis, U.S. officials used concern about climate change to legitimize their domestic and security prerogative of promoting U.S. multinational investment abroad. National security officials have created a simultaneous narrative in which U.S. multinational investment is the solution for deterring migration to the United States and serves as climate change adaptation.

While the narrative of climate security in theory presented a series of wins across the board, I show that the reality of these policies has been much different for Democrats. The true legacy of climate security justifications, in this case, has been marginal progress on climate action and lost political ground on immigration to the true party of migration criminalization. These tradeoffs come in exchange for increased multinational capital flows helping facilitate a similar industrial model—whether fully globalized manufacturing or more localized near- and friend-shoring—that hollows

out livelihoods in the U.S. heartland and stunts development in Northern Central America, fueling the cycles of resentment driving the far right. I conclude by outlining regional integration as an alternative to a deterrence-oriented approach.

Finally, through the specific focus on climate security discourse, this thesis highlights a larger value in critically deconstructing political narratives. This methodology can reveal and underscore the range of competing, contradictory, and plural interests that buttress both policy positions and the languages used to promote them. While I use this approach for climate security discourse in the U.S. context, it carries validity across global security and development policy and practice.

Chapter 1 details the research design structuring this inquiry, outlining my case selection and data sources. By combining historical policy analysis with elite interviews, this thesis explores how climate security language operates as both a rhetorical and material instrument of U.S. engagement in the region.

## **Chapter 1: Climate Change, National Security, and Migration Deterrence in U.S. Policy**

This chapter outlines my research design. I discuss my case study selection and the critical analysis approach I use to account for the depth and complexity of my research question. This methodology allows me to explore the nuanced interactions between climate change, national security, and migration deterrence. As a result, my research design attempts to illustrate, if not the entirety of the multifaceted, interdisciplinary intricacies of climate security language over time, at minimum a sense of the convoluted entanglements that arise when conflicting interests and priorities aim at addressing an overlapping set of concerns.

### Case Study Selection

#### *U.S. Climate Security Discourse*

Within climate security logic, U.S. national security officials presented migration as a central threat to national security and claimed that climate change multiplies this threat. An influential 2021 report from the U.S. National Intelligence Council stated:

...cross-border migration probably will increase as climate effects put added stress on internally displaced populations already struggling under poor governance, violent conflict, and environmental degradation...it will contribute to instability when it upsets socioeconomic, political, and demographic dynamics, and strains ties between originating and receiving countries.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Office of the Director of U.S. National Intelligence. 2021. National Intelligence Estimate: Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to US National Security Through 2040. Page 10. [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE\\_Climate\\_Change\\_and\\_National\\_Security.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE_Climate_Change_and_National_Security.pdf).

Academic literature, however, is mixed on the debate about whether climate change will increase migration (detailed in Chapter 3, on p. 82). Climate change has been found in some studies to increase migration to the United States.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it typically renders the most climate-vulnerable populations *immobile*.<sup>29</sup> It is far from clear that either migrants or migration broadly are national security threats; those determinations are political in nature, not evidence-based.<sup>30</sup>

Scientific evidence notwithstanding, U.S. national security officials have long framed migration as a threat if it is unplanned and irregular. Because of this narrative, and the U.S. government's assertion that climate change will increase migration to the United States, climate security discourse contributed to a longstanding, harmful, and racialized fear of large migrant caravans coming to the U.S. border.<sup>31</sup> The role of climate change in strengthening this fear carries significant weight in the U.S. national security establishment.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, climate change has increased the fear for national security officials that the territorial sovereignty of the United States is threatened by non-white 'others.'<sup>33</sup> National security officials have projected the narrative that these 'others' are coming to the United States from countries that they largely consider as sources of violence

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<sup>28</sup> Linke, A., Leutert, S., Busby, J. *et al.* 2023. Dry growing seasons predicted Central American migration to the US from 2012 to 2018. *Nature Scientific Reports* 13, 18400.

<sup>29</sup> Benveniste, H., Oppenheimer, M. and M. Fleurbaey. 2022. Climate change increases resource-constrained international immobility. *Nature Climate Change* 12: 634–641.

<sup>30</sup> Kerwin, D. 2018. From IIRIRA to Trump: Connecting the Dots to the Current U.S. Immigration Policy Crisis. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(3): 192–204.

<sup>31</sup> Dunn, T. J. 1995. *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992: Low Intensity Doctrine Comes Home*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>32</sup> Abrahams, D. 2019. From discourse to policy: U.S. policy communities' perceptions of and approaches to climate change and security. *Conflict, Security & Development* 19(4): 323-345.

<sup>33</sup> Macías-Rojas, P. 2018. Immigration and the War on Crime: Law and Order Politics and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(1): 1-25.

and criminality.<sup>34</sup> In addition, U.S. national security officials have considered Northern Central America as economically subordinate to the United States within the regional free trade regime built through the free trade agreements NAFTA and the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA-DR).<sup>35 36</sup>

The following section outlines how the case study of the U.S.-bound migration corridor through Central America and Mexico offers key lessons for understanding how U.S. national security officials have exploited climate security discourse to pursue political goals. As Greg Grandin argued, Latin America has long been the region where the U.S. government has piloted and redeveloped its evolving national security apparatus before exporting priorities elsewhere around the world.<sup>37</sup> Northern Central American countries are among the most climate-vulnerable countries globally, and the U.S. southwest border with Mexico is the most heavily trafficked in the world.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>36</sup> NAFTA was implemented in 1994 and updated through the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement in 2020. Signatories to CAFTA-DR include Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and the United States. CAFTA-DR was implemented in 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Grandin, G. 2006. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. Holt: New York.

<sup>38</sup> Office of the Director of U.S. National Intelligence. 2021. *National Intelligence Estimate: Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to U.S. National Security Through 2040*. [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE\\_Climate\\_Change\\_and\\_National\\_Security.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE_Climate_Change_and_National_Security.pdf).

*Biden Root Causes Strategy and Northern Central America*

Within this context, many of the Biden administration's signature national security policy documents focused on the relationship between climate change and migration.<sup>39</sup> In particular, the administration released a highly-publicized Root Causes Strategy for Migration from Central America (RCS).<sup>40</sup> The RCS aimed to reduce migration by enhancing economic development in neighboring countries, reducing crime and poverty and improving education, so people no longer wish to emigrate. In the most nuanced threads of these policy documents, administration officials separated climate change into short-term and long-term impacts.<sup>41</sup> Short-term, unplanned displacement—resulting from more intense, sudden-onset extreme weather events—places a strain on communities that migrants and displaced persons pass through, as well as on managing the border.<sup>42</sup> Long-term, climate change impacts such as drought, coastal erosion, and ocean acidification are considered 'root causes of migration'—the set of factors that motivate a decision to migrate—along with other factors such as economic opportunity, corruption, and violence.<sup>43</sup> While climate change is far from the only root cause of migration in this policy narrative, national security officials labelled it as a threat multiplier for “Poverty and economic inequality, pervasive crime and corruption, and political leaders’ drift toward authoritarian rule.”<sup>44</sup> According to this

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<sup>39</sup> The White House. 2021. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> The White House. 2021. U.S. Strategy For Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Northern Central America. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Neusner, J. 2024. Deadly Journeys: Climate Change, U.S. Border Enforcement, and Human Rights. 56 Case W. Res. *J. Int'l L.* 337.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The White House. 2021. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> The White House. 2021. U.S. Strategy For Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Northern Central America. Page 4. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf>.

argument, such factors “...have stunted economic growth and diverted critical resources from healthcare and education, robbing citizens of hope and spurring migration.”<sup>45</sup>

For this case study, migration deterrence has long been a national security priority for the United States in Mexico and Northern Central America. This focus features a spectrum of theories regarding migration control: whether to prioritize border security approaches, and/or whether to invest in what have been labelled as the root causes of migration.<sup>46</sup> As a part of this focus, the United States has used its foreign assistance instruments to discourage migration by investing in the so-called root causes of migration in Northern Central America since the Reagan administration.<sup>47</sup> Root causes policies combine with border security emphases to directly criminalize and stop migration, as well as support a larger political effort to make migration seem difficult and dangerous in order to create an environment of fear about the prospect of migrating.<sup>48</sup> The ultimate goal for national security officials is using migration-deterrent policies to project a sense of border control by reducing migration to the United States.<sup>49</sup>

However, a shift in the Biden administration’s iteration of a U.S. root causes approach highlights how climate change concerns came into the picture. In particular, the Biden Root Causes Strategy

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, T. 2017. *Storming the wall: Climate change, migration, and homeland security*. San Francisco: City Lights.

<sup>47</sup> Macías-Rojas, P. 2018. Immigration and the War on Crime: Law and Order Politics and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(1): 1-25.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

included an explicit focus on climate change as a ‘national security threat multiplier’ for irregular migration. This focus promoted investing in climate adaptation strategies to strengthen the resilience of communities primarily to deter migration. As a result, the Biden Root Causes Strategy used a climate security discourse and approach as part of its pursuit of the national security goals within its engagement with Northern Central America.

Accordingly, the Biden climate security discourse positioned climate adaptation as a positive and beneficial investment in the root causes of migration from Northern Central America. National security officials framed this as a win-win-win proposition: investing in climate adaptation would help reduce the root causes of migration, which is in the interests of the United States, Northern Central American countries, and would-be migrants themselves. A significant consensus of national security officials coalesced around this stated need to “...improve the ability of vulnerable communities both at home and abroad to adapt to and manage the increasing impacts of the global climate crisis that contribute to displacement.”<sup>50</sup>

I explore these connections between climate change and national security, focusing on how senior officials framed climate change as a reason to address migration issues. The principal claim is that officials have strategically used the language of climate security to limit migration, which they long viewed as a security threat. The study does not aim to cover the entire discourse on climate

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<sup>50</sup> The White House Briefing Room. 2023. Fact Sheet: Marking the Two-Year Anniversary of the Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. December 1, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/01/fact-sheet-marking-the-two-year-anniversary-of-the-report-on-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-migration/>.

security or all aspects of migration deterrence; rather, it highlights their specific intersection in the Biden administration, particularly its Root Causes Strategy alongside related policies.

As a result, the U.S.-bound regional migration corridor, encompassing Northern Central America and Mexico, is what Bent Flyvbjerg called a ‘critical case’ for understanding the intersection of climate change and U.S. national security doctrine.<sup>51</sup> The Northern Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are among the ‘highly vulnerable countries of concern’ assessed by the U.S. National Intelligence Council (ODNI) to be most at risk of climate change impacts.<sup>52</sup> While ODNI included Guatemala and Honduras within its list of 11 ‘highly vulnerable’ countries, I include El Salvador in this analysis for multiple reasons: it is entirely contained within Northern Central America’s ‘Dry Corridor,’ which suffers from severe drought; it is often linked with its NCA neighbors in U.S. policy deliberations, including the Biden administration’s Root Causes Strategy; and its intimate, complex relationship with the United States has significantly shaped national security narratives in both countries. Similarly, while fully acknowledging Nicaragua is also listed as an ODNI highly vulnerable country as a Dry Corridor member, as well as a site of significant U.S. Cold War involvement, I do not include Nicaragua in this analysis because of its exclusion from the Biden Root Causes Strategy, alongside general political-economic decoupling post-NAFTA to a greater degree than the NCA countries.

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<sup>51</sup> Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12(2): 219–245.

<sup>52</sup> Office of the Director of U.S. National Intelligence. 2021. National Intelligence Estimate: Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to U.S. National Security Through 2040. [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE\\_Climate\\_Change\\_and\\_National\\_Security.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE_Climate_Change_and_National_Security.pdf).

This case study provides a foundational structure to consider how elites used climate security framing to shape national security doctrine. As Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Kelemen stated, "...macro-historical analyses often explain the divergence that occurs during critical junctures as resulting from structural, antecedent conditions rather than from actions and decisions that occur during the critical juncture itself."<sup>53</sup> Capoccia and Kelemen stressed that for institutional development, the full value of these hinge points requires an assessment of counterfactuals as well as the choices taken; "Contingency, in other words, becomes paramount."<sup>54</sup>

In particular, the free trade regime of NAFTA and CAFTA-DR highlights how U.S. interests defining national security created a changed incentive structure. NAFTA and CAFTA-DR were key instruments that elites used to promote globalization, replacing the Cold War as the overriding political-economic paradigm for the United States,<sup>55</sup> which focused on expanding political alignment towards the U.S. in order to counter Soviet advances and create market opportunities for U.S. firms.<sup>56</sup> The integrated regional market created by NAFTA and CAFTA-DR drove the creation of a new U.S. national security doctrine protecting the fractured, public-private governance model of globalization.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Capoccia, G. and D. Kelemen. 2007. The Study of Critical Junctures - Theory, Narrative and Counterfactuals in the study of historical institutionalism. *World Politics* 59(1): 341-369. Page 342.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, Page 343.

<sup>55</sup> Norris, J. 2021. The enduring struggle: The history of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's uneasy transformation of the world. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>56</sup> Farish, M. 2010. Contours of America's Cold War. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>57</sup> Davis, D. and M. Barrera. 2017. Resource Led New Towns and the Challenges to Sovereignty. In *The City and the Camp: Territories of Extraction*, edited by Luis Valenzuela. Santiago, Chile: Universidad Adolfo Ibanez.

The free trade focus of U.S. national security officials towards the Western Hemisphere following the Cold War was further cemented by the application of a counterterrorism approach to the U.S. southwest border with Mexico. Peter Andreas defined the primary objective of post-NAFTA U.S. national security doctrine as promoting free movement of goods and services across the southwest border while simultaneously restricting immigration.<sup>58</sup> Jason Ackleson noted that "...traditional military logic and solutions were applied in the 1990s to non-military problems like migration or drugs, presenting a number of real problems, the effects of which have been seen on the U.S.–Mexico border. The threat of terrorism in the post-September 11th era has interestingly consolidated this relatively uncontested security approach at the frontier."<sup>59</sup> National security officials leveraged concerns over terrorism to support the massive growth of a homeland security apparatus in response.<sup>60</sup> In this way, as David Keen asked, "What are the forms of violence that flourish, half-concealed and perhaps legitimized, under the general label of a war against this or that? ...After the 'war on communism,' there was the 'war on drugs,' and now the war on terror. Each war has carried the need to win allies and with it the (whispered) implication that abuses by these allies will be tolerated."<sup>61</sup> My critical analysis unpacks the systemic foundations that elites have used to define national security in the context of climate change, and the constructed narratives and incentives anchoring these systems of power.

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<sup>58</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Ackleson, J. 2005. Constructing security on the U.S.–Mexico border. *Political Geography* 24:165–184. Page 169.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Keen, D. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Page 16.

Individual drivers of mobility along the U.S.-bound migration corridor are complex, intimately personal, and often harrowing in the face of extreme insecurity, instability, and violence.<sup>62</sup> Many studies have considered how the decision to migrate is impacted by climate change, among other drivers—such as economic opportunity, corruption, and violence—through interviews and household surveys.<sup>63</sup> Guatemalan, Honduran, Salvadoran, and Mexican migrants to the U.S. are driven by a number of individual, community, and environmental factors, and overall trends of rural to urban migration reflect broader and, in many cases, expected patterns.<sup>64</sup> This corridor, through the critical juncture of the NAFTA/CAFTA-DR free trade regime, is an apt case study to assess what elites consider to be at risk from climate change, and how the U.S. government has mobilized a wide range of resources and partners through a climate security discourse in response.

Appendix I (beginning on p. 316) further details the critical analysis approach I use to understand, describe, and explain these complex historical and political contexts.

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<sup>62</sup> Boas, I., Farbotko, C., Adams, H., Sterly, H., Bush, S., Geest, K., Wiegel, H., Ashraf, H., Baldwin, A., Bettini, G., Blondin, S., de Bruijn, M., Durand-Delacre, D., Fröhlich, C., Gioli, G., Guaita, L., Hut, E., Jarawura, F.X., Lamers, M., Lietaer, S., Nash, S.L., Piguët, E., Rothe, D., Sakdapolrak, P., Smith, L., Furlong, B.T., Turhan, E., Warner, J., Zickgraf, C., Black, R. and M. Hulme. 2019. Climate migration myths. *Nature Climate Change* 9(12): 901–903.

<sup>63</sup> Castellanos, E., M.F. Lemos, L. Astigarraga, N. Chacón, N. Cuvi, C. Huggel, L. Miranda, M. Moncassim Vale, J.P. Ometto, P.L. Peri, J.C. Postigo, L. Ramajo, L. Roco, and M. Rusticucci. 2022. Central and South America. In: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Lösckke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>64</sup> Migration Policy Institute (MPI) (accessed 2022) tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2019 American Community Surveys (ACS); 1970, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census data were accessed from Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010); data for 1850 to 1990, excluding 1940 and 1950, were from Campbell J. Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-1990" (Working Paper No. 29, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, February 1999).

One final note concerns the early actions of the second Trump administration and the availability of U.S. government data. President Trump’s broad attack on the federal government, helmed by Elon Musk and the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led to the dismantling of many federal agencies and programs. Of particular importance for this thesis is the fact that federal agencies in the development, humanitarian, and environmental sectors, broadly construed, had much of their work taken offline.<sup>65</sup> This is especially pertinent for USAID, White House offices coordinating climate and national security policy, and scientific agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), among others. Any of these U.S. taxpayer-funded resources taken offline may be found through the web archive Wayback Machine, a product of the nonprofit initiative Internet Archive.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the Salata Institute Climate Research Cluster on Strengthening Communities at Harvard University indexed and saved a broader range of government data available for research “...on environmental justice, community issues, and health indexes.”<sup>67</sup> These Harvard resources preserve additional climate work from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Energy (DOE), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Department of Interior (DOI), The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), the White House Executive Office of the President (EOP), and the Department of Transportation (DOT), in addition to NOAA. These are a

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<sup>65</sup> Santarsiero, R. (Ed.) 2025. Disappearing Data: Trump Administration Removing Climate Information from Government Websites. *The George Washington University National Security Archive*. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/climate-change-transparency-project-foia/2025-02-06/disappearing-data-trump>.

<sup>66</sup> Wayback Machine. 2025. *Internet Archive*. Access at: <https://web.archive.org/>.

<sup>67</sup> Salata Institute for Climate and Sustainability. 2025. Access Government Data on Environmental Justice. *Harvard University*. Access at: <https://salatainstitute.harvard.edu/access-government-data-on-environmental-justice/>.

few of the resources that have emerged in the wake of the second Trump administration's attacks on the humanitarian and climate communities, which endanger higher education, freedom of speech, scientific inquiry, and evidence-based policymaking.

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This chapter outlines my critical approach to studying climate security discourse, explaining how national security officials use this language to pursue specific priorities. I justify my choice of case study, detailing how U.S. engagement with Northern Central America provides a key venue for analyzing the intersection of climate security discourse and migration deterrence. In the following chapter, I expand the interdisciplinary foray of this thesis at the nexus of security studies, political ecology, border criminology, and migration studies.

## **Chapter 2: Climate Securitization and the Economic Frontier**

The relationships between climate change, national security, and migration have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, particularly in the wake of increasing environmental instability and shifting global security paradigms. The evolving literature on climate change and national security continues to further incorporate how conflict and displacement are mediated by political, economic, and social factors. Scholars in security studies, political ecology, migration studies, and border criminology have examined how political officials have framed climate change as a security threat and the implications of these framings for policy and governance. This chapter lays the foundation for understanding how U.S. officials have leveraged climate security language to justify migration deterrence strategies. It also situates the thesis within broader discussions of the securitization of environmental and humanitarian crises, highlighting the political stakes of linking climate adaptation to migration control. Appendix II (beginning on p. 336) provides a more thorough discussion of the history and politics of U.S. economic promotion and migration control in Mexico and Central America through NAFTA.

In particular, the securitization of climate change in U.S. policy is not just about recognizing environmental risks—it is a strategic maneuver that enables national security officials to justify political goals under the narrative of urgent climate action. By defining climate change as a threat multiplier, U.S. policymakers have reinforced a deterrence-first migration policy, arguing that climate instability exacerbates displacement, necessitating interventions that prioritize containment rather than protection. This framing has allowed officials to integrate climate concerns into long-standing efforts to manage migration through security-first approaches.

This chapter offers greater awareness of how officials leverage climate securitization to advance longstanding security interests for migration within the narrow boundaries of my case study. A leading security studies scholar, Peter Andreas, outlined how U.S. national security officials use migration as a discursive tool to advance political narratives.<sup>68</sup> According to Andreas, these politics in large part play out as ‘border games,’ or strategic policy decisions, negotiating tactics, and public relations narratives, that use the U.S.-Mexico border for political gain. Andreas argued that governments and private interests use these migration border games to advocate for differing visions of the liberalized NAFTA and CAFTA-DR free trade regime. This economic market requires tough-on-drugs, -crime, -terror, and -immigration politics to maintain and police.<sup>69</sup> Many migration studies and border criminology scholars consider root causes approaches to migration to be a welcome reprieve from border security emphases and criminalization.<sup>70</sup> At least we are talking about root causes of migration, rather than criminalizing the migrants—so the thinking goes. While Andreas presented development and other foreign assistance as part of the border games played around migration, scholars generally consider root causes approaches as more attuned to humanitarian concerns than border security approaches. I advance an understanding of why and how officials have weaved language about climate change into the border games they play by positioning the root causes of migration as critical for national security.

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<sup>68</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>69</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>70</sup> See: Ahuja, N. 2021. *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration, and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

I critically interrogate why national security officials have framed the climate components of root causes policies as altruistic climate action. Important structural critiques of the climate security construct<sup>71</sup> often unintentionally echo the framing of climate change as a threat multiplier. In reality, the political statements of national security officials are aimed at building support for root causes policies that may have harmful impacts. While a significant body of work examines the relationship between migration and U.S. national security doctrine, the recent policy turn to incorporate climate change into these determinations has not been paralleled by sufficient scholarly attention to why and how climate change has influenced that policymaking.

To do this, I consider central approaches taken to study climate security. One is a mainstream security studies thread of literature, which has used regression analyses and mixed methods to explore indirect causal relationships between climate change and conflict or violence. This causal thread is associated with the work of political scientists like Josh Busby and Colin Kahl who focus more on institutions and political economy,<sup>72 73</sup> and economists like Marshall Burke who explore specific interactions between environmental and socio-political factors.<sup>74</sup> Central to the security studies literature on climate security is the concept of climate change as a threat multiplier.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Busby, J.W. 2022. *States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>73</sup> Kahl, C.H. 2006. *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>74</sup> Burke, M., Ferguson, J., Hsiang, S. and E. Miguel. 2024. *New Evidence on the Economics of Climate and Conflict*. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. NBER Working Paper 33040. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w33040>.

<sup>75</sup> Goodman, S. 2024. *Threat Multiplier: Climate, Military Leadership, and the Fight for Global Security*. New York: Island Press.

The focus on isolating causal relationships within complex and multidimensional contexts not only undercuts a systems-level understanding of these issues but can also risk reproducing political narratives that are used to describe the dynamics of so-called climate security. Recent scholarship emphasizes the nuance that exists in the nonlinear relationship between climate change and questions of national security and violence,<sup>76</sup> but many scholars still are focused on isolating specific factors within a more indirect causal picture. For example: does increased drought increase migration?<sup>77</sup> Do natural hazards increase vulnerable communities' immobility?<sup>78</sup>

Political ecology and critical security studies scholars have contributed important insights to the understanding of climate security discourse as well. Political ecologists like Michael Watts,<sup>79</sup> U.S. foreign policy scholars like Greg Grandin,<sup>80</sup> and development studies scholars like Neel Ahuja<sup>81</sup> focus on the systemic failures of the national security establishment in instrumentalizing the environment and anonymizing human suffering in service of imperial expansion. However, many structural critiques carry a tendency to generalize the outcomes of the faulty systems they examine without sufficient attention to the shifting and evolving processes that underpin those outcomes.

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<sup>76</sup> Abrahams, D. 2020. Conflict in abundance and peacebuilding in scarcity: Challenges and opportunities in addressing climate change and conflict. *World Development* 132: 1-12.

<sup>77</sup> Linke, A., Leutert, S., Busby, J. *et al.* 2023. Dry growing seasons predicted Central American migration to the US from 2012 to 2018. *Nature Scientific Reports* 13, 18400.

<sup>78</sup> Benveniste, H., Oppenheimer, M. and M. Fleurbaey. 2022. Climate change increases resource-constrained international immobility. *Nature Climate Change* 12: 634-641.

<sup>79</sup> Watts, M.J. 2015. Now and Then: The origins of political ecology and the rebirth of adaptation as a form of thought. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G., and J. McCarthy (Eds.). 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*.

<sup>80</sup> Grandin, G. 2019. *The end of the myth: from the frontier to the border wall in the mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company.

<sup>81</sup> Ahuja, N. 2021. *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration, and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Scholars working on securitization note the ‘extraordinary politics’ that accompany the process of securitization by justifying extreme measures, such as reducing the rule of law, to pursue political goals. Even in this scholarship, root causes policies are often framed as intuitive and positive counterpoints to militarized and securitized paradigms.<sup>82</sup>

My aim is to understand the powerful interests driving the climate security discourse in the U.S. national security establishment and how these interests came to promote climate-focused root causes policies for migration. I research, in David Keen’s words,<sup>83</sup> the ‘positive functionality’ that the discourse itself plays in promoting certain policy positions and outcomes. I argue that a thorough analysis of climate security discourse highlights the fossil fuel misinformation that has underwritten how officials have incorporated concerns about climate change into national security policies for the United States. The remainder of this chapter reviews literature on the securitization of climate change, highlighting research intersections with conflict, politics, and development.

### Climate-Conflict Literature, or the Climate-Security Nexus

Since the 1990s, scholars have examined the role of the environment in contributing to concerns about conflict, displacement, and national security.<sup>84</sup> A solid academic consensus now believes that climate change requires moving past traditional conceptions of territorial protection and

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<sup>82</sup> See: Albert, M. 2023. Climate emergency and securitization politics: towards a climate politics of the extraordinary. *Globalizations* 20(4): 533-547.

<sup>83</sup> Keen, D. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>84</sup> Homer-Dixon, T. 1991. On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict. *International Security* 16(2): 76-116.

incorporating human livelihoods into definitions of security.<sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup> Many studies on the climate-security nexus take a deductive approach, linking climate shocks to conflict and displacement.<sup>87</sup> Much of the climate-security literature uses quantitative data and spatial analysis to determine whether climate change, in the form of both extreme weather events as well as longer-run effects such as drought, directly causes violent conflict or other forms of insecurity and instability.<sup>88</sup> Any direct causal relationships between climate change and insecurity are context-specific.<sup>89</sup>

However, we can say with a reasonable degree of certainty that climate change strains many markers of insecurity, including violent conflict and expanding to include context-specific income inequality, depressed agricultural productivity and growing season consistency, and rapid increases in informal urbanization, among others.<sup>90</sup> These compounded shocks have the potential to generate political, social, economic, and ecological unrest, which in turn hampers both mitigation and adaptation efforts. In this way, as Daniel Abrahams wrote, we can understand these dynamics as a nonlinear relationship between climate change and security: climate change plays a

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<sup>85</sup> Adger, N.W., Campos, R.S., Siddiqui, T., Gavonel, M.F., Szaboova, L., Rocky, M., Bhuiyan, M.R.A., and T. Billah. 2021. Human security of urban migrant populations affected by length of residence and environmental hazards. *Journal of Peace Research* 58(1): 50–66.

<sup>86</sup> Mach, K. J., Adger, W. N., Buhaug, H., Burke, M., Fearon, J. D., Field, C. B., et al. 2020. Directions for research on climate and conflict. *Earth's Future* 8, e2020EF001532.

<sup>87</sup> See: Hendrix, C.S. and S. Glaser. 2007. Trends and triggers: Climate, climate change and civil conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. *Political Geography* 26(6): 695–715.

Burke, M., Miguel, E., Satyanath, S., Dykema, J.A., and D.B. Lobell. 2009. Warming increases the risk of civil war in Africa. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106(49): 20670–20674.

<sup>88</sup> Abrahams, D. 2020. Conflict in abundance and peacebuilding in scarcity: Challenges and opportunities in addressing climate change and conflict. *World Development* 132: 1-12.

<sup>89</sup> Koubi, V. 2019. Climate Change and Conflict. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1): 343-360.

<sup>90</sup> Hendrix, C.S., Koubi, V., Selby, J. et al. 2023. Climate change and conflict. *Nat Rev Earth Environ* 4: 144–148.

role, among many other biophysical and socioeconomic processes, in negatively impacting national security, and insecurity can in turn contribute to climate change vulnerability.<sup>91</sup> Nina von Uexkull and Halvard Buhaug argued that quantitative empiricist research focused on direct correlations between climate and conflict, while valuable in building out a broad understanding of the relationship between the two, "[relegates] issues of causal mechanisms to mere speculation."<sup>92</sup> Leading scholars such as Josh Busby, Cullen Hendrix, von Uexkull, and Buhaug have called for research on the 'indirect pathways' that determine the long-term security outcomes of climate change. These may include "agricultural production and food prices, economic growth, migration, disasters, and international and domestic institutions."<sup>93</sup> In its landmark report on climate migration, the Biden White House stated that, with regard to indirect pathways and the relationship between climate change and conflict, "...it is widely agreed that specific context - geographic, demographic, environmental, economic, political, and cultural - determines the existence, strength, and direction of these relationships."<sup>94</sup>

My research question centers key 'indirect pathways'—political economy, geopolitics, and migration—that literature on the climate-security nexus identifies as needing more research for understanding these multifaceted dynamics.<sup>95</sup> I do not claim that climate change is the only

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<sup>91</sup> Abrahams, D. 2020. Conflict in abundance and peacebuilding in scarcity: Challenges and opportunities in addressing climate change and conflict. *World Development* 132: 1-12.

<sup>92</sup> von Uexkull, N. and H. Buhaug. 2021. Security implications of climate change: A decade of scientific progress. *Journal of Peace Research* 58(1): 3-17. Page 6.

<sup>93</sup> Busby, J.W. 2018. Taking Stock: the Field of Climate and Security. *Curr Clim Change Rep* 4: 338–346. Page 339.

<sup>94</sup> The White House. 2021. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. Page 8. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Mach, K. J., Adger, W. N., Buhaug, H., Burke, M., Fearon, J. D., Field, C. B., et al. 2020. Directions for research on climate and conflict. *Earth's Future* 8.

motivating factor for national security determinations around migration. Others include a non-exhaustive range of considerations around poverty, economic development, conflict, violence, corruption, energy security, urbanization, and competition over water and other scarce resources.

In sum, literature on the climate-security nexus has shifted from direct causal explanations—such as the idea that climate change alone drives conflict—to more nuanced understandings of indirect pathways, such as food insecurity, economic instability, and governance failures. Research highlights that climate-related displacement depends on regional factors, including political institutions and resource availability, rather than climate stressors alone. Despite these complexities, U.S. policymakers increasingly frame climate change as a national security concern, particularly in migration policy, reinforcing the notion that instability abroad threatens domestic national security. I next delve into the concept of national security within these debates.

### National Security

To understand the relationship between climate change and national security, it is important to first distinguish between 'security' and 'national security'. Security is certainly something we can identify by its absence. Chris Blattman defined war, or multiple organized groups in conflict with each other, as a breakdown in security.<sup>96</sup> Josh Busby defined a security “threat” as something that could “...cause such grave harms (in terms of loss of life and damage to the economy) that if an adversary were to threaten such damages, a state would be willing to wage war to stop them.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Blattman, C. 2022. *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace*. New York: Viking.

<sup>97</sup> Busby, J.W. 2022. *States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 6.

Security studies research explores multiple factors shaping security threats, including underdevelopment, resource competition, geographic determinism, colonial legacies, and geopolitical power dynamics.<sup>98</sup>

In parallel, national security is a broad, political term that is manipulated to serve both partisan and national interests. Scholars consider national security to mean both the protection of the traditional territorial integrity of a state as well as its political, economic, and ideological, socio-cultural interests.<sup>99</sup> Key factors for considering the integration of climate change concerns into national security, discussed in more depth below, include the manner in which national interests are threatened and the kinds of reactions and resources that are required in response.<sup>100</sup> In particular, I maintain a critical separation between 'security,' 'public security,' or 'human security,' understood as the facts and experiences on the ground—when there is gender-based violence, armed conflict, corruption, extortion, and declines in human rights and the rule of law, among other factors<sup>101</sup>—and national security, which is a highly subjective, political construct. Some critical refugee studies scholars argue using the term 'human security' problematizes the individuals as the security problem when in reality their actions, such as forced distress migration, are the result of systems failure that should be the focus of our attention.<sup>102</sup> I acknowledge the

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<sup>98</sup> Blattman, C. 2022. *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace*. New York: Viking.

<sup>99</sup> Walt, S.M. 1991. The Renaissance of Security Studies. *International Studies Quarterly* 35(2): 211–39.

<sup>100</sup> Busby, J.W. 2008. Who Cares About the Weather?: Climate Change and U.S. National Security. *Security Studies* 17(3): 468-504.

<sup>101</sup> United Nations Development Programme. 1994. *Human Development Report*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>102</sup> Ahuja, N. 2021. *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration, and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

utility of human security for being a well-understood proxy describing humanitarian protection and livelihoods. The distinction between public or human security and national security, and the ways in which national interests are often prioritized over public and human security in ways that further generate insecurity, is often deprioritized within policy deliberations around climate change and national security.

Early scholars of national security referred to the protection of a nation-state's sovereignty, territory, and residents from external threats.<sup>103</sup> In the contemporary context, scholars have expanded the scope of national security beyond military defense to encompass a broader range of issues including economic stability, environmental degradation, cybersecurity, pandemics, non-state actors and transnational criminal organizations, and human rights.<sup>104</sup> <sup>105</sup> Transnational threats, such as terrorism, organized crime, and pandemics, transcend national borders, requiring international cooperation and innovative approaches in response.<sup>106</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the interconnectedness of public health with overall national security, highlighting the need for robust healthcare systems and global cooperation in addressing health crises.<sup>107</sup> Globalization and technological advancements have introduced new complexities: while

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<sup>103</sup> Morgenthau, H. J. 1960. *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. New York: Knopf.

<sup>104</sup> Buzan, B. 2006. *People, states and fear: An agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War era*. ECPR Press.

<sup>105</sup> Chandler, D. 2016. Resilience, not robustness: The neglected story of non-traditional threats and national security. *Millennium* 44(1): 78-97.

<sup>106</sup> Baylis, J., Smith, S., and P. Owens. 2017. *The globalization of world politics: An introduction to international relations*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>107</sup> Gostin, L. O., Friedman, E. A., Wetter, S. A., Foegen, W. H., and J. P. Seigel. 2021. The United States and global health security: Legal and policy responses to pandemics. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 325(10): 1009–1010.

globalization has facilitated economic growth, it has also increased vulnerabilities, such as dependence on global supply chains and cyber vulnerabilities in interconnected systems.<sup>108 109</sup> Climate change and environmental degradation have emerged as significant national security concerns within these sectoral analyses.<sup>110</sup> Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and resource scarcity increase risk, requiring a broader understanding of national security that includes environmental dimensions.<sup>111</sup>

National security is a flexible and politically contingent concept that is often redefined based on shifting policy priorities. Climate change has been integrated into this framework as a nontraditional security threat, positioned alongside terrorism, transnational crime, and economic instability. However, U.S. national security officials primarily view climate change as a state security issue rather than a human security crisis, prioritizing deterrence and stability over humanitarian responses. In the next section, I explore how officials have linked climate change to migration to justify increased securitization at the border and interventionist policies abroad, reinforcing the idea that migration must be controlled as part of a broader security strategy.

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<sup>108</sup> Biersteker, T. and S. Eckert. 2020. Conceptualizing security in a globalized world. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Security*.

<sup>109</sup> Nye, J. S. 2020. Do cyber threats undermine national security? *The Washington Quarterly* 43(4): 7–19.

<sup>110</sup> Dalby, S. 2020. Environmental Security and Climate Change. *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.

<sup>111</sup> Hartmann, B. 2011. Rethinking climate refugees and climate conflict: Rhetoric, reality and the politics of policy discourse. *Journal of International Development* 23(2): 233-246.

## Origins of Climate Securitization

An influential body of scholarship from the Copenhagen School (CS) emphasizes the artificial constructions of national security through the process of securitization. A commonly referenced definition of securitization from the CS is: "...when a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is 'normal politics.'"<sup>112</sup> Some alternative approaches challenge the distinction that something needs to be 'normal politics' to be securitized.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, the main thrust of CS securitization thinking is that enough political, social, and emotional 'saliency' is attached to an issue in order to provide the actor responsible for managing it an expanded array of tools and resources seen as necessary for the job.<sup>114</sup> The George W. Bush administration's inflation of nuclear proliferation concerns with Saddam Hussein (which infamously turned out to be flimsy at best) to justify its invasion of Iraq is a commonly understood example of securitization. In other words, "Securitization combines the politics of threat design with that of threat management."<sup>115</sup>

The securitization of climate change has emerged as a central concern in international security and migration studies, shaping how states conceptualize and respond to environmental threats. Early formulations of securitization theory by Barry Buzan et al. emphasize that issues become "security threats" through performative speech acts that justify extraordinary measures, often reinforcing

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<sup>112</sup> Buzan, B., Wæver, O. and J. de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Pages 24–5.

<sup>113</sup> See: McDonald, M. 2008. Securitization and the Construction of Security. *European Journal of International Relations* 14(4): 563–587.

<sup>114</sup> Balzacq, T., Léonard, S., and J. Ruzicka. 2016. "Securitization" revisited: theory and cases. *International Relations* (30)4: 494-531.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, Page 494.

state power and legitimizing coercive responses.<sup>116</sup> Within this framework, climate change has been increasingly portrayed as a threat multiplier, a concept widely adopted by policymakers to argue that environmental stress exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and fuels instability, particularly in the Global South. Scholars such as Betsy Hartmann, Chris Methmann, and Delf Rothe have critically examined how this discourse often obscures the political and economic structures that drive climate vulnerability, and instead emphasizes containment strategies that prioritize border security over mitigation and adaptation.<sup>117</sup> <sup>118</sup> This thesis builds on these critiques by demonstrating how the United States has instrumentalized climate security narratives in Northern Central America, using the language of resilience and adaptation to justify deterrence-based migration policies. The empirical chapters that follow examine how these securitized narratives have been embedded in U.S. foreign assistance, private-sector engagement, and regional governance frameworks, reinforcing a national security logic that links climate action to migration control rather than addressing underlying structural drivers of displacement.

Beyond the Copenhagen School's emphasis on speech acts, more recent scholarship has explored how securitization operates through institutional and bureaucratic practices rather than solely rhetorical declarations. Thierry Balzacq and Matt McDonald argued that security logics often become embedded in governance structures, shaping funding priorities, diplomatic engagement,

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<sup>116</sup> Buzan, B., Wæver, O., and J. de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner.

<sup>117</sup> Hartmann, B. 2010. Rethinking Climate Refugees and Climate Conflict: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Politics of Policy Discourse. *Journal of International Development* 22(2): 233–246.

<sup>118</sup> Methmann, C. and D. Rothe. 2012. Politics for the Day After Tomorrow: The Logic of Apocalypse in Global Climate Politics. *Security Dialogue* 43(4): 323–344.

and development interventions.<sup>119 120</sup> This thesis extends these insights by analyzing how U.S. climate adaptation policies in Northern Central America function as a form of ‘bureaucratic securitization,’ where migration deterrence is not explicitly framed as an emergency but is nonetheless systematically reinforced through policy design. The empirical chapters illustrate how this manifests in programs such as the Biden Root Causes Strategy, where climate resilience funding was allocated in ways that align with U.S. migration enforcement objectives. Furthermore, the thesis engages with critical security studies perspectives that highlight the depoliticizing effects of climate security discourse,<sup>121 122</sup> showing how resilience narratives obscure the ways in which climate-induced displacement is rooted in historical patterns of economic and political marginalization. By situating the U.S. approach to climate security in Northern Central America within these broader theoretical debates, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship that interrogates the intersections of climate governance, migration control, and security politics.

Some critics of securitization theory argue that it neglects power dynamics, marginalized voices, and the implications of securitizing certain issues.<sup>123</sup> These arguments highlight the constructed nature of national security and the potential for securitization to serve the interests of dominant

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<sup>119</sup> Balzacq, T. 2011. *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*. Routledge.

<sup>120</sup> McDonald, M. 2008. Securitization and the Construction of Security. *European Journal of International Relations* 14(4): 563–587.

<sup>121</sup> Aradau, C. 2004. Security and the Democratic Scene: Desecuritization and Emancipation. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7(4): 388–413.

<sup>122</sup> Floyd, R. 2019. *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

groups, presenting a series of 'moral and ethical' dilemmas.<sup>124</sup> While this scholarship raises pertinent concerns about ensuring that proper voices are represented within security formulations and ensuring that securitization is not a pretext for politically-motivated persecution, they can also under-emphasize how securitization can be a helpful tool for political analysis.<sup>125</sup>

While I am extremely sympathetic to the sensitivity of ensuring that livelihoods, cultural heritage, and often heart-wrenching decisions regarding personal safety and security (such as decisions around forced migration) are not politicized to justify political agendas, I augment the securitization debate at a more applied level. I consider not just how climate change has been securitized, but also how government responses have been shaped by concerns about climate change. My perspective informs how securitization can be used as a practical tool of political analysis for bureaucratic decision making, as well as climate and humanitarian outcomes. Government officials' framing of climate change as requiring urgent action can utilize many tenets of securitization theory—'extraordinary politics', including both speech acts and policy design—to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts.<sup>126</sup>

The work of David Keen on complex emergencies is instructive for how to consider securitization as a practical tool of political analysis for climate change and national security. Keen argued that understanding complex emergencies, or episodes of violent conflict coupled with humanitarian

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<sup>124</sup> Aradau, C. 2004. Security and the democratic scene: desecuritization and emancipation. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7(4): 388–413.

<sup>125</sup> Taureck, R. 2006. Securitization theory and securitization studies. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9(1): 53–61.

<sup>126</sup> Albert, M. 2023. Climate emergency and securitization politics: towards a climate politics of the extraordinary. *Globalizations* 20(4): 533-547.

catastrophes such as famine, requires seeing war and peace as two states of societal existence that exist in tandem rather than being fully divorced from each other.<sup>127</sup> Conflict does not spontaneously happen; it is often the natural result of political economies and development processes that themselves have positive functions rather than simply being outcomes.<sup>128</sup> Keen's emphasis on the transitions between conflict and peace runs in contrast to what he calls the "...prevailing approach to security."<sup>129</sup> In the words of Mark Duffield, the prevailing approach to security is: "...once violent, corrupt and criminal leaders are neutralised or removed, liberal peace, in alliance with the poor, can once again resume normal development."<sup>130</sup>

As a result, Keen argued:

...part of the problem in much existing analysis is that conflict is regarded as, simply, a breakdown in a particular system, rather than as the emergence of another, alternative system of profit, power and even protection. Yet events, however horrible and catastrophic, are actually *produced*, they are made to happen by a diverse and complicated set of actors who may well be achieving their objectives in the midst of what looks like failure and breakdown.<sup>131</sup>

I focus not just on how elites perceive climate change to cause breakdowns in national security, but the systems of 'profit, power and even protection' that are often relegated to secondary status

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<sup>127</sup> Keen, D. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 25.

<sup>130</sup> Duffield, M. 2001. *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books. Page 132. Quoted in Keen, D. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>131</sup> Keen, D. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Pages 14-15.

relative to the extraordinary politics attached to doomsday predictions for climate change effects. These incentive structures, in this case seen through the national security officials that incorporate climate change into national security determinations, carry intentional functionality on their own, shepherding transitions in service of their prevailing profit, power, and protection. The following section discusses how this functionality is especially important for the label of climate change as a threat multiplier.

### *Threat Multiplier Scholarship*

In the United States, urgent rhetoric calling for extraordinary politics in response to climate change has gained a near-uniform status in the U.S. national security establishment's endorsement of climate change as a threat multiplier. While the label has gained traction in broader NATO and international circles, it is a U.S. creation, stemming from former U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Sherri Goodman's original coinage.<sup>132</sup> The threat multiplier label frames how climate change exacerbates the potential for traditional national security threats such as war, extremism, food insecurity, resource competition, and political conflict.<sup>133</sup> Scholarly research has further developed the label by starting to identify the specific conditions that lend the highest risk in order to move beyond simply saying 'bad things go together.'<sup>134</sup> More recent iterations have started to emphasize the circular nature of the issue as well; for example, the World Food Programme and Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) stated that in the Central

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<sup>132</sup> The Center for Naval Analyses. 2007. National Security and the Threat of Climate Change. [https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/national%20security%20and%20the%20threat%20of%20climate%20change.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/national%20security%20and%20the%20threat%20of%20climate%20change.pdf).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Busby, J. and N. von Uexkull. 2018. Climate Shocks and Humanitarian Crises: Which Countries Are Most at Risk? *Foreign Affairs*.

American Dry Corridor, "...climate extremes have an indirect effect on conflict by exacerbating a variety of social insecurities, which in turn may increase conflict occurrence."<sup>135</sup> Policymakers have gravitated towards the term as easily understood and a way to leverage national security concerns for securing climate action within defense and security circles.<sup>136</sup>

Creators and defenders of threat multiplier logic point to its accessible utility as an easily understood phrase, especially in the national security establishment.<sup>137</sup> In addition, threat multiplier advocates frame the term's success as integrating a systemic view of the risk and vulnerability that climate change presents into the national security establishment, especially the military.<sup>138</sup> In this systemic view, the threats that are 'multiplied' by climate change typically include geopolitical competition, food and water insecurity, military preparedness and infrastructure vulnerability, and humanitarian crises largely stemming from mass displacement.<sup>139</sup>

Methodologically, the threat multiplier perspective suffers from its empiricist and interpretivist foundations. Threat multiplier scholarship aligns empiricist studies—or studies centrally focused on proving causal links—of the relationships between climate change and negative security

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<sup>135</sup> Pacillo, G. et. al. 2023. Is climate a "risk multiplier" in the Northern Central American dry corridor? *CGIAR/WFP Joint Publication*. Page 5.

<sup>136</sup> Abrahams, D. 2019. From discourse to policy: US policy communities' perceptions of and approaches to climate change and security. *Conflict, Security & Development* 19(4): 323-345.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Goodman, S. 2024. *Threat Multiplier: Climate, Military Leadership, and the Fight for Global Security*. New York: Island Press.

<sup>139</sup> Hendrix, C. S., and M. N. King. 2020. Climate Change and Conflict: What We Know About the Linkages, and How to Address Them. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 45: 233-258.

outcomes with elite perspectives to build a theory that is powerful in its linear simplicity. While this theory does reflect a concern with climate risk and vulnerability, it suffers from the interpretivist downfall of interpreting, or reproducing, research subjects' perspectives as theory. This limited approach is not offset by claiming regression analyses show climate change causing conflict as proof that elite perspectives constitute theory. Not centering critical analysis in threat multiplier theory has the potential to bake elite biases promoting military and geopolitical power into a mainstream understanding of climate change that is reproduced through climate security discourse. This literature can omit whether elite perspectives are themselves biased and obscure powerful, material interests through the cover of performative language and policymaking.

As a result, the threat multiplier perspective presents substantive and methodological challenges for understanding why and how national security officials think about climate change. This is a linear framework that presents a limited view of complex interactions between environmental and human systems. Substantively, threat multiplier framing overly focuses on violent conflict and militaries' ability to combat threats with force.<sup>140</sup> As a result, the argument diverts attention from climate action itself as an alleviator of the very risk and vulnerability those policies are intended to reduce.<sup>141</sup> The threat multiplier label has joined how national security officials understand climate risk and vulnerability to adaptation and resilience. In effect, the label risks cementing adaptation and resilience as north stars instead of interrogating the motivations of the actors and institutions that promote this discourse in the first place.

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<sup>140</sup> See: Busby, J.W. 2022. *States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>141</sup> Abrahams, D. 2020. Conflict in abundance and peacebuilding in scarcity: Challenges and opportunities in addressing climate change and conflict. *World Development* 132: 1-12.

A seminal book written by Josh Busby, a University of Texas professor, shaped the creation of much of the Biden administration's policies for climate change and national security.<sup>142</sup> Busby promoted "...a more expansive approach of thinking about climate change as a security threat."<sup>143</sup> Busby defined climate change as a security threat relative to "...the gravity of harms and how this compares to an armed external attack."<sup>144</sup> Busby stated that because the impacts of climate change can cause similar levels of devastation and large-scale loss of life as armed conflict, and require military assets to counter, they "...can rise to the level of security problems."<sup>145</sup> Against this framing, Busby used a paired-cases approach, examining states with similar environmental impacts but with what he argues are different national security outcomes, in an attempt to isolate the factors explaining how climate change affects national security. He assessed what he claimed to be parallel examples, such as Somalia and Ethiopia, through regression analysis and quantitative markers of success like reduced conflict, famine, and increased economic growth. He concluded that state capacity, political inclusion, and receptiveness to international aid are the central determinants for climate change's effects on states' national security.

Essentially, Busby argued that stronger, more inclusive, and more open states will respond better to climate change than states weaker in those areas. He considered the motivations of national security officials relative to their role in creating stronger or weaker states, as defined by institutionalists. Busby presented a conventional political science approach to this interdisciplinary

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<sup>142</sup> Busby, J.W. 2022. *States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, Page 6.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

set of issues. Busby argued for a positivist understanding of climate change as a threat multiplier and framed democratic governance and state capacity as thresholds for success.

The threat multiplier framework raises methodological and substantive questions. Methodologically, by assessing whether certain power sharing agreements exist within political institutions or not (one factor which makes them more or less inclusive), this perspective presents a static picture of dynamic processes. This approach risks reproducing the bias inherent in performative climate security language promoted by national security officials. These elite biases frame aggregate climate impacts and political interests in binary, relational terms without comprehensively interrogating the underlying material interests. Climate change is not necessarily a national security issue just because national security officials think it involves military assets and is fit to purpose for their worldview, which has been shaped by fossil fuel industry misinformation (outlined beginning on p. 66). As a result, a key potential limitation of threat multiplier scholarship is that the assumptions underpinning elite perspectives are reproduced onto scholarly theory.

Accordingly, the threat multiplier perspective can be tautological and difficult to falsify. It is intuitive to say that stronger governments and societies will inherently better manage the impacts of climate change. A threat multiplier diagnosis, however, does not inform ways to understand the determinants of state capacities themselves. Second, the threat multiplier framework is overly linear. In this view (which has been integrated into the U.S. national security establishment at senior levels) a climate hazard occurs, and the risk lies in the resulting impacts that augment traditional threats, as elaborated above. Unfortunately, this linear description undermines the adaptation focus it purports to champion. The emphasis on managing national security threats often

prevents adaptation investment for climate-vulnerable countries because elites perceive these countries to be in linear decline. Venezuela, Haiti, and Northern Central American countries, for example, are rarely referred to as potential countries of eventual return for U.S.-bound migrants—the overriding perception revolves around these countries being national security threats that climate change is exacerbating as emissions increase.

Consequently, the threat multiplier view presents a significant challenge for efforts towards climate justice for the most climate-vulnerable countries, which have contributed a fraction of global emissions yet are experiencing the most severe consequences. The case for loss and damage funds, as well as overall adaptation investment, is jeopardized if decision makers view these countries as sources of conflict and insecurity because of climate change patterns that will only increase. In addition, the threat multiplier framework is overly state-centric: ecologies, human mobility patterns, and political and administrative state functions vary sub-nationally. The threat multiplier framework presents an overly narrow perception of the full feedback loop of actors and interests defining political change, and the complex realities of their impacts.

In addition, some critics of threat multiplier framing argue that the label securitizes climate change. This line of thought focuses on the ‘extraordinary politics’<sup>146</sup> that are granted to elite actors to tackle perceived national security threats. Invoking the catastrophic language of military operations to describe climate change bolsters a securitized perspective in which, because these threats are so extraordinary, the means to confront them must not be bound by conventional

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<sup>146</sup> Albert, M. 2023. Climate emergency and securitization politics: towards a climate politics of the extraordinary. *Globalizations* 20(4): 533-547.

restraint. Scholars have explored how the removal of political restraint has been used in various contexts to justify long-term extensions of state power that can alter fundamental relationships between democratic processes and the rule of law.<sup>147</sup> Some scholars note securitization can overly militarize policymaking in a way that actually increases conflict and instability instead of reducing them.<sup>148</sup> Others argue that securitization is a response to the outputs of neoliberal capitalism and omits structural analysis of the systems that produce those outputs.<sup>149</sup>

Additionally, critiques of the threat multiplier concept center its overly narrow focus on violence as opposed to broader national security implications of climate change, and the resulting challenge in implementing development interventions that need to be shoehorned to size.<sup>150 151</sup> Some critical refugee studies scholars have rejected the securitization that a threat multiplier label advances. Neel Ahuja called climate securitization a convenient distraction from the systemic causes of underdevelopment and insecurity—stemming from extractive capitalism and colonial, neo-imperialist, racialized interventionism, border security, and militarism—by portraying displaced persons and other products of these systems as the threat, rather than the systems themselves.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Agamben, G. 2004. *States of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>148</sup> Selby, J. and C. Hoffmann. 2014. Rethinking Climate Change, Conflict, and Security. *Geopolitics* 19(4): 747-756.

<sup>149</sup> Ahuja, N. 2021. *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration, and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>150</sup> Abrahams, D. 2020. Conflict in abundance and peacebuilding in scarcity: Challenges and opportunities in addressing climate change and conflict. *World Development* 132: 1-12.

<sup>151</sup> Mercy Corps. 2020. *Addressing the Climate-Conflict Nexus: Mercy Corps' Journey and Future Directions*. Washington DC: Mercy Corps.

<sup>152</sup> Ahuja, N. 2021. *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration, and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

While Ahuja's systemic critique presents useful reframing, it also risks exacerbating a false binary of the securitization debate. Racialized securitization certainly does not emphasize individual agency or drivers of systemic outcomes as much as it does the threat perceptions of those outcomes. But concerns about humanitarian protection are very real, not least for those who are fleeing violence, persecution, and environmental degradation. While Ahuja explicitly acknowledges this and does focus on the need for systemic solutions to systemic problems, there is further room to examine how national security determinations contribute to those systemic drivers themselves, and what function they play. Systemic generalizations risk framing securitization in an overly static manner, as an assumed, inherent characteristic of neoliberal imperialist capitalism. Even though the end-state diagnosis is generally correct, we lose analytical value by under-examining the process of securitization itself and what that process, not just the outcome, lends for understanding the complex phenomena involved. In other words, we risk missing how to leverage the practical analysis inherent in the securitization lens without losing focus on the need for applied solutions. Otherwise, humanitarian, development, climate, and immigration advocates, especially in the United States, risk ceding the narrative to the national security paradigm that defines the counterterrorism and counternarcotics status quo.

Systemic critiques of climate securitization, therefore, can be susceptible to providing a static reflection of dynamic processes. Blanket critiques frame securitization as an end state. However, there are rich historical trajectories and institutional legacies behind the creation and implementation of those 'extraordinary politics' themselves.

In contrast, I do not take securitization of climate change as the conclusion, but rather the starting point of my inquiry. I consider the application of political interests and power that, as David Keen has argued, serve a positive function in generating national security policies to protect and amplify those very interests.<sup>153</sup> I provide a critical analysis that unpacks how and why national security officials have generated the threat multiplier label used to define U.S. national security doctrine for climate change.

Beyond threat multiplier framing, researching why national security officials use climate security discourse to advance their goals around migration is an important contribution for understanding political dynamics between the United States, Mexico, and Northern Central America. Scholars in security studies, political science, and migration and border criminology studies have used critical analysis to unpack the structural determinants of ways that national security officials think about migration.<sup>154</sup> However, these analyses are not solely focused on isolating the role of the environment within structural critiques of migration securitization. Instead, those studies consider the environment as one of many factors that drive migration, usefully providing a full picture. I extend this angle by focusing on the role of the environment in political determinations.

In addition, I center how national security discourses about climate change are motivated by national security officials themselves. Scholars in political ecology, security studies, and migration studies have examined the relationship between climate change and both security and migration.

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<sup>153</sup> Keen, D. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>154</sup> See: Green, L. 2011. The Nobodies: Neoliberalism, Violence, and Migration. *Medical Anthropology* 30(4): 366-385.

Political ecology studies of climate change and security provide structural critiques of how nature is commodified, commercialized and instrumentalized in what Michael Watts called a “...more-or-less Marxist analysis of political economy in which the social relations of production, access to and control over resources, and power relations rooted in state and capital figured centrally.”<sup>155</sup> While these studies are useful for an overall systemic diagnosis of the problem—the environment is used by powerful actors to further their own ends—they do not condition analytical treatment to consider the process by which those systems have come into being. Applying this sweeping systems lens can generalize the role of powerful decision makers by relegating those actors to their relative place in upholding certain state-market relations that suppress poor, agrarian communities.

I also build on these structural analyses’ healthy skepticism of adaptation language. These scholars consider the concept of adaptation as facilitating the destruction of nature and the repression of workers and marginalized voices, particularly those of women, indigenous leaders and other community authorities.<sup>156</sup> In this vein, political ecology studies of climate change and migration advance this systems lens in challenging the theory that migration is a ‘successful’ adaptation strategy for climate change impacts.<sup>157</sup> As Michael Watts argued, policy focuses on creating systems that can adapt to climate change “...by definition, circulate widely and are deployed among heterogeneous communities in a variety of ways. Their historical semantics are typically

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<sup>155</sup> Watts, M.J. 2015. Now and Then: The origins of political ecology and the rebirth of adaptation as a form of thought. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G., and J. McCarthy (Eds.). 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. Page 33.

<sup>156</sup> Vigil, S. 2024. Towards a feminist political ecology of migration in a changing climate. *Geoforum* 155(104076).

<sup>157</sup> Radel, C., Schmook, B., Carte, L., and S. Mardero. 2018. Toward a Political Ecology of Migration: Land, Labor Migration, and Climate Change in Northwestern Nicaragua. *World Development* 108: 263-273.

complex and unstable. The language of adaptation is ubiquitous, if not promiscuous, traveling effortlessly across biological, cultural, social, and ideological boundaries.”<sup>158</sup>

However, these structural critiques often sideline national security discourse as part of the power structure that produces detrimental frameworks for climate change and migration. In contrast, I extend this research through study of national security officials that provides analytical insight into the rhetoric and policy design that enables bureaucratic securitization beyond simply stating that these officials serve as powerful agents that reproduce unbalanced discourse. In addition, even in security studies and political science literature that examines in greater detail how climate change influences U.S. national security officials’ thinking, the role of climate change has not yet been seen as a fundamental component for structural debates around migration and national security beyond its assumed role as a threat multiplier.<sup>159</sup>

The work of Neta Crawford is important in this respect. Crawford showed that political-economic incentives in the United States have created what she labels as the ‘Deep Cycle’ of military industrialization and greenhouse gas emissions that conditions decision making by national security officials.<sup>160</sup> Crawford usefully argued that these structural incentives produce threat multiplier thinking, and that thinking leads to a focus on climate adaptation over mitigation. I

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<sup>158</sup> Watts, M.J. 2015. Now and Then: The origins of political ecology and the rebirth of adaptation as a form of thought. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G., and J. McCarthy (Eds.). 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. Page 29.

<sup>159</sup> Abrahams, D. 2019. From discourse to policy: US policy communities’ perceptions of and approaches to climate change and security. *Conflict, Security & Development* 19(4): 323-345.

<sup>160</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

advance Crawford's work by providing not just a reaffirmation of the structural incentives underpinning climate security discourse, but a layered consideration of why and how those structural incentives have been used by national security officials to pursue their own interests within structures of power.

To this end, the securitization of migration in U.S. policy predates contemporary climate security discourse but has become increasingly linked to it in recent years. Policymakers use climate security rhetoric to justify migration deterrence strategies, portraying adaptation investments as a means of reducing displacement rather than as genuine development efforts. While climate adaptation is often framed as a humanitarian initiative aimed at strengthening resilience, it functions as a political tool to reinforce border control measures. The Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy exemplifies this approach, explicitly linking climate adaptation to migration deterrence, creating tensions between development goals and security priorities.

The threat multiplier framing of climate change presents environmental processes as amplifiers of existing security risks rather than direct causes of instability. This framing enables national security officials to build political support for climate-related interventions while focusing on deterrence over addressing systemic vulnerabilities. By framing climate change as a security risk, agencies like the Pentagon justify interventionist policies, particularly in regions experiencing climate-induced displacement. Although scientific consensus on climate-driven migration remains inconclusive, policymakers increasingly treat migration as a national security risk, influencing both domestic and foreign policy decisions in ways that prioritize containment over protection. I further explore the political dynamics of climate securitization in the next section.

## Climate Securitization, Big Oil, and U.S. Policy

The integration of climate security into U.S. national security discourse has not occurred in isolation but has instead been shaped by powerful corporate and political interests. As the concept of climate resilience gained traction within government institutions, it also became a strategic tool for fossil fuel companies, which have long sought to control the narrative on mitigating emissions. Rather than prioritizing emissions reductions, climate security rhetoric has emphasized resilience and adaptation, reinforcing a status quo beneficial to fossil fuel industries while sidelining systemic climate action. This section explores how Big Oil influenced climate security discourse, shaping U.S. policy to align with corporate interests and, in turn, justifying securitized responses to migration and environmental crises.

In this context, securitization is a useful frame for understanding the political origins of climate security narratives, and the functions that the narratives themselves perform. Of particular importance is how elites have leveraged national security narratives to protect the political interests underpinning the systemic determinants of emissions-intensive profiteering that prioritized the so-called Global North. The work of scholars such as Timothy Mitchell, Benjamin Franta, and Adam Hanieh is instructive in illuminating how multinational fossil fuel companies, predominantly based in the United States and Western Europe, used the twentieth century to create, consolidate, and expand a global economic order predicated on profit-maximizing extraction and consumption of oil and gas.<sup>161</sup> These strategies relied on sophisticated systems of misinformation, political intervention, and public relations narratives developed in order to protect such interests.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Hanieh, A. 2024. *Crude Capitalism: Oil, Corporate Power, and the Making of the World Market*. London: Verso.

<sup>162</sup> Franta, B. 2022. *Big Carbon's Strategic Response to Global Warming, 1950-2000*. Stanford University PhD Thesis. Accessed at: <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hq437ph9153/Franta%20->

National security framing was first used to justify repeated foreign intervention in the Middle East to secure oil and gas reserves, pipelines, and downstream processing and refining capacities, and was couched in the language of democracy promotion and geostrategic competition, against the constructed veneer of communism in Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states.<sup>163</sup> A financialized militarism was central to these processes. Fossil fuel interests promoted significant military-industrial production in the United States in order to provide enough artificial demand for the cycling of U.S. dollars needed to sustain pliable governing partners in Middle Eastern petrostates, most of which were ruled in direct opposition to the supposed democratic values they allegedly safeguarded.<sup>164</sup> In tandem, Big Oil was waging a public relations war at home in the United States, working to manufacture faulty academic research discrediting the emerging science detailing global warming and climate change, and characterizing the expansion of oil and gas throughout the economy as supposed markers of hard-won American power and freedom overseas.<sup>165</sup>

The extraordinary politics used to provide moral and political justification for the expansion of fossil fuels link domestic and foreign policy. At home, fossil fuels powered the creation of the U.S. interstate highway system and resulting car-dependent suburban explosion.<sup>166</sup> Abroad, national

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<https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hq437ph9153/Franta%20-%20Big%20Carbon%20strategic%20response%20to%20global%20warming%201950-2020%20-%202022-08-25-augmented.pdf>

<sup>163</sup> Mitchell, T. 2011. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Franta, B. 2022. *Big Carbon's Strategic Response to Global Warming, 1950-2000*. Stanford University PhD Thesis. Accessed at: <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hq437ph9153/Franta%20-%20Big%20Carbon%20strategic%20response%20to%20global%20warming%201950-2020%20-%202022-08-25-augmented.pdf>

<sup>166</sup> Jackson, K. 1985. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

security officials secured the energy supply needed to power foreign demand via the U.S.-British 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, the Carter Doctrine's explicit naming of fossil fuel supply as a 'vital national interest' of the United States, Operation Desert Storm in Kuwait, and the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>167</sup> In particular, the CIA's intervention in Iran and the invasion of Iraq count among the most ruinously consequential post-war U.S. foreign policy decisions.<sup>168</sup>

Neta Crawford's dataset of U.S. military greenhouse gas emissions connects Big Oil's weaponization of national security framing with contemporary labels of climate change as a threat multiplier.<sup>169</sup> Crawford argued that U.S. foreign expansionism and global military dominance have been tied to a long-standing domestic political-economic model predicated around large-scale extraction and consumption of fossil fuels. Crawford illuminated how the U.S. initially replicated and then far surpassed the British imperial model of market dominance through an aggressive global military force posture predicated around procuring and protecting fossil fuels, mostly replacing coal with oil and natural gas. This global network has been over-indexed in the Middle East since World War I, and we can draw a straight line, for oil and gas, between the U.S. economy's ever-expanding appetite for energy and its attempted diplomatic, market, and military dominance of the primary producing countries. Crucially, this expansive foreign policy also created enormous political and economic incentives for maintaining domestic productive capacity

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<sup>167</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>168</sup> Gordon, P. 2020. *Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East*. New York: St. Martin's Press. A Council on Foreign Relations Book.

<sup>169</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

to support the eternal search for additional fossil fuel supply, both at home and abroad—i.e., the Deep Cycle. Foreign policy expansionism is a key lens that elites have used to shape understanding of climate change as a national security threat. National security officials have intricately tied concerns about climate change to the implications for the U.S. military-industrial complex's market and military dominance and its elite protectorate, at home and abroad.

The fossil fuel industry weaponized national security framing by advocating for adapting to the impacts of climate change rather than mitigating the causes. In particular, the concepts of climate 'adaptation' and 'resilience' are key products of this legacy. Recent historical scholarship from Franta and others focuses on research produced during the 1970s at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), a collaborative effort to join scientists together from across the Iron Curtain near Vienna, Austria, that developed central products of climate misinformation still in use today.<sup>170</sup> In particular, IIASA researchers stated that replacing fossil fuels would be too costly, time-consuming, and technically complex to pursue as a strategy, a finding based far more on speculation than any hard empirical evidence.<sup>171</sup> As a result of this artificial 'complexification,' IIASA researchers argued for focusing efforts on the 'resilience' of society to comprehensively manage the impacts of global warming, and 'adapt' social systems in response.<sup>172</sup> As Franta noted:

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<sup>170</sup> Franta, B. 2022. Big Carbon's Strategic Response to Global Warming, 1950-2000. Stanford University PhD Thesis. Accessed at: <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hq437ph9153/Franta%20-%20Big%20Carbon%20strategic%20response%20to%20global%20warming%201950-2020%20-%202022-08-25-augmented.pdf>.

<sup>171</sup> See: Schrickell, I. 2017. Control Versus Complexity: Approaches to the Carbon Dioxide Problem at IIASA, *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 40(2).

<sup>172</sup> Franta, B. 2022. Big Carbon's Strategic Response to Global Warming, 1950-2000. Stanford University PhD Thesis. Pages 135-136. Accessed at: <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:hq437ph9153/Franta%20-%20Big%20Carbon%20strategic%20response%20to%20global%20warming%201950-2020%20-%202022-08-25-augmented.pdf>

The adaptation solution...let Big Oil off the hook. Their approach called for climate change management of every aspect of society, transforming a conceptually simple problem (of replacing fossil fuels) with a hopelessly complex one. The researchers did not seem to realize that global warming, as a cumulative problem, could not be managed away indefinitely. At some point, fossil fuels would simply need to be replaced.<sup>173</sup>

The fossil fuel industry manufactured these solutions under the auspices of providing technical, apolitical reasons not to upset prevailing Cold War geostrategic considerations. Private sector elites prescribed courses of action in response to rising global warming that left its main systemic drivers intact in the name of business continuity and national security.

The Big Oil-driven narrative of adaptation and resilience had a powerful influence on U.S. national security doctrine for climate change. National security doctrine is tied to "...leaders' perceptions of the country's interests" that serve "...as a guide by which leaders conduct the foreign policy of a country. At its most effective, a national security doctrine is the organizing principle that helps statesmen identify and prioritize their country's geopolitical interests."<sup>174</sup> National security doctrines are subjective creations that typically come from a number of sources to determine a presidential administration's focuses, how those focuses align with longer-run trends in the ways U.S. national interests are perceived, and the strategies deployed to expand and protect such interests. Each administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy can be assessed as an umbrella for other strategy documents, public statements, and, of course, actions, appropriations, and programs designed and implemented as a result to assess national security

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Sempa, F. 2004. U.S. National Security Doctrines Historically Viewed: A Commentary. *American Diplomacy* 9(2).

doctrines. As Chin et. al. noted of the National Security Strategy: "Though presidents may ignore their own national security strategy, if any words matter, the words in this document do."<sup>175</sup>

National security officials have increasingly incorporated climate change into U.S. national security doctrine as an indirect threat multiplier. While environmental degradation, namely nuclear contamination and waste, was considered as central to the theater of Cold War great power competition that defined U.S. national security doctrine from World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the effects of anthropomorphic climate change were not incorporated into significant decision making until the Obama and Biden administrations.<sup>176</sup> Those administrations increasingly emphasized the role of climate action as a strategic imperative within competitive frameworks of trade, investment, and a so-called rules-based international order.<sup>177</sup> Above all, climate change was benchmarked against "...an emphasis on protecting democracy and striving to make democracies demonstrate the superiority of the democratic way of life over its alternatives."<sup>178</sup> As a result, the use of the threat multiplier label has evolved directly in tandem with significant national security emphases that, in the period since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, climate change is believed to impact. These security paradigms include counterterrorism, counternarcotics, human rights, and territorial sovereignty that underpin the perceived moral stature of advanced, secular Western democracies in contrast to the rise of asymmetric, nonstate, theological, transnational, and organized criminal

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<sup>175</sup> Chin, J., Skinner, K., and C. Yoo. 2023. Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time. *Texas National Security Review* 6(4): 103-124. Page 103.

<sup>176</sup> Goodman, S. 2024. *Threat Multiplier: Climate, Military Leadership, and the Fight for Global Security*. New York: Island Press.

<sup>177</sup> Chin, J., Skinner, K., and C. Yoo. 2023. Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time. *Texas National Security Review* 6(4): 103-124. Page 123.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

organizations.<sup>179</sup> In particular, the Biden administration’s national security doctrine centered on the implications of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and concerns around a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, despite criticism of its selective double standard for noninterventionism, notably in regards to the Israel-Hamas war.<sup>180</sup>

As referenced in the Introduction, the Biden administration’s national security doctrine of climate security, and the indirect pathways that comprise it, is vague and difficult to standardize. As a result, the shorthand of climate security is more usefully understood as a collection of powerful interests that have historically evolved into a political vehicle shaping policymaking. In addition, the crosscutting, transboundary, and nonhuman character of climate change makes its relationship to national security much more difficult to positively define. Indeed, the impacts of climate change in driving longer-run strains on political, economic, ecological, and social infrastructures are much more difficult to conceptualize in practice. Josh Busby considered how climate shocks can be compared to analogous military events, such as “a decapitation strike on [a] country’s capital from an external aggressor,” or “...if a neighboring country bombed one’s refineries or depopulated a city.”<sup>181</sup> The value of such conceptual exercises aside, this inconsistency in terms means Busby actually defined what climate change *insecurity* is rather than a positive definition of what climate-secure human livelihoods look like, either in theory or in practice. While the continuously shifting and political nature of the climate security definition may render that task impossible, what is

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<sup>179</sup> Lieven, A. 2020. *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>180</sup> Wertheim, S. 2024. Why America Can’t Have It All: Washington Must Choose Between Primacy and Prioritizing. *Foreign Affairs*. February 14, 2024.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, Page 23.

certain is that an understanding via exclusion will complicate any efforts to inductively problem-solve for perceived threats to national, human, and ecological interests.

Who is driving these definitions of what climate security means, and why is it imperative to even have such a definition? Defining contested political concepts and structures requires an historical view. In this way, the concept of elite and institutional policy determinations is longstanding in the context of climate change and national security. North et al. found that climate shocks can fracture ruling political coalitions.<sup>182</sup> Harry Verhoeven documented how transboundary natural resource disputes are often folded into political state-building campaigns.<sup>183</sup> Colin Kahl argued that exclusive (i.e., corrupt and opaque) political institutions hamper countries' responses to natural disasters within their own borders.<sup>184</sup> Busby's state capacity, political inclusion, and receptiveness framework treated these institutional components of security outcomes as static entities that either exist or do not.<sup>185</sup> These kinds of institutions-based arguments about development (which largely stem from Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson)<sup>186</sup> are critiqued by Stefan Dercon, who presented more of a dynamic picture in arguing that constantly evolving and subjective 'elite bargains' over power and profit sharing determine whether development outcomes

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<sup>182</sup> North, D.C., Wallis, J.J., and B.R. Weingast. 2009. *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*. First edition. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>183</sup> Verhoeven, H. 2015. *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State Building*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>184</sup> Kahl, C.H. 2006. *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>185</sup> Busby, J.W. 2022. *States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>186</sup> Acemoglu, D., and J.A. Robinson. 2012. *Why nations fail: the origins of power, prosperity and poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers.

and the consequences that result, beginning with peace, stability, and security, are positive in the long-run.<sup>187</sup> While Dercon painted a more realistic picture of the often unorthodox and unpredictable shifts in power sharing that can determine development outcomes, and also focused on the agency of individual actors in shaping systemic responses to security and development challenges, he still treated these actors themselves as static pawns on a chessboard that need to be configured in the right way. I build on this literature by considering the tacit rules and interests that motivate such actors themselves.

As a result, I work within the theoretical gap that exists within understandings of why and how climate change influences U.S. national security officials' pursuit of their goals, alongside a parallel empirical gap in emergent climate security discourse in the United States. I advance skepticism of both adaptation language and national security language by deconstructing climate security discourse. I isolate the extent to which climate change has emerged as a tool for powerful actors to pursue material interests through a focus on migration.

While scholars have extensively studied the climate-security nexus, less attention has been given to how climate discourse is strategically deployed for political ends. Existing research tends to overlook the ways in which climate security rhetoric enables migration deterrence policies under the guise of resilience-building. However, climate security rhetoric does not exist in isolation—it is deeply entangled with historical U.S. narratives of economic frontierism, expansion, and control. The following section examines how longstanding ideologies of economic frontierism have framed

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<sup>187</sup> Dercon, S. 2022. *Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose*. London: Hurst and Co.

migration governance, underscoring how climate security discourse serves as a contemporary extension of past policies aimed at consolidating U.S. influence in the Americas.

### Constructing Legality at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Deeply embedded scholarship in anthropology, sociology, and criminology has defined how elites have policed and legitimized the U.S.-bound regional migration corridor by moving the boundaries of what is considered legal. Clear and powerful themes from this scholarship revolve around the criminalization, othering, and legal exclusion of individual migrants as a tool of social control. Elites have criminalized migration by labeling migrants as 'looters'<sup>188</sup> and 'nobodies',<sup>189</sup> who are then transformed by the U.S. criminal justice and immigration systems into 'illegals' and 'aliens'.<sup>190</sup> In a study of the complex production of violence, migration, and social fabrics between Los Angeles and El Salvador, Elana Zilberg described the 'transnational neoliberal securityscapes' created by the criminalization of immigrants, the blurring of lines between states, law enforcement, borders, and militaries, and the erosion of sovereignty and individual agency within carceral and punitive systems of socio-political control.<sup>191</sup> In a rich ethnography of migrant journeys through Mexico to the United States, Wendy Vogt affirmed the precarity and contested expression of coercive power in what she called the 'arterial border' of the migration corridor.<sup>192</sup> Vogt's analysis

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<sup>188</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>189</sup> Green, L. 2011. The Nobodies: Neoliberalism, Violence, and Migration, *Medical Anthropology* 30(4): 366-385.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>192</sup> Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press.

of the arterial border described how the 'intimate economies of mobility' are "...not fixed or static, but continuously performed," as well as the horrific violence and suffering that is commonplace on the journey to the United States.<sup>193</sup> The centrality of gender to this subjective legality is critical as well: men typically head north as surplus labor with the hopes of sending remittances back home, while women are subject to a complex burden of care and precarity.<sup>194</sup> Women are also increasingly exposed to horrific violence and trafficking by organized crime if they attempt to migrate, a situation faced by many LGBTQIA+ migrants as well.<sup>195</sup>

Within the grinding free trade regime, deportation is a foundational plank that the United States has used to subjugate what elites consider excess, disposable labor through the production and reproduction of violence. Anthropologists, sociologists, and criminologists such as Vogt and Zilberg have documented the immensely destructive impact of mass deportation on individuals, families, and communities. Structurally, mass deportation feeds the heterogeneity and fluidity of both formal and informal authorities in perpetuating systems of spatial capitalist control, where malign actors have taken advantage of mass deportations to exercise considerable coercion over recently returned migrants.<sup>196</sup> The cumulative effect is that systemic, deep, and pervasive vulnerability and insecurity is forced onto individuals and communities. These studies help us understand David Harvey's description of capitalist political economy as being upheld by

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, Page 54.

<sup>194</sup> Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press.

“...logics of power that are neither solely political nor predominately economic but rather institutional arrangements embedded within the state that have an influential role in setting the stage for the accumulation of capital.”<sup>197</sup>

Elites solidified these structural imbalances through the criminal-legal apparatus in the United States and resulting zero-tolerance law enforcement frameworks promoted in Mexico and Northern Central America, which have rendered migrants' legal status the subject of punitive and coercive cruelty. In an analysis of mass deportation under the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, Tanya Golash-Boza highlighted deportations related to the immigration crime (established by IIRIRA) of 'illegal entry,' which is determined by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE):

The difference between a person deported on noncriminal grounds for being undocumented and one deported on criminal grounds for 'illegal entry' is almost entirely a question of prosecutorial discretion. In other words, these 47,000 people deported for illegal entry were converted into criminals for reporting purposes. [...]

ICE currently uses an exceedingly broad definition of criminal behavior: even very minor infractions are included. For example, anyone with a traffic ticket for exceeding the speed limit on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway who sends in their check to pay their fine has just entered ICE's "convicted criminal" category. If the same definitions were applied to every citizen...evidence suggests that the majority of U.S. citizens would be considered convicted criminals.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Harvey, D. 2003. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 35.

<sup>198</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press. Page 9.

In Northern Central America, this structural vulnerability pushes migrants into a 'liminal' space.<sup>199</sup> This occurs between their 'home' countries, which many who have spent significant time in the U.S. barely know, and the United States, whose multinational corporations, in partnership with elite counterparts throughout the region, have defined migrants' primary value as their labor.<sup>200</sup> Zilberg noted that as a result, the cycle of legal hopelessness has come full circle, where the denial of refugee status for those fleeing U.S.-backed, state-sponsored violence in the 1980s and 1990s has been replaced by the denial of asylum applications for gang violence and political persecution in contemporary Northern Central America.<sup>201</sup> Granting these requests would formally constitute a guilty admission of failure on the part of the United States for its central role in fomenting crisis and insecurity. The outcome is that "...contrary to the assertion that securitescapes work to entrench the state rather than to deterritorialize it...securitescapes effectively undermine the very sovereignty they set out to defend and the very peace they seek to establish."<sup>202</sup>

These regional, U.S.-driven securitescapes are a useful starting point for understanding the institutional determinants of national security along the regional migration corridor in the post-NAFTA era. If we are to better understand how climate change is seen as a national security threat multiplier, we need to adequately account for the foundational inputs of insecurity in the first place. As Vogt argued, "There is no one 'root cause' to explain migration from Central America; rather,

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<sup>199</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>200</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>201</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, Page 219.

we must interrogate the layered factors that produce everyday insecurities."<sup>203</sup> In addition, no discussion of migration is complete without a critical reckoning of its relationship to development and underdevelopment.<sup>204</sup> My critical theory analysis aligns with the dynamic and fluid character of these intertwined phenomena, taking appropriate caution when assessing their evolutions as historical and path-dependent, rather than as a static snapshot in time. In the subsequent chapter, I consider why climate change came to influence elite narratives about immigration as a national security threat, and how this climate security discourse intersects with the frontierist logic that is a predominant organizing principle for how U.S. elites perceive the lands, resources, and peoples within their reach.

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In sum, I advance critical theory scholarship of climate securitization in two main ways. First, I deconstruct not only the origins of climate security discourse in the United States but also examine why and how national security officials have exploited this discourse through performative language to pursue their material interests, and how these dynamics have shifted over time. Second, I detail the implications that climate security discourse has for U.S. engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America—explored in the following chapter—especially through the contested mix of immigration, economic development, and national security.

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<sup>203</sup> Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press. Page 33.

<sup>204</sup> Delgado Wise, R. and H. Márquez Covarrubias. 2008. Capitalist Restructuring, Development and Labour Migration: The Mexico: U.S. Case. *Third World Quarterly* (29)7: 1359-1374.

This chapter further traces the evolution of climate securitization and its growing entanglement with economic frontierism and migration deterrence in U.S. policy. The integration of economic frontierism into this picture further underscores how deterrence-first strategies remain central to U.S. engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America. By framing climate adaptation as a security priority, U.S. officials have advanced investment-led deterrence policies that serve both geopolitical and corporate interests.

While securitization theory has been widely applied to migration and environmental governance, this thesis demonstrates that climate security discourse functions not just as a tool of exceptional politics, but as a bureaucratic and economic instrument that aligns security interests with multinational investment. This extends securitization studies by showing how climate discourse is operationalized through economic structures rather than purely military frameworks. To analyze this process, I adopt an analytical framework, introduced in Chapter 3, that foregrounds the role of discourse in shaping security policymaking. This framework allows me to move beyond causal empiricism—focused on whether climate change ‘causes’ migration—and instead examine how national security officials have strategically framed climate adaptation as a deterrence tool.

### **Chapter 3: Analytical Framework**

This chapter builds out my analytical approach for understanding why national security officials have used climate security discourse to advocate for certain migration policies, from border security to root causes approaches, and how this discourse shaped resulting political dynamics. I first discuss prevailing approaches for considering the fusion of climate change, immigration, and economic frontierism through national security language. I then explore what the process of developing policy language involving security concerns has looked like for U.S. officials: what variables and incentive structures determine decision making. Finally, I discuss potential alternative approaches to this convoluted set of issues.

I question not just whether U.S. national security officials think climate change multiplies the threat of migration. I also consider whether their articulation of this threat is genuine or performative, and how the willingness to embrace or reject any connection between climate change and migration is a consequence of the relationships between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America. This framework offers one way to grasp what the process of climate securitization looks like within the geographic and temporal context of this case study.

#### Climate Change, Immigration, and Frontierism

How elites understand the relationship between climate change and immigration is a key consideration for U.S. national security deliberations about protecting frontierist market expansion. A chief concern for scholarly and policy literature especially is the large-scale, irregular migration and displacement that will result from climate change. Migration and border criminology studies have attempted to connect the decision to migrate with climate change, among

other drivers—such as economic opportunity, corruption, and violence, especially gender-based and sexual violence.<sup>205</sup> Research on migration has a long tradition of unpacking the systemic foundations of why migration criminalization and national security have evolved as twin constructs in the United States and Latin America from the end of the Cold War through 9/11.<sup>206</sup> Migration and border criminology scholars have examined the links between climate change, migration, and national security through ethnography, household surveys, and analysis of border arrivals and other immigration applications data.<sup>207</sup> These studies shed important light on how to understand human mobility in the context of climate change, but provide less insight into the systemic drivers of policy frameworks that govern migration decision making itself.

The terminology employed to describe these complex phenomena is a useful starting point. I use the terms 'climate-affected migration,' 'climate-affected mobility,' and 'climate displacement' as appropriate treatments of the contested causal relationship between climate change and complex mobility decisions, which often feature climate change as one of many factors impacting mobility or immobility.<sup>208</sup> In addition, I do not use the phrase 'climate refugees' because of the strict legal

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<sup>205</sup> See: Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press.

<sup>206</sup> See: Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>207</sup> Brown, O. and R. McLeman. 2013. Climate Change and Migration: An Overview. *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*. Immanuel Ness, editor: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

<sup>208</sup> Huckstep, S. and M. Clemens. 2023. "Climate Change and Migration: An Omnibus Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners." CGD Policy Paper 292. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. Page 35. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/climate-change-and-migration-omnibus-overviewpolicymakers-and-development>.

requirements needed for refugee status as well as the lack of appropriate legal frameworks available to label involuntary, climate-induced migrants as refugees.<sup>209</sup>

A common approach for classifying this range of human mobility is to pair the type of climate shock with the motivations of the migration response.<sup>210</sup> Scholars have sorted climate shocks into those with short-, medium-, or longer-term duration.<sup>211</sup> In parallel, researchers have classified common motivations for mobility as 'distress' (e.g., fleeing a hurricane), 'amenity-seeking' (e.g., pulled by a strong labor market), or 'adaptive' (e.g., moving from drought-ridden highlands to an urban area) migration.<sup>212</sup> In general, climate displacement typically results in shorter travel distances and return to home communities after initial displacement.<sup>213</sup> Climate-affected mobility can also take the form of 'involuntary immobility,' where climate shocks render individuals unable to move (e.g., flooding or landslides cut off transportation routes).<sup>214</sup> However, "...where, how, and whether people move in response to that event is shaped by preexisting migration systems, the resources and networks of affected households, government or humanitarian interventions, and the broader development context."<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Brown, O. and R. McLeman. 2013. Climate Change and Migration: An Overview. *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*. Immanuel Ness, editor: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Carling, J. 2002. Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28(1): 5-42.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Schewel, K. et. al. 2022. Evaluating Climate-Related Migration Forecasting Models. USAID Research Technical Assistance Center: Washington, DC. Page 6.

A lively, interdisciplinary body of scholarly work has evolved in response to early predictions of mass climate displacement that garnered significant national security attention. A commonly cited 2005 study from Oxford's Norman Myers projected that there would be 200 million climate migrants by 2050.<sup>216</sup> The Myers study laid out a linear trajectory: it stated that climate impacts would render landscapes uninhabitable, forcing distress migration towards developed countries.<sup>217</sup> The Myers study drew notice from policymakers and national security officials, especially in the United States and European Union.<sup>218</sup> The 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy called refugee flows stemming from climate change "...an urgent and growing threat to our national security."<sup>219</sup> More recently, the World Bank's *Groundswell* report has become a commonly-cited benchmark for climate-affected mobility.<sup>220</sup> The *Groundswell* report predicted that, absent mitigation and adaptation efforts, there could be 143 million people internally displaced across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia because of environmental factors by 2050.<sup>221</sup> This policy awareness does not fully grapple with the substantial challenges associated with these predictions.

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<sup>216</sup> Brown, O. 2008. Migration and Climate Change. *International Organization for Migration*. Migration Research Series 31.

For the Myers study:

Myers, N. 2005. Environmental refugees: An emergent security issue. 13th Economic Forum, May, Prague 2-27.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> The Myers study was cited in influential publications such as the Stern Review:

Stern, N. (Ed.) 2006. *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>219</sup> Executive Office of the President. 2015. National Security Strategy. Page 12.

<sup>220</sup> Kumari Rigaud, Kanta, Alex de Sherbinin, Bryan Jones, Jonas Bergmann, Viviane Clement, Kayly Ober, Jacob Schewe, Susana Adamo, Brent McCusker, Silke Heuser, and Amelia Midgley. 2018. *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, estimates of climate-based migrants have ranged from tens of millions to over one billion in the coming decades, and are considered in the scholarly community to be in early stages of predictive capabilities; an expert assessment for USAID concluded that "...the field of climate-related migration forecasting is still in its infancy" and "at this stage of model development, numerical projections to 2050 should be seen as notional at best."<sup>222</sup> Critical appraisals of mass climate migration catastrophism have cautioned against amplifying severe projections of climate displacement without equal attention to the true nature of most climate-affected mobility, which either results in internal displacement, with a circular nature—people typically hope to return home after being displaced—or involuntary immobility.<sup>223</sup>

In the United States, national security officials have effectively leveraged the specter of mass climate migration as a political tool despite the complex realities of climate displacement. Elites have emphasized climate catastrophism in tandem with restrictive immigration policies to promote punitive border security emphases that have been a boon to the private homeland security industrial complex.<sup>224</sup> In this line, as Julia Neusner wrote, the U.S. government's weaponization of the harsh Sonoran desert in northern Mexico, labeled 'Prevention Through Deterrence,' was meant to deter would-be asylum seekers by pushing available immigration routes through a physical environment migrants were unlikely to survive.<sup>225</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense justified Prevention

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<sup>222</sup> Schewel, K. et. al. 2022. Evaluating Climate-Related Migration Forecasting Models. USAID Research Technical Assistance Center: Washington, DC. Page 5.

<sup>223</sup> De Haas, H. 2023. How Migration Really Works. Penguin: New York.

<sup>224</sup> Miller, T. 2017. Storming the wall: Climate change, migration, and homeland security. San Francisco: City Lights.

<sup>225</sup> Neusner, J. 2024. Deadly Journeys: Climate Change, U.S. Border Enforcement, and Human Rights. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 56(337).

Through Deterrence as needed in response to what it called the ‘low-intensity conflict’ that U.S.-bound migration represented.<sup>226</sup> Prevention Through Deterrence highlights how the severe impacts of climate change, which place strain as a push factor for mobility, also inflict violence on migrants in transit, as the U.S. knowingly subjects them to extreme heat and other climate shocks.<sup>227</sup>

However, the United States does face significant governance challenges when appropriately planning and managing climate-affected mobilities that do occur. As a 2023 report from the Organization of American States noted, "The Americas are the epicenter of some of the most complex mixed migratory movements in recent decades."<sup>228</sup> In response, the U.S. government has invested in strengthening HA/DR (humanitarian assistance and disaster response) capacities<sup>229</sup> and has improved integration processes for migrants once settled in the United States.<sup>230</sup> As the scale of future displacement is directly tied to the scale and effectiveness of integrated mitigation and adaptation efforts in what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calls 'climate resilient development,' projections of future climate-affected migration are difficult to estimate without political-economic context.<sup>231</sup> The contested variance within the discussion of climate-affected

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<sup>226</sup> Dunn, T. J. 1995. *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992: Low Intensity Doctrine Comes Home*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>227</sup> Neusner, J. 2024. *Deadly Journeys: Climate Change, U.S. Border Enforcement, and Human Rights*. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 56(337).

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid*, Page 11.

<sup>229</sup> Faller, C. and P. Paterson. 2023. *Weathering the storms together: Improving U.S. humanitarian efforts*. *Atlantic Council*.

<sup>230</sup> Ceriani Cernadas, P. et. al. 2023. *Reception and Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Cities Across the Americas*. *Organization of American States*.

<sup>231</sup> IPCC. 2023. *Summary for Policymakers*. In: *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, pp. 1-34.

migration, further explored in the following section, raises important questions about how elites make national security determinations about climate change, when science does not neatly support policy even as governments and civil society want to be prepared for real impacts.

### Securitizing Climate-Affected Migration

Academic and policy dialogue around climate change, migration, economic development, and national security in post-NAFTA Northern Central America engage with vast and interdisciplinary bodies of work spanning nearly the full range of both social and natural sciences. My analysis helps make sense of such a broad array of scholarship and policy practice and provides complementary analysis to a longstanding area of wide-ranging inquiry. Building off King and Smith's political institutional orders that constrain available choices for key decision makers, my approach centers a dual, binary lens that is a central tenet of this diverse scholarship: elites view security for elite and corporate interests with economic logic, while viewing security for migrants and workers with criminalization logic. This is Grandin's frontierism at its heart, the reality that there have always been two sets of American Dreams: one for the haves, and one viciously applied onto the have-nots. Likewise, it resembles Vogt's arterial border, where "migrants don't neatly fit into popular or legal definitions of economic migrants or refugees/asylum seekers...raising questions about the cogency of such terms and the need for broader analytical categories of mobility and violence as spatially and temporally deep."<sup>232</sup> And finally, it complements Zilberg's securityscape, where repressive, zero-tolerance law enforcement carried out by transnational,

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<sup>232</sup> Vogt, W. 2018. *Lives in transit: violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Oakland: University of California Press. Page 49.

shadowy agents of insecurity ('crimmigration' agents in the United States, *Mano Dura* soldier-cops in Northern Central America) creates a *Doble Cara*, or 'two-faced,' atmosphere.<sup>233</sup>

I use the dual economic/criminalization lens to structure analysis of the climate security discourse that elites have used to shape the post-NAFTA political institutional order between the United States and its regional neighbors. In this way, I augment Mitchell and Crawford's work by considering how elite climate security discourse furthers a scholarly understanding of why national security officials consider climate change a national security threat multiplier. The dual lens furthers Franta's work on the misinformation campaigns used by fossil fuel companies to artificially construct overly complicated rationale that justify their interests as central to U.S. national security by incorporating parallel approaches used by multinational firms regarding U.S.-bound migration. In addition, I use the dual lens to assess the indirect pathways of so-called climate security and go beyond debating whether a direct causal link exists between climate change and violent conflict. This dual lens advances Busby's state capacity framework for institutional climate resilience by deepening and enriching analysis of how those capacities have come to be. Just as every storm does not become a natural disaster, state and societal capacities do not exist in a contextual vacuum. To understand how climate change is perceived to reduce national security, I strive to be realistic about the root causes of national security threats as well as the political narratives that elites use to advance their own interests in the process.

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<sup>233</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

My final conceptual benchmark is aligning the work of Andreas and the root causes dual lens with the evolution of climate change. Andreas outlined how these politics in large part play out as subjective and dynamic 'border games' using the U.S.-Mexico divide for partisan gain, "...depending on the political winds and social norms of the day."<sup>234</sup> In his analysis, the dual lens comprises two main spectrums: economic and political. First, Andreas framed his border games analysis between the economic duality of legal and illegal commerce. This economic duality centers both drug and migration flows as part of long-standing illicit 'smuggling' networks that at once operate outside of the law while also being intricately tied to it. Increased trade flows create the physical, financial, regulatory, socio-economic, and political capital and infrastructure needed to sustain illegal drug smuggling routes. In parallel, migration is the central conduit for illicit labor flows as a surplus Northern Central American and Mexican export to the United States, partially in exchange for remittances sent back home that serve as important sources of foreign exchange.

The interplay between these two inputs, drugs and migration, leads to delicate border games that impact the legal status of drugs and migration at any given time. As negative perceptions around illegal drugs increased, migration became much more criminalized and illegal. Andreas noted the NAFTA free trade regime meant borders were "...increasingly protected and monitored, not to deter armies or impose tariffs on trade, but to confront a perceived invasion of 'undesirables,' particularly illegal immigrants, drug traffickers, and other clandestine transnational actors."<sup>235</sup>

This trend in criminalization led to militarized responses across the United States, Mexico, and

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<sup>234</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Page 18.

<sup>235</sup> Andreas, P. 1998. The Escalation of U.S. Immigration Control in the Post-NAFTA Era. *Political Science Quarterly* 113(4): 591–615. Page 591.

Northern Central America. These responses spanned borders and political parties, and in many ways have only lent oxygen to the cascading cycles of violence and corruption that the policies were meant to dampen.

In parallel to criminalization is Andreas's political duality of law enforcement and state capacity. Andreas detailed how corruption means not only that the state is absent in many of its key functions relating to enforcing the rule of law and maintaining a monopoly on violence, but that it is simultaneously present and benefits from the illicit networks it neglects to police. This central contradiction of law enforcement plays a significant role, in conjunction with domestic political concerns, in creating subjective applications of legality.

Binary determinations of what elites consider legal for both goods and services as well as immigration are a core piece of the border games that are played to influence perceptions across multiple political and economic scales. These shifting elite determinations are reflected by another fluid duality in the relationship between civilian law enforcement and military apparatuses. As illicit drugs and migration were politically tied together in a way that purportedly required a tough, securitized, *Mano Dura* response across the region, this securitization evolved to blur lines between not just civilian and military functions and character, but also the perception of why governments needed to respond, and in what ways.

I build on the work of Andreas by centering the elite use of climate security discourse as an emergent component of these frameworks of fluid duality. Climate change presents challenging dualities around time and border control for governments to navigate alongside the dualities of

border games. First is the question of time. Resilience frameworks focus on both short- and long-term time horizons in how they can facilitate rebounding to previous system functions. These multiple timelines oscillate between disaster prevention, mitigation, and long-run adaptation before natural hazards occur, and emergency management and response capabilities after extreme shocks. The spectrum around time horizons clashes with the second climate security duality, the role of borders. Climate change does not recognize states' territorial integrity in its impacts. Accordingly, early warning systems, emergency response and disaster risk management, and long-run adaptation efforts vary on different sides of political borders, both national and sub-national. Within these dualities, my research design speaks to the role of migration deterrence among many other important variables of a broader climate security discourse that is not exclusive to migration. This research highlights the political dynamics of how climate factors are integrated into the larger determinants of migration, and how the security concerns involved shape policy.

### *Discussion*

I find that my framework holds weight against other two alternative hypotheses:

1. The first potential hypothesis is that U.S. national security officials did not deploy climate security discourse to pursue specific goals around migration deterrence. This hypothesis could result from three different realities:
  - a. One possibility is that U.S. national security officials exhibit climate denialism, and the official documents labelling climate change as a threat multiplier come from political appointees, not career civil servants or military officials.
  - b. A second possibility could be that climate-affirming U.S. national security officials focus more on so-called hard security threats that are assessed to be worsened by climate change and more worthy of attention than migration.

Within the second possibility, there are three central hard security threats:

- i. The first is *vulnerability of military installations and operations* from exposure to hurricanes, drought and extreme heat, flooding, landslides, and coastal erosion.
    - ii. The second is *strengthening of transnational criminal organizations* (TCOs, i.e., drug cartels) through competition over resource scarcity and resulting opportunities to engage in illicit mining, logging, fishing, and wildlife trafficking.
    - iii. The last is *geopolitical competition* with China and Russia, through diplomatic, economic, and military channels made more appealing to Northern Central American states by the fiscal strain caused by climate vulnerability, especially regarding relationships with Venezuela, Cuba, and around the emergent lithium market in South America.
  - c. A final possibility for the first potential hypothesis is that hemispheric migration is a longstanding concern for U.S. national security officials, and this concern has not been affected by climate change. U.S. national security officials think of human mobility in all its complex multidimensionality, and do not think climate change has affected the core fundamental reasons for why people make decisions about migrating, which are predominately tied to economic opportunity and poverty; violence, corruption, and persecution; and family reunification. As a result of these explanations, U.S. national security officials could not see value in climate change being a tool for advancing their material interests.
2. A second potential hypothesis is that climate security discourse is an objective, scientific framework that is not used for material political gain. In this telling, national security officials perceive climate change as a catalyzing force for mass displacement towards the United States and have allocated significant resources in response. In particular, the Biden Root Causes Strategy heavily focuses on increasing long-term development finance, outside of narrow electoral cycles, to lift these countries out of centuries of poverty in a broad-based, sustainable way. U.S. national security officials also prioritize the scientific evidence around how climate change affects migration. They have designed flexible immigration policies meant to empower individuals in climate-vulnerable situations to make the decisions that are best for themselves and their families. These flexible immigration policies support the oft-cited evidence that migration can serve as a primary climate adaptation strategy both at the individual/community and state levels. U.S. national security officials have focused on facilitating migration as climate adaptation by providing humanitarian and human rights protections and encourage seasonal and flexible

movements that give people the best opportunity to deal with extreme and unpredictable climate change impacts.

In terms of falsifiability, the first potential hypothesis, that U.S. national security officials have not used climate security discourse to advance their goals, is clearly untrue. First, there is a high degree of concern about climate change within the U.S. national security establishment. While there are some elected officials as well as rank and file members of the enormous U.S. military who are climate change skeptics, most elite officials consider climate change a real phenomenon. For this climate-affirming majority, my research showed that migration has maintained its relevance for U.S. national security officials in comparison to hard security threats such as military vulnerability, transnational organized crime, and geopolitical competition. There was a significant amount of messaging from the U.S. government, ranging from the White House to the Department of Defense and USAID, that clearly illustrates increased attention paid to the links between climate change and migration. In addition, my interview data show that climate change has made U.S. national security officials pay more attention to migration as both a cause and outcome for all three of the hard security threats listed above.

Even if elites do not individually value climate security discourse as a tool, the discourse has created a powerful and wide-reaching set of tacit rules that help condition elite behavior. Climate change has increased how migration is understood to cause stress on public systems that expand the mandate and threaten the viability of military operations; increase vulnerability that malign actors exploit via human, narcotics, and weapons trafficking; and destabilize regional governments and degrade goodwill for the United States that will make partnerships with China and Russia more attractive. Concern about climate change has allowed U.S. national security officials to

pursue migration deterrence as a central goal within the full range of national security threats in the Western Hemisphere.

A more plausible explanation than a blanket deference to threat multiplier framing is that the apolitical and deterrence undercurrents of climate security discourse complicate the tension of perceived national security threats with the agency that elites use to prioritize their goals. The agency of the U.S. national security establishment to address shifting agendas can be powerfully seen through the convergence of climate and immigration policies that reflect core determinants motivating the expression and application of U.S. power in the contemporary world. For climate change, the question of loss and damage looms as an implicit threat that U.S. national security doctrine is continuously benchmarked against.<sup>236</sup> Because formal, binding endorsement of loss and damage reparations would legally implicate the United States for its historically leading role as a greenhouse gas emitter, its aligned interests safeguarding diplomatic leverage and profitable, carbon-intensive industries divert attention towards technical investments in adaptation. This posture of managing the effects of climate change avoids confronting the political realities of mitigation that are at once both moral and overwhelmingly tangible. Within U.S. domestic politics, a significantly bipartisan consensus drives a parallel immigration posture that attempts to perform similar cartwheels around accountability for how conflicting perceptions of national security are bisected by dual pushes to militarize the border and liberalize capital and labor flows, when desirable.<sup>237</sup> The short-term deterrence focus aggravates the national security priorities it purports

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<sup>236</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. April 7, 2023.

<sup>237</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

to remedy through the artificially constructed threat of migration. This outlook increases exposure for vulnerable populations that malign actors exploit through horrific means, strengthening their capacities for human, narcotics, weapons, and other illicit forms of trafficking.<sup>238</sup> The overall effect is a confused one, with quiet majorities of interests driving emissions cuts and working to expand legal immigration pathways amidst simultaneous deference to entrenched carbon-intensive and criminalization narratives. The shifting balance of these interests defines the degree to which climate security discourse is valuable to national security officials in real time.

As a result, my analysis aligns most with the second potential hypothesis, that climate change has provided cover for U.S. national security officials to advocate for restricting migration from Northern Central America. I find that climate change has been folded into the longstanding lens of border security and migration deterrence that U.S. national security officials prioritize. On one hand, these militarized, deterrence lenses directly stem from the domestic politics of immigration in the United States. On another hand, my data show that the enormous scale of the challenge associated with ‘fixing’ the root causes of migration from Northern Central America is virtually impossible to surmount, requiring immense amounts of capital coupled with fundamental overhauls of those countries’ government systems for public administration and the rule of law. In addition, migration is of interest to U.S. national security officials largely due to post-9/11 regional priorities of counternarcotics and counterterrorism, especially as it relates to organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean. Perceptions of climate change as increasing irregular migration to the United States have not prompted investments in greenhouse gas mitigation or climate

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<sup>238</sup> International Crisis Group. Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap. Latin America Report Number 102: November 3, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/102-darien-gap%20%281%29.pdf>

adaptation for the sake of climate action. U.S. national security officials have assessed migration relative to their national security considerations first and foremost and have conditioned any climate action on migration deterrence and national security priorities.

The more interesting question is why and how these priorities have been pursued. Acknowledging the utility of climate security discourse as a political tool, I assess where its intellectual pillars in Washington are situated, and how their historical foundations can lend insight for their future directions. To make sense of this thicket, my research becomes a narrative documentation of how the underpinning concepts have been adopted, thrown around, and changed in certain historical moments, providing a framework to consider climate security discourse beyond a particular political administration. The political intersection of where climate change and national security meet is not so much a collision, but instead a funnel for various priorities to be deployed and developed in an ongoing struggle for relevance. In essence, it is no mistake that there isn't one definition of climate security—it *is* confusing. Instead of trying to pin down concrete definitions at static moments in time, a more accurate analogy might be the lived experience and path-dependent results of history. Seen this way, the U.S. national security doctrine for climate change is constantly being made and remade, a work in progress featuring a politicization that is part and parcel of how its foundational concepts are created and ultimately transformed into investments, technologies deployed, and lives altered. I reflect this interaction of tools, agency, and power in my research design: climate change and national security are ongoing forces and constructions.<sup>239</sup> This approach considers how climate security discourse might move forward, while recognizing

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<sup>239</sup> Ackleson, J. 2005. Constructing security on the U.S.–Mexico border. *Political Geography* 24:165–184.

that large political-economic systems cannot erase the past even if, as is the case with climate change, they experience different impacts than before.

Additionally, my findings apply relative to how important climate change is as a political priority in any given moment. The re-election of the climate-denying Donald Trump in the United States crystallizes the reality that there are strong incentives for political actors to use climate change as a tool *so long as it remains relevant*. I argue that climate security discourse helps sell the political left on migration deterrence. The right and, increasingly, the center (in the United States as well as across the region), are generally pro-deterrence. However, the hook of climate action helps sanitize and humanize deterrence policies for the left. President Trump (or any future climate denier) will change the topline narrative about climate change, but my research shows that the tacit rules about climate security discourse within the State and Defense Departments, the development and humanitarian communities, and other government agencies remain more complicated. My formulation of the 'safe spaces' that climate security discourse provides illustrate the value of my findings within climate-denying environments. Career civil servants will continue to use technical, apolitical framings of climate change to pursue what they know needs to be done, while political appointees typically are much more concerned about border optics and strict deterrence, regardless of political party. My findings show that the foundational elements of U.S. engagement with Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—a fully integrated economic market, with national security and private sector elites dictating immigration and labor policy—maintain significant longevity across partisan political administrations. As I discuss in the Conclusion, this methodology should be extended to the second Trump administration to assess how different casts

of actors, interests, and aims continue to shape U.S. security discourse relative to Mexico and Northern Central America; what changed from the Biden era and what remained.

Biden's climate security emphases speak to much larger and fundamental aspects of how the United States deals with its regional relationships with respect to national sovereignty, growing its economy, and maintaining its borders. I first situate this critical view of climate security discourse in time, especially key historical moments that represent the critical political junctures of the end of the Cold War and the creation of the counterterrorism state following the September 11th attacks. I also center space and geography; the United States' physical location, bordering Mexico and extending its influence to Northern Central America, is a powerful venue through which climate security discourse has been developed in practice. In particular, the historical subjectivity and artificiality of these political borders glue many of these threads together, as a conduit through which the United States' military and economic power has been cemented and expanded, in concert with that of its elite partners around the region.<sup>240</sup> Far too often, this power has been flexed in an uncomfortable tension, and at the expense of the natural resources and subjugated peoples whose labor is at once politically disposable and economically vital to its smooth functioning.

In this way, the fossil fuel industry origins of climate security discourse provide a useful understanding of how national security officials perceive migration to the United States as a national security threat. In recent decades, national security officials helped shape public perception of how climate change impacts national security by artificially 'complexifying' the role

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<sup>240</sup> Blitzer, J. 2024. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis*. New York: Penguin Press.

of fossil fuels in causing climate change. Multinational firms funded intentionally misleading research promoting the false argument that the simple prerogative of replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources would be overly complicated, difficult, and costly.<sup>241</sup> In doing so, Big Oil made altering its profitable status quo seem falsely complicated.<sup>242</sup>

This focus on adaptation, through the concept of climate resilience, was central for the political agenda to expand fossil fuel production and consumption.<sup>243</sup> National security officials presented climate resilience as a simplified, idealized version of a society able to recover from the destructive impacts of climate change. These negative outcomes include irregular migration; fragility, violence, and organized crime; and reduced economic growth.<sup>244</sup> In this industry narrative, if a society is resilient to the effects of climate change, it will be able to adapt—without needing to change the carbon-intensive system itself. Big Oil funded faulty research making this argument and swayed political opinion to a significant degree through policy advocacy and public relations campaigns. These efforts sustained a profitable political-economic system in the face of emerging scientific consensus about climate change.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Bonneuil, C., Choquet, P.-L., and B. Franta. 2021. Early warnings and emerging accountability: Total's responses to global warming, 1971–2021. *Global Environmental Change* 71.

<sup>242</sup> Mitchell, T. 2011. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso.

<sup>243</sup> Watts, M.J. 2015. Now and Then: The origins of political ecology and the rebirth of adaptation as a form of thought. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G., and J. McCarthy (Eds.). 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

I found that climate change has led national security officials to use the same strategy for migration, in the opposite direction—i.e., toward simplicity rather than complexity. This is the ‘why’ of my research: national security officials use climate change to simplify narratives about migration to pursue their goals. Simplified migration deterrence takes the form of the root causes lens: give people jobs and safety, and they will not migrate. National security officials have centered their simplified version of migration as a linchpin for what they portray as a climate-resilient society. Climate change has led to an overriding political concern that extreme weather events and longer-run drought alike will drive people from their homes, and that policies therefore need to keep people where they are. National security officials integrated this adaptation priority across timescales into acute disaster response capacities, as well as broader immigration and foreign policy. As a result, the simplification of migration and climate resilience work in tandem to cement a deterrence focus. In this way, migration, climate change, and national security have been fused, and climate resilience has almost become synonymous with national security: national security cannot exist without climate resilience, because without resilience, people will move. The prescribed solution, outlined in the historical context of Chapter 4, is cementing profitable U.S. multinational investment that mitigates the root causes of migration. Whether intentionally or not, national security officials have reproduced the legacy of fossil fuel misinformation about climate change within frameworks for migration.

The political process of simplifying migration through climate security discourse sheds light on the ‘how’ of my research question. National security officials have used performative narratives around migration in order to pursue underlying interests: domestic political advantage as well as a reliable, low-cost labor supply throughout regional supply chains connected through the free trade

agreements of NAFTA and CAFTA-DR.<sup>246</sup> U.S. officials, in tandem with willing partners across the region, incorporated concern about climate change into their efforts to position predictable migration as crucial for profitable supply chains in Mexico and Northern Central America. I highlight how national security language was woven into U.S. economic priorities to expand nearshoring efforts through *maquiladora* growth in Mexico after NAFTA (described on p. 352) and through the Biden administration's Partnership for Central America (e.g., p. 151). These efforts served to entrench the merging of economic and security agendas, which underpins my analytical framework: that profit-seeking guided corporate elite behavior, while migration was heavily criminalized to facilitate certain regional levels of legal and unauthorized migration for particular industries, namely agriculture and manufacturing. As a result, U.S. officials prioritized economic continuity ahead of immigration reform in the United States, which they perceived as carrying significant domestic political cost. The underlying interests of national security officials can also clash with development agendas in Mexico and Northern Central America, which are costly, lengthy endeavors that fail to deliver short-term political benefits. Any performative language by national security officials towards mitigating the root causes of migration in this regard is benchmarked against longer-run emphases on militarized border control that have proliferated since the implementation of NAFTA. National security officials emphasize border control to strengthen counternarcotics and counterterrorism focuses for U.S. foreign policy in Mexico and Northern Central America.

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<sup>246</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

In these ways, my explanatory analysis is composed of the historical and political dimensions of why climate change has been used by U.S. national security officials to advance political priorities around migration deterrence. This analysis explores how powerful officials and special interests used national security framing to redirect attention to climate change concerns for their political purposes. In other words, migration deterrence is woven into the larger narrative of climate security, with both utilizing similar security language. In this way, I contribute to the theoretical understanding of climate securitization by highlighting why and how the climate components of migration deterrence were used to pursue political goals through the Biden RCS. My grounded research contribution is limited to the empirical context of U.S. engagement with Northern Central America since NAFTA.

The migration deterrence focus prioritized through the threat multiplier and root causes lenses serves to further solidify carbon-intensive industrial systems, protected by a powerful national security establishment. This broader climate resilience paradigm prioritizes short-term migration deterrence and disaster recovery over long-term development in Northern Central America. Taken together, climate security discourse threatens to exacerbate the same instability that climate action aims to deter, and privileges national security politics over climate and human mobility realities.

Next, Chapter 4 examines the historical evolution of U.S. climate securitization in Northern Central America, demonstrating how migration deterrence strategies—framed as addressing the root causes of migration—have been embedded in U.S. policy since NAFTA, with climate change rhetoric serving as an extension rather than a departure from longstanding security priorities. Table 1 below examines the key concepts underpinning the contributions of this framework.

**Table 1: Key Concepts (author’s elaboration)**

	<b>U.S. Climate Security Discourse</b>	<b>Biden Root Causes Strategy</b>	<b>U.S. Immigration Policy in NCA</b>
<b>Actors</b>	Originated in DoD, widely used across the USG	Political strategy created by the White House. Primarily implemented by USAID and the State Department (root causes language used at least since Reagan administration)	Political strategy created by the White House. Benchmarked against Congressional constraints. Primarily implemented by the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department
<b>Framing</b>	Climate change is a ‘threat multiplier’ (first coined in 2007)	Achieve migration deterrence through multifaceted actions combatting fragility, including climate adaptation	Reduce and deter irregular migration
<b>Mechanism/Logic</b>	Climate adaptation	‘Safe Space’ of framing political migration deterrence investments as apolitical climate interventions. Threat multiplier language enabled pursuit of root causes logic through Safe Spaces	Development assistance, lawful immigration pathways, and border security
<b>Intended Outcome</b>	Climate resilience	Migration deterrence through climate resilience	Regularize and deter lawful migration. Deter irregular migration
<b>Actual Outcome</b>	Adaptation-first focuses at risk of compounding due to increased greenhouse gas emissions	Negative resilience through ‘Missing Middle’ of HA/DR—gap between disaster response and development	Mixed movements

## Chapter 4: Historical Evolution of U.S. Climate Security Discourse

*The shared principles that exist, which you don't find in other hemispheres...there's not a common thread quite as distinct as what you can point to with Latin America and the U.S. and Canada. We have the desire for a stable, peaceful, and prosperous hemisphere because we do have so many ties that bind us and share so many threads.*

Author interview with U.S. official. June 27, 2023.

### *Overview*

In this chapter, I discuss the historical evolution of U.S. climate security discourse in Northern Central America. I elaborate on how migration deterrence has been a central part of longstanding U.S. national security concerns in Mexico and Northern Central America since NAFTA. I further the discussion of how migration shifted from being seen as an economic issue to a national security threat during the 1990s. I show through policy analysis that the idea of ‘investing in the root causes of migration’ has in fact existed prominently in the U.S. government since the Reagan administration. This temporal progression is important because it shows that U.S. officials have long tried to deter migration to the U.S.-Mexico border to consolidate a regional free trade regime in a post-Cold War landscape. While this is long established in scholarly literature, it provides the basis for showing how U.S. officials later used the growing focus on climate change to advance their longstanding goals for migration.

The logic that linked migration to security threats in the 1990s has since expanded to incorporate climate change as an additional justification for deterrence policies. Just as U.S. policymakers framed migration as an economic and security risk in the post-NAFTA period, today they increasingly portray climate-related displacement as a national security emergency. This framing allows officials to recycle deterrence policies under a new climate security agenda, positioning

adaptation investments as a solution to migration rather than addressing structural climate vulnerabilities. By tracing these historical precedents, this chapter highlights how contemporary climate security discourse operates as an extension of established national security priorities.

This chapter lays the groundwork for my argument by tracing the historical roots of U.S. migration deterrence policies to the post-NAFTA era, focusing on how economic integration and border securitization framed migration as a national security threat. The first subsection analyzes legislative and policy shifts during the 1990s, highlighting how these measures entrenched a securitized view of migration. The second subsection explores the rise of the root causes narrative, which framed economic instability and violence in NCA as drivers of migration. Together, these subsections demonstrate how early policy developments set the stage for incorporating climate concerns into the national security framework. This historical context is crucial for understanding the continuity in U.S. policy framing, which later integrates climate change into existing securitization strategies. I then explore how the climate security narrative originated in the Pentagon's label for climate change as a threat multiplier. This narrative was grounded on the premise, originally developed by the fossil fuel industry, that the U.S. government should focus more on adapting to climate change and become more resilient rather than reduce consumption of fossil fuels. The final subsection of this chapter discusses the influence of adaptation-focused narratives from the fossil fuel industry, illustrating how these narratives shaped early climate security policies. I examine key policy documents and political action that framed climate change as a threat multiplier, linking it to migration concerns. The chapter concludes by exploring how climate security framing has been operationalized through adaptation initiatives, emphasizing migration control rather than greenhouse gas mitigation.

Table 2 outlines the historical evolution of climate security discourse among watershed moments in U.S. regional engagement and national security.

**Table 2: Evolution of U.S. Climate Security and Immigration Policy (author’s elaboration)**

Year	Key Moment / Policy	Changed Interests / Strategic Shifts
<i>Pre-NAFTA</i>		
1960s	Alliance for Progress replicated Marshall Plan’s focus on fostering “self-reliance” in Western Hemisphere	Cold War emphases on economic and political alignment and integration. Environmental issues seen primarily through a strategic lens related to the Soviet Union. Early discussions of climate change in national security circles focused on geopolitical competition
1980s	Interdiction at Sea (Haitian/Cuban migrants)	Migration deterrence framed as national security
1986	Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) provided amnesty for some unauthorized immigrants and criminalized the employment of "alien" noncitizens	National security officials largely treated immigration as a product of complex economic decision-making, albeit with increased concerns about perceived uncontrolled nature of migration
1990	IRCA Commission on unauthorized migration framed the root causes of migration as an economic development problem	Initial root causes logic framed a choice between accepting goods and services from southern neighbors or countenancing unauthorized human traffic
1990	The U.S. Immigration Act of 1990 created Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and a larger U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform (CIR)	Pre-NAFTA legislation emphasized cooperation with Mexico and Central America and created limited legal pathways for displacement
<i>NAFTA to 9/11</i>		
1994	NAFTA implemented	Free trade prioritized; migration framed as threat to economic integration
1994-1996	Legislative and executive action paralleling NAFTA implementation (AEDPA, Crime Bill, CIR reports, Prevention Through Deterrence)	Immigration and criminal justice systems increasingly integrated into a 'cimmigration' apparatus. Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. Entrenched simplified narratives of migration as a security threat to economic prosperity
1996	IIRIRA enacted	Major step in criminalizing migration; foundation for deterrence infrastructure
2001	Chinese accession to WTO	Economic competition increasingly viewed as a strategic interest. Post-NAFTA objectives solidified as promoting the free movement of goods while restricting immigration. Root causes logic increasingly tied to national security by calling for development to diminish the need for unilateral enforcement

2001	September 11 <sup>th</sup> attacks	Migrants increasingly framed as criminal threats compromising economic prosperity, fitting under a constructed securitization banner. Immigration reform efforts scuttled
<i>Post-9/11</i>		
2003	Department of Homeland Security created	Immigration functions moved to a national security remit; counterterrorism focus accelerated border militarization and integrated surveillance/enforcement
2006	CAFTA-DR implemented	Solidified regional economic integration through free trade, laid foundation for further security cooperation
2007	Threat Multiplier concept gains traction (CNA report)	Climate change framed as security threat
2008-2010	Mérida Initiative and CARSI implemented amidst financial crisis	Expanded security cooperation solidified law enforcement, counternarcotics, and migration deterrence focuses of economic regime
2010	DACA created by Obama Administration	Attempt to mitigate uncontrolled perception of unauthorized migration
2011	First DoD Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap	Adaptation seen as defense readiness issue
2014	Northern Triangle unaccompanied minors' migration wave	Counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and human trafficking focuses solidified the elite economic-criminalization lens for migration and regional stability
2014	DoD formally labels climate change as a "threat multiplier" in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review	Climate change incorporated into U.S. national security doctrine, primarily as an indirect threat multiplier
2015	Paris Agreement	Landmark framework for climate action
2015-2019	Obama administration's U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (Alliance for Prosperity)	Root causes focus on adapting to climate change rather than mitigating causes, influenced by fossil fuel industry narratives
<i>First Trump Administration and Covid-19</i>		
2017	Withdrawal from Paris Agreement and elimination of climate programs across USG	Climate denial at highest levels of government, despite scientific consensus affirming climate change
2017-2019	Aggressive anti-immigration policies (Remain in Mexico, frozen foreign assistance to Central America, travel bans) alongside Global Fragility Act and USMCA	Migration deterrence remained a top security threat, pursued overtly. Nativist migration focus clashed with other regional priorities around trade, security cooperation, and selective political engagement
2020	Covid-19 pandemic and Title 42	Decimated U.S., Mexican, and Central American societies and entrenched use of Title 42 as deterrence agent
2020	Hurricanes Eta and Iota	Disaster response exposes gaps between development and deterrence
<i>Biden Administration and Climate Security Moment</i>		
2021	Biden inauguration and reentry into Paris Agreement	Climate prioritized in foreign and security policy

2021	PREPARE announced	Climate adaptation framed as global security stabilization
2021-2	Root Causes Strategy (RCS), Partnership for Central America, SMOs, Los Angeles Declaration launched	Fusion of climate security discourse with migration deterrence. Positioned U.S. multinational investment in root causes as a migration deterrent through climate adaptation
2022	Climate Security codified by U.S. Congress	New legal authority for securitizing climate-related 'threats', including migration. Mainstreamed climate security discourse, explicitly linking climate change impacts to U.S.-bound migration as a national security interest
2023	Historic migration levels at U.S.-Mexico border	Crackdown on asylum; regional deterrence strategy escalates. Reflected bipartisan securitization of migration, either overtly (Trump) or subtly incorporating climate discourse (Biden)
<i>Second Trump Administration and Beyond</i>		
2025	Trump re-elected; climate, foreign assistance, and humanitarian capabilities gutted	Bipartisan deterrence approach maximized amidst widespread climate denial and deprioritization

In these ways, I trace the trajectory of how elites shaped U.S. national security interests in Latin America through the critical juncture of NAFTA. I take a longer historical view of how national security threat determinations influenced the shifting economic dynamics of the region. I illustrate how significant changes in capital and labor flows between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America shaped the character of U.S. engagement with its neighbors. I assess when, why, and how U.S. national security officials factored climate change into these policy determinations, and what the resulting outcomes were. To begin, the next section highlights how institutional legacies from the Cold War created the foundation for the root causes framework that has come to define U.S. policy across the full range of immigration, climate, and national security policymaking.

## Root Causes and the Criminalization Shift

As environmental concerns began to influence economic promotion through NAFTA negotiations, U.S. policymakers were occupied with mitigating the root causes of irregular migration from Mexico and Northern Central America. How elites perceived these root causes and how they saw migration as a security threat shifted significantly through the critical juncture of NAFTA. The Reagan administration's signature immigration legislation (elaborated on p. 350), the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), provided amnesty for certain unauthorized immigrants living in the United States, including all U.S. residents present prior to 1982. In addition, IRCA criminalized the knowing employment of 'alien' noncitizens, and strengthened provisions for employer verification. As a former U.S. official noted:

Migration became increasingly viewed as a problem because of its perceived uncontrolled, unregulated nature. The fact that millions of people were coming across our frontier to seek work and to establish themselves without the U.S. government really having any idea who they were or where they were going—that began to worry people.<sup>247</sup>

In addition to its so-called grand bargain, IRCA was the first time that root causes logic specifically influenced U.S. national security determinations. IRCA created a bipartisan "12-member Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development to examine, in consultation with Mexico and other Western Hemisphere sending countries, conditions which contribute to unauthorized migration to the United States" and assess "...mutually beneficial, reciprocal trade and investment programs to alleviate such conditions."<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. January 22, 2023.

<sup>248</sup> "S.1200 - 99th Congress (1985-1986): Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 6 November 1986, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/1200>.

This IRCA Commission root causes report, published in July 1990, is a useful marker of analysis, coming at the tail end of the Cold War and before the critical juncture of NAFTA implementation. The IRCA Commission report also introduced a key piece of the rationale that featured heavily in the debate about NAFTA ratification, and which persisted through the Biden administration: that increasing development and standard of living in Mexico and Northern Central America would reduce migration to the United States.

The IRCA Commission report's key to mitigating the root causes of migration was clear in its title: *Unauthorized migration: an economic development response*.<sup>249</sup> The problem the Commission identified for the United States was clear:

We are often in the unenviable position of having to choose between accepting goods and services from our southern neighbors in ways that affect our domestic industries and labor markets, or of countenancing unauthorized traffic in human beings.<sup>250</sup>

As Boustan and Abramitzky showed, this logic presents a false choice. From its earliest iteration, root causes logic held that U.S. policymakers would need to choose between protecting U.S. jobs or allowing low-wage, unauthorized immigration. Central to this logic was that the pull of higher wages in the U.S. forces this unavoidable choice for elites. Boustan and Abramitzky argued that once in the United States, the notion that immigrants replace U.S. workers is a myth; immigrants typically either create additional jobs by founding companies or support existing jobs through

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<sup>249</sup> United States. 1990. *Unauthorized Migration: An Economic Development Response*. Report of The Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822015216088&view=1up&seq=1>.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, Page iv.

services.<sup>251</sup> Boustan and Abramitzky illustrated that the U.S. economy is large enough to take in new workers. In addition, those new workers have been precisely the driving generator of wealth and economic power in the United States throughout its history. Despite these realities, the IRCA root causes report delivered two central conclusions in response to the false choice between domestic or foreign workers:

...the search for economic opportunity is the primary motivation for most unauthorized migration to the United States...while job-creating economic growth is the ultimate solution to reducing these migratory pressures, the economic development process itself tends in the short to medium term to stimulate migration by raising expectations and enhancing people's ability to migrate. Development and the availability of new and better jobs at home, however, is the only way to diminish migratory pressures over time.<sup>252</sup>

U.S. national security officials have lost the IRCA Commission's patient nuance about the root causes of migration. The criminalization focus that has dominated U.S. elite thinking since the 1990s has overshadowed the fact that economic development in countries of origin increases migration in the short term because of greater disposable income and education. Criminalizing migration elevates national security politics above any recognition that "...the search for economic opportunity is the primary motivation for most unauthorized migration to the United States."

National security officials used the simplified criminalization of migration as a national security threat to develop policy responses, both pre- and post-NAFTA. Pre-NAFTA, the IRCA Commission prescribed a broad range of approaches in response to what it considered the root

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<sup>251</sup> Boustan, L. and R. Abramitzky. 2022. *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>252</sup> United States. 1990. *Unauthorized Migration: An Economic Development Response*. Report of The Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development. Page xiv.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822015216088&view=1up&seq=1>.

causes of economically motivated migration. These policy responses included: integrating the potential for "...movement of undocumented people to the United States" into all U.S. foreign policy, trade, and international development deliberations; investing heavily in regional macroeconomic stability and integration, primarily through reduced barriers to trade and foreign investment; centralizing immigration and refugee jurisdiction within a single, Cabinet-level Agency for Migration Affairs; and, in a preview of later root causes policies, focusing development efforts on particular Mexican and Northern Central American subnational regions with the highest levels of U.S.-bound migration.<sup>253</sup> The IRCA Commission report is imbued with the Washington Consensus logic of its time, which prescribed export-oriented growth and increased foreign direct investment as the keys to long-run economic development. In this vein, the IRCA Commission saw structural adjustment as a central prescription: "Undertaking the steps needed to decrease price distortions and allocate resources to the most efficient areas of a country's economy is always a painful process."<sup>254</sup> While this clarity on its structural adjustment-led economic development vision was clear, the Commission tied root causes to national security by calling for the United States to: "Promote mutually beneficial economic development so as—over time—to diminish the need for unilateral enforcement measures to control unauthorized immigration."<sup>255</sup>

While the success of this economic strategy will be further discussed throughout this thesis, the IRCA Commission root causes report, as a product of the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, is remarkable to read decades after its publication for its measured introspection

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid, Page 5.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, Page xxvii.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, Page xvi.

and humility around the complexity and intimacy of human mobility. Of course, the conclusions of a bipartisan advisory committee should not be taken with undue gravity when considering the cataclysmic outcomes of U.S. interventionism in Northern Central America during the 1980s, which were intentional, political decisions made by U.S. leadership in concert with malign actors in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. However, in contrast to the racial fear mongering those administrations sometimes stoked, the discussion of the root causes of mobility struck an introspective tone. This introspection examined the effectiveness of U.S. immigration policy and the imbalance between stated goals and outcomes:

We were not dealing with just another factor of production, but with the needs and yearnings of fellow human beings...Undocumented immigrants are almost by definition subject to exploitation...Once here, these migrants become a vulnerable underclass, unable to seek the protection of our laws or enjoy the many benefits of our society.<sup>256</sup> [...]

We are especially concerned about the negative effect on many sending countries of U.S. policy choices based entirely on domestic considerations.<sup>257</sup> [...]

U.S. immigration policy has long been ambivalent and often incoherent, reflecting in large measure public sentiment on the subject. If it was illegal to enter without proper documentation, it was not illegal for employers to hire undocumented workers. Our inconsistency is constantly reflected in foreign policy decisions which are driven by considerations often at odds with immigration concerns, and this sends a host of contradictory signals to actual and potential immigrants.<sup>258</sup>

Before NAFTA, national security officials largely treated immigration as a product of economic decision-making that acknowledged the complexity of the issue. This thinking applied to

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, Page iv.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, Page v.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid, Page xiv.

conditions in NCA countries as well as the contributions of U.S. policy to those conditions. The IRCA Commission directly tied the political nature of treating the root causes of unauthorized migration as a national security threat to the contradictory realities of that threat determination. The IRCA Commission tried to temper the complexity of the root causes of migration to mitigate perceptions of these contradictory realities. In particular, the Commission was especially aware of the contradiction between the time needed to achieve structural transformation and the political desire to label migration a short-term threat:

Emphasis is usually on the immediate goals—resolution of the crisis of the moment—rather than on the long-term trends in human migration that generate their own momentum, ultimately producing millions of new and permanent residents of the United States.<sup>259</sup> [...] The development solution to unauthorized migration is measured in decades – even generations.<sup>260</sup>

The IRCA Commission also noted the role of environmental pressures as part of the root causes of U.S.-bound migration. Pre-NAFTA, the Commission integrated environmental concerns into the complexity of migration. The Commission tied the environment to economic development, the use of land for productive purposes, and the national security implications of environmental degradation:

Rapid population growth in the migrant-sending countries and measures leading to economic development often have led to considerable environmental degradation and erosion of the natural resource base. As available natural resources have diminished, competition for them has intensified pressures for people to migrate across borders.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid, Page xv.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, Page xxxvi.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, Page xxxi.

The Commission clearly stated the national security threat of environmental degradation, as the result of reduced economic stability, well before the effects of climate change were central considerations in U.S. policy. The Commission, highlighting “deteriorating conditions in Guatemala and El Salvador,” noted:

Guatemala provides another of the region's most troublesome examples of soil erosion. El Salvador is now among those countries in the world with the lowest percentage of forest land. Agriculture is the predominant means of livelihood in most Caribbean Basin countries. Agricultural exports account for about 70 percent of Northern Central America's export revenues. Yet in most migrant-sending countries food production does not keep pace with population growth and a critical constraint is soil erosion...The recent upsurge in the export of beef to North America for the fast-food industry has led to the clearing of large areas of tropical forest in Northern Central America, leaving soils vulnerable to erosion. Crowded farmers overworking their tiny holdings, often on steep hillsides, also contribute to soil erosion.<sup>262</sup>

In Northern Central America, the IRCA Commission focused on the reduced economic potential associated with environmental degradation as a push factor for U.S.-bound migration. Contributing to the complexity of the issue, the Commission's economic development prescriptions were different for the Mexican and Northern Central American contexts. In Northern Central America, the focus was placed on ensuring the productive capacity of the land:

Although damage is already severe, some patterns of destruction could be reversed by sustainable agricultural practices and measures to preserve natural ecosystems. The latter are not incompatible with economic growth as long as development activities are consistent with sustainable resource management. Environmentally-sound development projects that generate employment include agroforestry, agricultural practices based on traditional agroecosystems, and multipurpose use of the forest, including ecotourism.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid, Page 102.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, Page xxxi.

Mexico's economic strength and potential for the United States, as a larger market and closer political ally, lent a different prescription focused on *maquiladora*-style manufacturing:

Co-production strategies enable developing countries to generate jobs, earn foreign exchange, modernize plants, and undertake self-sustaining industrial development...[the] United States should support Mexican requests to international financial institutions for funds to improve infrastructure in interior Mexican locations capable of hosting *maquiladora* activities...increased economic interdependence suggests that growth in foreign assembly carries its own momentum.<sup>264</sup>

These divergent emphases for Mexico and Northern Central America were clear: U.S. elites assessed the impact of environmental degradation and other push factors for unauthorized migrants relative to the perceived impacts on the regional economic market. National security officials used this regional divergence to develop the dual lens of economic logic for elites and criminalization for migrants. Simultaneously, as NAFTA came into focus, elites used this dual lens to simplify perceptions of migration as a national security threat due to migrants' perceived criminality. The Clinton administration's public rationale in support of NAFTA ratification tied economic stability, environmental conservation, and national security together through reduced migration. In a speech to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce urging ratification, President Clinton said:

So a lot of people who don't have access to other jobs in other parts of Mexico come up there, they work in the *maquiladora* plant, but they can make more money in America. Or they come looking for a job, they don't get it, so they just—it's very close to the border. So you could argue that the *maquiladora* system has perversely increased illegal immigration.

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<sup>264</sup> United States. 1990. Unauthorized Migration: An Economic Development Response. Report of The Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development. Page xxiv. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822015216088&view=1up&seq=1>.

How will NAFTA reverse that? It erases the *maquiladora* line. This will permit investment to occur in Mexico City and south of there. This will permit a balanced development approach so there will not only be more jobs and higher incomes, but they'll be strewed out all over the country instead of right there on the American border, all of which will reduce illegal immigration long-term. Also...if NAFTA passes we will get much more cooperation from the Mexican Government in enforcing our immigration laws and our drug laws. There's no question that we'll get a higher level of cooperation on both those very important issues if this passes.<sup>265</sup>

Mexican President Carlos Salinas echoed Clinton's argument in supporting NAFTA ratification:

NAFTA is a migration reduction agreement, because Mexicans will not have to migrate north looking for jobs in this country, but they will be able to find them in my own, which is my own main commitment.<sup>266</sup>

Legislation that paralleled NAFTA ratification further entrenched simplified narratives of migration as a national security threat. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1990 created the new classification of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to provide people short-term relief in the United States after being displaced from their home countries due to "ongoing armed conflict, an environmental disaster, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions."<sup>267</sup> TPS, by definition, stipulated that presence in the U.S. was temporary and not in itself a pathway to legal permanent status.<sup>268</sup> In addition, the Immigration Act of 1990 created a larger U.S. Commission on

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<sup>265</sup> Clinton, W.J. 1993. Remarks on NAFTA to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://advocatetanmoy.com/2021/04/27/president-clintons-remarks-on-nafta-to-the-u-s-chamber-of-commerce-01-11-1993/>.

<sup>266</sup> Salinas de Gortari, C. 1993. MIT Commencement Address, 1993. The Tech (June 23, 1993). Accessed April 19, 2023. [https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3-euw1-ap-pe-ws4-cws-documents.ri-prod/9781138824287/ch12/5\\_Carlos\\_Salinas\\_de\\_Gortari\\_A\\_Win.Win.Win\\_Situation\\_1993.pdf](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3-euw1-ap-pe-ws4-cws-documents.ri-prod/9781138824287/ch12/5_Carlos_Salinas_de_Gortari_A_Win.Win.Win_Situation_1993.pdf).

<sup>267</sup> "S.358 - 101st Congress (1989-1990): Immigration Act of 1990." Congress.gov, Library of Congress, 29 November 1990, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358>.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

Immigration Reform (CIR) tasked with producing four additional reports to Congress from 1994 to 1997. After the implementation of NAFTA on January 1, 1994, there was a notable shift in language coming from the 1990 Commission that in many ways paralleled the IRCA Commission in its bipartisan composition, even while chaired by a Democratic Education Secretary. We can see that while crossing from a Republican to a Democratic president (George H.W. Bush to Clinton), the significant evolution in narrative around how migrants were perceived as national security threats paralleled the landmark legislation of those years. Welfare reform, zero tolerance law enforcement, and the expanded carceral state were coupled with heavy emphasis on the illegality of unauthorized migrants and the need to 'curb unlawful migration into the United States through prevention and removal.'<sup>269</sup> Each subsequent report from the CIR continued to harden the severity with which elites saw unauthorized migrants as threats to U.S. national security, straying from the IRCA Commission's consideration of the "needs and yearnings of fellow human beings." In 1994, the CIR stated: "We believe that unlawful immigration is unacceptable...the principal issue at present is how to manage immigration so that it will continue to be in the national interest."<sup>270</sup> This criminalization push also simplified immigration as a national security threat by framing immigrants as a drain on U.S. society and the American way of life. The 1994 CIR report made clear that:

...illegal aliens should not be eligible for any publicly-funded services or assistance except those made available on an emergency basis or for similar compelling reasons to protect public health and safety...benefits policies should continue to send this message: if aliens enter the U.S. unlawfully, they will not receive aid except in limited instances...Should

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<sup>269</sup> United States. 1994. U.S. Immigration Policy: Restoring Credibility. Report of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. Accessed April 20, 2023.

<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/64167/U.S.%20Commission%20on%20Immigration%20Reform.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, Page ii.

illegal aliens require other forms of assistance, their only recourse should be return to their countries of origin.<sup>271</sup>

In contrast to the IRCA Commission's emphasis on patience and long-term commitment, the 1994 CIR report emphasized the "...adoption of quick and effective strategies targeted at alleviating migration pressures in communities producing large numbers of illegal aliens." The same report also introduced alert systems aimed at "...strengthening intelligence gathering capacities to improve early warning of unauthorized migration patterns."<sup>272</sup> These alert systems were the precursors to biometric identification processing expanded through the post-September 11th national security state.<sup>273</sup> The 1995 CIR report expanded the conditionality of desirability—"Unless there is a compelling national interest to do otherwise, immigrants should be chosen on the basis of the skills they contribute to the U.S. economy"—and emphasized "Americanization" of immigrants, or "cultivation of a shared commitment to the American values of liberty, democracy, and equal opportunity."<sup>274</sup> The CIR's final report, in 1997, shut the door even further, stating that: "reducing the employment magnet is the linchpin of a comprehensive strategy to deter unlawful immigration."<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, Page xxii.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, Page xxx.

<sup>273</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>274</sup> United States. 1995. *Legal Immigration: Setting Priorities Policy Report to Congress*. Page xxi. Accessed April 20, 2023.  
<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/64167/U.S.%20Commission%20on%20Immigration%20Reform.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>275</sup> United States. 1997. *Becoming an American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy Report to Congress*. Page 113. Accessed April 20, 2023.  
<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/64167/U.S.%20Commission%20on%20Immigration%20Reform.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

Following NAFTA, elites simplified the perception of immigration as a national security threat for public consumption by labeling migrants as criminal threats to U.S. economic prosperity and a stable, peaceful, prosperous life. This elite narrative framed both the root causes of why migrants left their home countries and the impact of their arrival in the United States through a criminalization lens easily understood by a general audience. The narrative that migrants compromised economic prosperity joined freedom, democratic values, and prosperity under a constructed securitization banner that pervaded and shaped how the national security establishment thought of migration as a threat.<sup>276</sup>

Scholars have long documented the combined focus on securing unimpeded regional financial capital flows while militarizing the U.S.-Mexico border during the 1990s alongside the evolution in narrative around unauthorized migration as a threat.<sup>277</sup> These policy responses are notable in their focus on the USG's designation of immigration at the border as being a 'low-intensity' national security threat.<sup>278</sup> Figure 1 illustrates how these perceptions resulted in significant and sustained expansion of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which saw its staff increase roughly 400% (from 4,000 to 20,000) and its budget increase 1,342% (from \$326 million to \$4.7 billion) from 1992 to 2019.<sup>279</sup> This is just CBP; Donald Kerwin noted that overall U.S. immigration enforcement spending (a conservative estimate of appropriations for CBP and Immigration and

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<sup>276</sup> Boustan, L. and R. Abramitzky. 2022. *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>277</sup> Martínez, D. E., Heyman, J. and J. Slack. 2020. *Border Enforcement Developments Since 1993 and How to Change CBP*. *Center for Migration Studies*.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

Customs Enforcement [ICE]) increased from \$1.9 billion to \$21.1 billion between 1997 and 2018.<sup>280</sup> The militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and overall U.S. immigration enforcement furthered an elite narrative of migrants as potential criminal threats that needed to be defended against, even as they simultaneously dismantled barriers to free trade.<sup>281</sup>

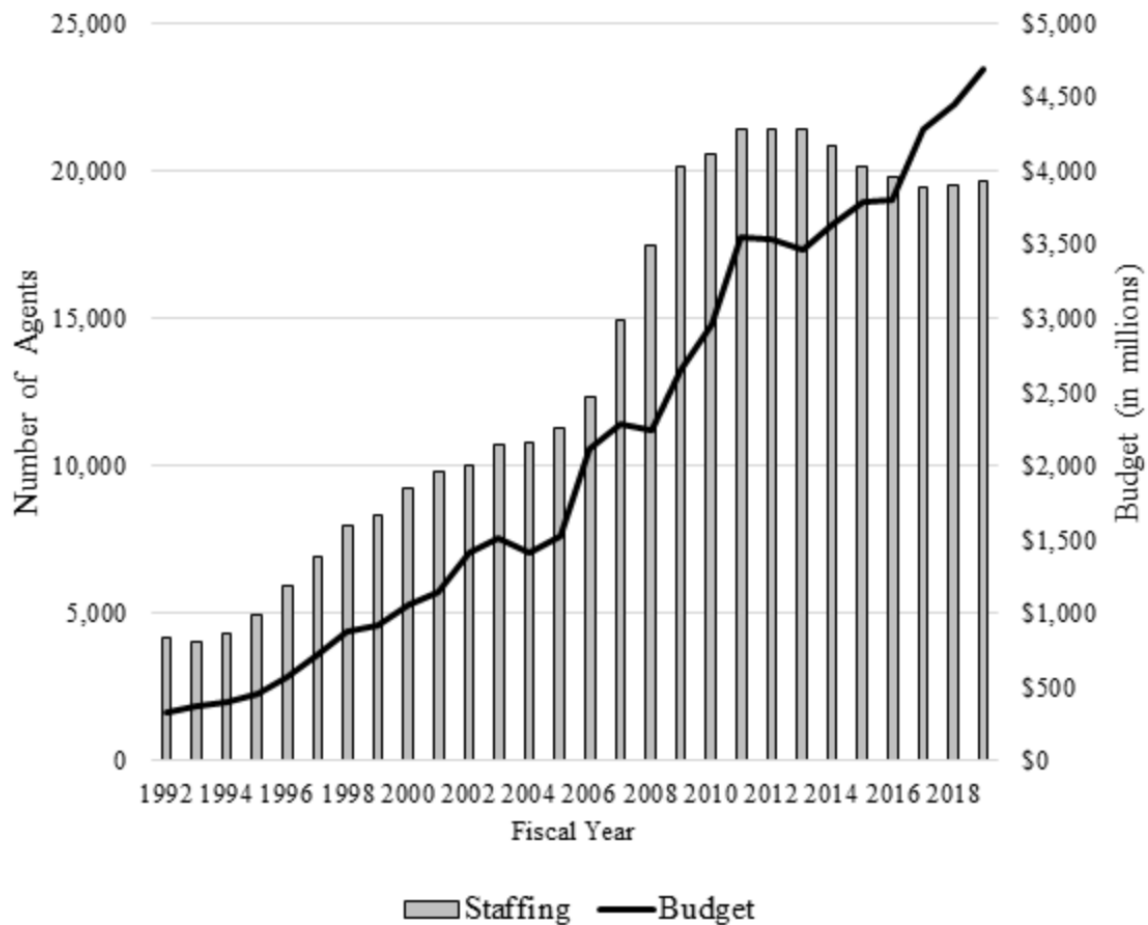


Figure 1: U.S. Border Patrol Staffing and Budget, FY 1992-2019. Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection and American Immigration Council data, image from Martínez et. al (2020).<sup>282</sup>

<sup>280</sup> Kerwin, D. 2018. From IIRIRA to Trump: Connecting the Dots to the Current U.S. Immigration Policy Crisis. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(3): 192–204.

<sup>281</sup> Green, L. 2011. The Nobodies: Neoliberalism, Violence, and Migration, *Medical Anthropology* 30(4): 366-385.

<sup>282</sup> Martínez, D. E., Heyman, J. and J. Slack. 2020. Border Enforcement Developments Since 1993 and How to Change CBP. *Center for Migration Studies*.

The September 11th attacks spurred a counterterrorism focus that accelerated the border militarization of the 1990s and strengthened the integration of domestic and foreign surveillance and enforcement mechanisms.<sup>283</sup> In parallel, the ratification of CAFTA-DR solidified the free trade agenda. Furthermore, while elites perceived post-9/11 migration as an increased threat across the board, particular migrants received scrutiny, namely refugees from Muslim-majority countries.<sup>284</sup>

In Northern Central America, these twin emphases produced a strange mix of U.S. engagement. On one hand, we can see a continuation of the stability-through-economic development focus dating back to IRCA in President George W. Bush's speech urging CAFTA-DR ratification to the Organization of American States:

By opening up Central America and the Dominican Republic to U.S. trade and investment, CAFTA will help those countries develop a better life for their citizens. That seems to make sense to me. I mean, if you're living in a neighborhood, you want your neighbors doing well. If you're a good neighbor you say, gosh, I hope everybody in the neighborhood is succeeding. And by helping those economies improve, CAFTA will help the nations strengthen their democracies. And that's in our national security interest. That makes us all more secure.<sup>285</sup>

On the other hand, as Elana Zilberg noted, the Bush administration's War on Terror led to situations like that in El Salvador. Sensationalist media reporting around Al-Qaeda leaders meeting with Salvadoran gang leaders (which was never corroborated) helped solidify increased bilateral

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<sup>283</sup> Kerwin, D. 2018. From IIRIRA to Trump: Connecting the Dots to the Current U.S. Immigration Policy Crisis. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(3): 192–204.

<sup>284</sup> O'Neil, K., Hamilton, K. and D. Papademetriou. 2005. Migration in the Americas. *Migration Policy Institute*. [https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/policy\\_and\\_research/gcim/rs/RS1.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/policy_and_research/gcim/rs/RS1.pdf).

<sup>285</sup> Bush, G.W. 2005. U.S. President George W. Bush Discusses CAFTA-DR, Organization of American States. Accessed April 25, 2023. [https://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/speech.asp?sCodigo=05-0163](https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/speech.asp?sCodigo=05-0163).

security cooperation tying U.S.-bound migration and violence to perceived terrorism.<sup>286</sup> This created fear that the main vehicle for U.S.-El Salvador bilateral security cooperation—the U.S.-sponsored International Law Enforcement Academy for Latin America—would replicate the Cold War-era School of the Americas in overreach and a blurring of police and military functions in Northern Central American states.<sup>287</sup> Such states actually came to see the increased U.S.-bound migration resulting from zero tolerance law enforcement as the positive reflection of a strong, military-carceral state, which allowed them to justify further consolidating power in the executive branch of government.<sup>288</sup> As a result, the counterterrorism focus solidified the elite economic-criminalization lens for migration and overall regional stability. Counterterrorism became part of the simplified narrative of migration as a national security threat.

The George W. Bush and Obama administrations substantially expanded regional security cooperation alongside the extension of the free trade regime through CAFTA-DR and the implementation of a counterterrorism focus. Expanded security cooperation took place through the Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, commonly known as the Alliance for Prosperity. These frameworks entailed significant amounts of U.S. congressional appropriations: \$3.3 billion in bilateral assistance to Mexico through the Mérida Initiative from 2008-2022;<sup>289</sup> roughly \$1.2 billion through CARSI from 2010-2015; and \$2.6

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<sup>286</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Seelke, C. 2021. Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, FY2008-FY2021. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10578/21>.

billion under the whole-of-government U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Northern Central America from 2015-2019.<sup>290</sup> The Mérida and CARSÍ frameworks largely focused on bilateral and multilateral cooperation pertaining to law enforcement strengthening, anti-narcotics prevention, prioritizing judicial and prosecutorial freedom, and general security and rule of law enhancement.<sup>291</sup>

The success of regional security cooperation, within rising tides of regional violence, drug abuse, and firearms trafficking, has been contested at best. Joint U.S.-Mexican militarized responses to accelerating cartel violence in Mexico, driven by both the Bush and Obama administrations in the U.S., as well as the Fox and notably Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations in Mexico, only perpetuated vicious cycles of violence and corruption on a massive scale.<sup>292</sup> National security strategies in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador during this time mirrored the U.S.-backed Mexican approach as well, with militarized focuses on violence prevention that have arguably exacerbated such issues in tandem with restrictive U.S. immigration policies. For example, the 2015 Salvadoran security strategy, *Plan El Salvador Seguro*, only lists the following high-level focuses: "Violence and crime prevention; Improve the criminal justice system; Inmate rehabilitation and reinsertion; Attention and protection for victims; Strengthen institutions responsible for citizen security."<sup>293</sup> The militarized regional political institutional order in large

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<sup>290</sup> Meyer, P. 2019. U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Northern Central America: Policy Issues for Congress. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44812>.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Astorga, L. 2015. *¿Qué querían que hiciera?: Inseguridad y delincuencia organizada en el gobierno de Felipe Calderón*. Mexico City: Grijalbo.

<sup>293</sup> Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia, El Salvador. 2015. *Plan El Salvador Seguro*. <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/mjisp/documents/129525/download>.

parts cuts across borders, administrations, and even political parties throughout the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

President Trump's nativist focus on border security during his first term clashed with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's emphasis on '*abrazos, no balazos*' (hugs, not bullets) approaches to migration and regional security. The first Trump administration's harsh migration approach led to the 2019 freeze of most U.S. foreign assistance to Northern Central America for over a year; Trump repurposed 85% of those funds to other countries around the world in an effort to pressure those governments to curb U.S.-bound migration by reallocating existing funding towards tougher law enforcement.<sup>294</sup> This only hampered overall efforts; a report from the USG internal watchdog, the Government Accountability Office, found that the Trump freeze "...adversely affected 92 of USAID's 114 projects and 65 of State's 168 projects" in the region due to "...delays from planned timeframes and decreased frequency, quality, or types of services provided to beneficiaries."<sup>295</sup> Luis Astorga, a leading Mexican scholar of organized crime, noted that despite López Obrador's rhetorical assails of the tough-on-crime approaches of his predecessors, his administration capitalized on the alternative narrative without a major shift in policy, and has seen over 500,000 deaths and 110,000 disappeared since 2000.<sup>296</sup> In a report for the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, Enrique Roig, a senior U.S. official who was

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<sup>294</sup> U.S. government Accountability Office. 2021. Northern Central America of Northern Central America: The 2019 Suspension and Reprogramming of U.S. Funding Adversely Affected Assistance Projects. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-104366-highlights.pdf>.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ferri, P. 2023. Luis Astorga: "No hay política de Estado en materia de seguridad, solo ocurrencias sexenales." *El País*. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2023-10-27/luis-astorga-no-hay-politica-de-estado-en-materia-de-seguridad-solo-ocurrencias-sexenales.html>.

the USAID CARSI coordinator from 2010-2015, wrote that "...cities and communities across the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are learning the hard way over decades of shortsighted crime control efforts that 'you can't arrest your way out of the problem.'"<sup>297</sup> Despite their mixed record at best, these efforts both resulted from and justified expansion of the simplified criminalization narrative in support of the free trade regime.

Taken together, some argue that U.S. migration deterrence policies are not merely about economic and security interests but also about responding to domestic political pressures. Rising public concern over unauthorized migration in the 1990s—driven by media coverage and shifts in labor markets—helped construct migration as a political crisis. From this perspective, deterrence policies emerged not only from elite economic interests but also from a broader political environment that demanded stricter border controls. While public sentiment undoubtedly shaped these policies, I argue that elite decision-makers strategically framed migration as a security threat to justify economic and geopolitical goals, making deterrence more than just a reactionary policy.

Nonetheless, the criminalization focuses used to simplify perceptions of migration as a national security threat pervaded root causes logic deployed in response, especially including the increased incorporation of climate change into those national security determinations. In the following chapter, I explore how the root causes framing became more formally codified into U.S. national security doctrine through the use of the threat multiplier label by the Obama and Biden administrations.

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<sup>297</sup> Roig, E. 2021. An Overview of the Northern Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) to Reduce Violence and Strengthen Institutions in the Northern Central America of Northern Central America (NTCA). <http://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Final-WHDPC-CARSI-3-2021.pdf>.

## Climate Security Foundations

*The thing about migration is it's such a cross-border issue. You know it has an impact on both sides of the border. And then when you add climate considerations, the national security prerogatives quickly become fractured on all sides. Who is causing the problems, and who is responsible for solving them?*

Author interview with U.S. official. September 18, 2023.

The rest of this chapter builds on the post-NAFTA legacy of criminalized migration by assessing why and how U.S. national security officials have increasingly incorporated climate change considerations into what they consider national security threats. These climate change considerations then informed how elites constructed simplified, criminalized labels for migration in response. I focus on how national security officials have tied the threat multiplier label for climate change to lasting narratives around the root causes of migration as national security threats to the United States.

The U.S. national security establishment has long been aware of potential risks posed by climate change to the U.S.-led, post-Yalta world order.<sup>298</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense has repeatedly noted the implications of sea level rise and other climatological impacts to its operations and asset maintenance, and first formally labeled climate change as a threat multiplier to traditional national security hazards in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). Submitted by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, a former Republican Senator, to President Barack Obama, a Democrat, the 2014 QDR stated (emphases mine):

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<sup>298</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. MIT Press: Cambridge.

The pressures caused by climate change will influence resource competition while placing additional burdens on economies, societies, and governance institutions around the world. **These effects are threat multipliers** that will aggravate stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, and social tensions – conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence.<sup>299</sup>

The Biden administration followed the first Trump administration and its well-documented climate denialism, which included removal of climate change language and considerations from policymaking across the USG.<sup>300</sup> In contrast, the Biden administration accelerated the incorporation of climate change as one of the key threats to U.S. interests across the U.S. national security establishment. This whole-of-government approach included issuing the first U.S. National Intelligence Estimate entirely dedicated to climate change;<sup>301</sup> climate risk analyses,<sup>302</sup> adaptation plans,<sup>303</sup> and force posture assessments from each service branch (the Army,<sup>304</sup> Navy,<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2014. Quadrennial Defense Review. Page 8. [https://www.acq.osd.mil/ncbdp/docs/2014\\_Quadrennial\\_Defense\\_Review.pdf](https://www.acq.osd.mil/ncbdp/docs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf)

<sup>300</sup> Gross, S. 2020. What is the Trump administration's track record on the environment? *The Brookings Institution*. August 4, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-the-trump-administrations-track-record-on-the-environment/>.

<sup>301</sup> U.S. National Intelligence Estimate. 2021. [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE\\_Climate\\_Change\\_and\\_National\\_Security.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE_Climate_Change_and_National_Security.pdf)

<sup>302</sup> U.S. Department of Defense/ 2021. Climate Risk Analysis. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Oct/21/2002877353/-1/-1/0/DOD-CLIMATE-RISK-ANALYSIS-FINAL.PDF>

<sup>303</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2022. Climate Adaptation Plan. <https://www.sustainability.gov/pdfs/dod-2021-cap.pdf>

<sup>304</sup> U.S. Army. 2022. Climate Strategy. [https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/about/2022\\_army\\_climate\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/about/2022_army_climate_strategy.pdf)

<sup>305</sup> U.S. Department of the Navy. 2022. Climate Action 2030. <https://www.navy.mil/Portals/1/Documents/Department%20of%20the%20Navy%20Climate%20Action%202030%20220531.pdf>

and Air Force<sup>306</sup>); a comprehensive USAID 2022-2030 Climate Strategy;<sup>307</sup> the first-ever U.S. Treasury Climate Action Plan;<sup>308</sup> and the aforementioned National Security Council report on climate change and migration, among many others.<sup>309</sup> A shared sense of pragmatism pervaded these efforts. A U.S. official stated, for instance, that with regards to climate change and violent conflict, "...we are really pushing away from just thinking about the causal linkages and thinking instead about what happens when these two systems smash together in a really dramatic way."<sup>310</sup> U.S. officials framed major industrial policy, especially the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, as advancing decarbonization that would help strengthen U.S. national security and global leadership.<sup>311</sup> The administration codified this commitment in the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy, the overriding national security planning document for the USG, which stated: "Of all of the shared problems we face, climate change is the greatest and potentially existential for all nations."<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> U.S. Air Force. 2022. Climate Action Plan.

<https://www.safie.hq.af.mil/Portals/78/documents/Climate/DAF%20Climate%20Action%20Plan%20-%20FINAL%20Oct%202022.pdf>

<sup>307</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2022. Climate Strategy 2022-2030

<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/U.S.AID-Climate-Strategy-2022-2030.pdf>

<sup>308</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury. 2021. Climate Action Plan.

<https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Treasury-Climate-Action-Plan-July-2021-Final.pdf>

<sup>309</sup> The White House. 2021. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

<sup>310</sup> Author interview with U.S. official, July 31, 2023.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> The White House. 2022. U.S. National Security Strategy. Page 9. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

Major U.S. private sector interests followed the federal government's lead in assessing the multifaceted risks posed by climate change as a national security threat multiplier. This risk integration occurred through both behavioral incentives as well as regulatory exposure. Across the private sector, definitions of climate change risk center on how existing assets and operations may be affected, and how to assess the opportunities, and opportunity cost, of climate action and inaction from a business perspective. Blackrock, the world's largest institutional investor with over \$10 trillion in assets under management,<sup>313</sup> communicated to its clients that climate change is a central threat to its business, publishing research showing "...inaction regarding climate risk could lead to a global cumulative loss in economic output of nearly 25% over the next two decades,"<sup>314</sup> and definitively stating that "climate risk is investment risk."<sup>315</sup> The U.S. Chamber of Commerce focused on the risks of climate inaction as they relate to "economic growth, job creation, and American competitiveness."<sup>316</sup> Large U.S.-based multinational manufacturers routinely submit voluntary climate risk disclosures detailing a host of potential impacts across the life cycles of complex value and supply chains, spanning the range of regulatory, technological, legal, market, reputational, acute physical, and chronic physical risks.<sup>317</sup> While the private sector has strongly resisted the U.S. federal government mandating climate impact reporting for Scope 2 and 3

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<sup>313</sup> Al Jazeera. 2022. BlackRock hits a record \$10 trillion assets under management.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/1/14/blackrock-hits-a-record-10-trillion-assets-under-management>

<sup>314</sup> BlackRock. 2022. Climate Risk and the Energy Transition: Investment Stewardship. Page 3.

<https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/literature/publication/blk-commentary-climate-risk-and-energy-transition.pdf>

<sup>315</sup> Ibid, Page 7.

<sup>316</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce. 2022. Our Approach to Climate Change. <https://www.uschamber.com/climate-change/our-approach-to-climate-change>

<sup>317</sup> VF Corporation. 2022. Climate Risk Disclosure.

[https://d1io3yog0oux5.cloudfront.net/vfc/files/documents/Sustainability/VF\\_CDP\\_Climate\\_Change\\_2022.pdf](https://d1io3yog0oux5.cloudfront.net/vfc/files/documents/Sustainability/VF_CDP_Climate_Change_2022.pdf)

emissions through the Securities and Exchange Commission,<sup>318</sup> the lead-up to COP 27 saw the Biden administration initiate rulemaking around mandatory climate risk disclosures for all federal government contractors.<sup>319</sup>

Donald Trump's re-ascendance to the White House in 2025 resulted in some early mixed signals from the private sector on climate risk. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, and overall reversals of Biden climate policies, are a serious blow to sustaining private sector climate action.<sup>320</sup> In addition, the second Trump administration's attacks on climate action within the federal government may lead to a further chilling effect in the private sector.<sup>321</sup> However, while some major firms and industry groups retracted climate goals, others maintained their commitments.<sup>322</sup> Substantial global net zero agreements and subnational commitments in the United States carry the potential to sustain private sector focus on climate risk, especially around supply chain vulnerability and insurance markets.<sup>323</sup> The overall private sector outlook on climate change is mixed moving forward into the second Trump administration.

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<sup>318</sup> Maurer, M. 2022. The Wall Street Journal. Companies Skewer SEC's Climate-Disclosures Plan in Comment Letters. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/companies-skewer-secs-climate-disclosures-plan-in-comment-letters-11655834912>

<sup>319</sup> The White House. 2022. Biden-Harris Administration Proposes Plan to Protect Federal Supply Chain from Climate-Related Risks. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/10/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-proposes-plan-to-protect-federal-supply-chain-from-climate-related-risks/>

<sup>320</sup> Tollefson, J. 2025. Drill, Baby, Drill? Trump policies will hurt climate – but US green transition is underway. *Nature*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00243-8>.

<sup>321</sup> Gibson, K. 2025. The Trump Administration's Retreat from Global Climate Leadership. *Center For American Progress*. January 21, 2025. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-trump-administrations-retreat-from-global-climate-leadership/>.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Mehta, A. 2025. As Trump slashes climate action, can states and cities pick up the slack? *Reuters*. February 27, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/analysis-trump-slashes-climate-action-can-states-cities-pick-up-slack-2025-02-27/>.

Civil society also played an important role in shaping understanding of climate change as a national security threat to the United States. Civil society advocacy largely highlighted the humanitarian and institutional outcomes that result from climate-affected migration. Major immigration advocates like the American Immigration Council tend to perceive climate change as an indirect contributor to more 'direct' causes of migration to the United States from Northern Central America and Mexico, namely violence, crime, and lack of economic opportunity.<sup>324</sup> Think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations,<sup>325</sup> Inter-American Dialogue,<sup>326</sup> Center for Global Development,<sup>327</sup> Center for Climate and Security and International Military Council on Climate Security,<sup>328</sup> and Center for Strategic and International Studies,<sup>329</sup> to name just a few, have flooded the policy space with a multitude of reports and briefs related to various components of stated climate threats. This grey literature is largely oriented towards providing U.S. policymakers with avenues for 'leadership' and 'opportunity' around managing climate-affected migration and its resulting

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<sup>324</sup> Hiskey, J., Córdova, A., Orcés, D., and M.F. Malone. American Immigration Council. 2016. Understanding the Northern Central American Refugee Crisis: Why They Are Fleeing and Why U.S. Policies Are Failing To Deter Them. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/understanding-central-american-refugee-crisis>

<sup>325</sup> Howko-Johnson, A. 2022. Council on Foreign Relations. The Crisis of the Century: How the United States Can Protect Climate Migrants. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/crisis-century-how-united-states-can-protect-climate-migrants>

<sup>326</sup> Graham, N., Vereen, MK., and A. Woolverton. 2022. Inter-American Dialogue. Climate Adaptation in the Northern Central America: How the United States Can Foster Locally Led and Sustainable Change. <https://thediologue.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ENGLISH-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>327</sup> Huckstep, S., Resstack, R., and H. Dempster. 2022. Center For Global Development. Is there any point defining a climate migrant? <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/there-any-point-defining-climate-migrant>.

<sup>328</sup> "The World Climate and Security Report 2021." Product of the Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security. Authors: Steve Brock (CCS), Oliver-Leighton Barrett (CCS), Laura Birkman (HCSS), Elisabeth Dick (HCSS), Leah Emanuel (CCS), Sherri Goodman (CCS), Kate Guy (CCS), Sofia Kabbej (IRIS), Tom Middendorp (Clingendael), Michel Rademaker (HCSS), Femke Remmits (HCSS), Julia Tasse (IRIS). Edited by Erin Sikorsky and Francesco Femia. Published by the Center for Climate and Security, an institute of the Council on Strategic Risks. June 2021.

<sup>329</sup> Yayboke, E., Houser, T., Staguhn, J., and T. Salma. 2020. Center For International and Strategic Studies. A New Framework for U.S. Leadership on Climate Migration. [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201022\\_Yayboke\\_ClimateMigration\\_Brief\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201022_Yayboke_ClimateMigration_Brief_0.pdf)

geopolitical impacts. Much of this civil society advocacy culminated in the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection of 2022, in which the Biden administration attempted to reframe migration as more of a shared, regional issue requiring increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation.<sup>330</sup> The original Los Angeles Declaration was a partially successful effort yet was tarnished by the absence, in protest, of the Mexican, Honduran, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan presidents—key actors for its full implementation.<sup>331</sup> Subsequent follow up meetings established more cooperative working arrangements with these key regional actors. In all, civil society advocacy on climate change and national security has reflected a broad incorporation of the threat multiplier lens, naming climate change as a wide-reaching, all-encompassing, indirect contributor to several traditional national security threats that need to be managed prudently and humanely.

Combined actions from the Biden administration, the private sector, and civil society mainlined a collective perception of climate change as a national security threat multiplier. In the following section, I delve deeper into where this climate security discourse came from and how it transitioned into its broad-based application. To do this, I examine the Biden administration’s whole-of-government approach, which began with the genesis of climate security discourse in the Department of Defense. In particular, the Pentagon’s approach to the climate security narrative laid the foundations of climate adaptation and climate resilience, central to the Biden administration’s Root Causes Strategy in Northern Central America.

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<sup>330</sup> The White House. 2022. Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/10/los-angeles-declaration-on-migration-and-protection/>.

<sup>331</sup> Subramanian, C. and C. Carcamo. 2022. 20 Western Hemisphere Nations Sign Los Angeles Declaration on Migrants Despite Key Absences. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2022-06-10/biden-latin-american-leaders-to-sign-migration-declaration-despite-summit-absences>.

## The Pentagon and Interagency Narratives of Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier

*Securitization of climate is a wholly European concept. Americans do not think about that. We're climatizing security. That's what we're doing. Instead of talking about securitizing the climate...don't waste time on that. That leads down a rabbit hole of too much criticism of institutions that doesn't necessarily lead to productive solutions. Securitization of climate is knocked by people who don't understand security and are afraid of its impact. It's unavoidable. No one doubts there are many national security implications of climate change. It doesn't mean that everything in the world of climate has to do with security, or that the military is the answer to problems. No, the military is sort of the last resort to solve climate issues. Then you need the military to do search and rescue, or provide relief in a storm, things like that.*

Author interview with former U.S. official. July 27, 2023.

The U.S. military's embrace of the threat multiplier lens is instructive for how climate security discourse has influenced the USG's larger posture towards migration. The Pentagon's threat determination, as the institution traditionally responsible for the physical and territorial safety of the United States and its frontier, is important to understand. As Neta Crawford argued, President Biden's administration, clearly seen through countless official public-facing publications and statements, reoriented the U.S. military to label climate change as a threat to: 1) its ability to actively engage in military operations; 2) the safety and security of its sprawling physical presence around the world, especially in coastal areas but also as the result of natural disasters; 3) the readiness of partner militaries to deploy humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR) capacities in the event of a natural disaster; and 4) the tactical opportunity cost that results from repositioning, retraining, and deploying assets and personnel in order to respond to climate change-related events instead of other actions related to operations and installations.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

A former U.S. official described the threat multiplier logic at play in sensational terms:

We know it's widely accepted now that climate change acts as a threat multiplier, and the threat multiplier has to do with exacerbating existing security threats. Take the case of Latin America, and specifically the Northern Triangle. You already have a region that's politically unstable. Fragile states have been raped by narcoterrorism, human traffickers, wildlife trafficking—pick your brand of trafficking. You've got very weakened and fragile states for a whole variety of reasons. The more rapid intensification of climate change over the last 10 to 20 years then exacerbates some of the other problems, because as you get more drought, or more flooding, or more storms, or more variability in weather, people become food and water insecure. That disrupts livelihoods. That's the whole literature, right, it disrupts livelihoods. When people get really desperate and they can't support themselves or their families, they move more often. The literature shows in the first instance they try to first move internally or become displaced internally. But now, more and more, of course, are seeking to come into the U.S., or move northward, or get to Mexico or somewhere else, even the Caribbean.<sup>333</sup>

However, as Crawford noted, the U.S. military's perspective contains an overriding focus on climate adaptation. The DoD employs an adaptation focus to best position itself in response to perceived future threats without corresponding attention to mitigating its own role in contributing to climate change. This trend is slowly changing: in May 2023, the DoD released an Operational Energy Strategy that details its planned decarbonization efforts for its operations, which parallels the initial 2021 push on its installations.<sup>334</sup> However, the DoD's consideration of decarbonization across its supply, production, and value chains is largely focused on improved tactical ability (e.g., electrifying military operations will reduce tactical exposure and vulnerability to attacks on fuel convoys) while conditioning emissions reductions on maintaining 'warfighting readiness.' Its institutional attitude otherwise emphasizes increased funding and policy leverage to adapt its

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<sup>333</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. July 27, 2023.

<sup>334</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2023. Operational Energy Strategy. <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eic/Downloads/OE/2023%20Operational%20Energy%20Strategy.pdf>

enterprise to contend with a changing climate rather than mitigating emissions for the sake of climate action.

The Pentagon's increased awareness of the multifaceted risks climate change poses to U.S. national security is welcome and necessary (and the result of significant institutional and civil society advocacy) but is artificially truncated and limited. Climate security advocates working to get the DoD on board with climate action need to do so on the Pentagon's terms. The DoD requires conditioning emissions reductions on warfighting readiness, or its ability to conduct whatever operational requirements that might arise, above all else. National security officials have tended to focus on the threats that result from climate change because of this deference to military objectives. This adaptation focus diminishes sufficient attention to the causal inputs that determine both the biophysical, climatological impacts of climate change and, crucially, the institutional determinants of climate change mitigation and adaptation. The discourse assumes that greenhouse gas emissions have occurred, climate change has begun and will accelerate. The impetus is then a matter of managing the worst potential outcomes. This acquiescence to the DoD's traditional priorities in effect locks in the false, fossil fuels-driven narrative that mitigating emissions is too difficult. Even as the DoD is pursuing some emissions reductions, its decarbonization efforts will be contingent on other prerogatives that often run directly counter to decarbonization goals. Given the gravity the DoD exerts on both overall USG emissions as well as its irreplaceable function in providing legitimacy to larger climate security discourse, the threat multiplier framing threatens to condition USG posture on security approaches first, even as the global greenhouse gas emissions stock increases rapidly.

There are several potential explanations for why and how fossil fuel misinformation promoting adaptation has shaped climate security discourse within the DoD. First, many policymakers believe the average voter sees climate change as a complex, technical, abstract, and futuristic concept.<sup>335</sup> However, there are also more detrimental explanations for the Pentagon's relative focus on climate change outputs instead of inputs. One example is the U.S. military's safeguarding of its budgetary and policy dominance within the federal government by protecting its fossil fuel-dependent industrial base.<sup>336</sup> Another is the fossil fuel industry's intentional disinformation campaigns aimed at reducing its public exposure as a central contributor to climate change.<sup>337</sup> Through the primary territorial protector of national interests, the U.S. military, climate security discourse has collectively allowed for national security officials to institutionalize the dilution of emissions mitigation. These elites reduce the urgency around mitigation by using the threat multiplier phrase to signal engagement with the outcomes of climate change while skirting responsibility for its causes, as well as the most severe impacts that will result from unabated emissions.

National security officials use the threat multiplier lens as a central component of climate security discourse in the United States by framing greenhouse gas emissions in terms of their outcomes rather than their causes. While many rightfully celebrate the tangible achievement of USG agencies incorporating climate change concerns into their strategic planning and program delivery, the practical result is two-fold. On one hand, these securitized visions of climate change and their

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<sup>335</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. October 11, 2022.

<sup>336</sup> Crawford, N. 2022. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>337</sup> Franta, B. 2022. Weaponizing economics: Big Oil, economic consultants, and climate policy delay. *Environmental Politics*, 31(4): 555-575.

adjoining 'climatized' national security apparatuses shield their fossil fuel financial backers and ideological enablers from changing their own behavior. In addition, the climatized-securitized national security engine slow-rolls its own contributions to climate change mitigation, worsening the national security threats that are ostensibly in its own interest.

Slow-rolling emissions reductions is a particularly salient potential long-term outcome from threat multiplier framing. In this way, the Pentagon's successful efforts in resisting reporting its own greenhouse gas emissions are a key example of, in reality, diluting the threat of climate change. The DoD has consistently drawn a blind distinction between how climate change will impact its operating environment and the role of U.S. military greenhouse gas emissions – the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions for the USG –in accelerating climate change since the first COP meeting in 1992. In the lead-up to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol climate change negotiations, the Clinton administration circulated internal cables calling for a "'National Security Exemption' relating to military activities that directly support peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and other appropriate national security readiness operations."<sup>338</sup> The problem, of course, is that the DoD was knowingly worsening the effects of climate change by maintaining and even increasing its greenhouse gas emissions through peacekeeping and 'other appropriate national security readiness operations.' This dissonance persists as of August 2025; the 2015 Paris Agreement still allows for

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<sup>338</sup> Cable, State Department, State 202013, to U.S. Del Mark Hambley and All NATO Post Collective, Subject: National Security Exemption on Climate Change, October 26, 1997 [Confidential]. National Security Archive, George Washington University. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27354-document-1-cable-state-department-state-202013-us-del-mark-hambley-and-all-nato-post>. In Crawford, 2022.

countries to make voluntary reports of their military emissions within the broader scope of nationally determined contributions running up to 2030.<sup>339</sup>

Figure 2, the DoD's climate risk analysis, illustrates the truncated definition the DoD has for climate change as a national security threat. In the Pentagon's perspective, the climate 'hazard' occurs, and the risk lies in the resulting impacts that threaten traditional threats, such as access to natural resources, agricultural production, infrastructure damage, political tension, conflict, and geopolitical competition. As detailed in my earlier analysis of threat multiplier scholarship, this risk assessment is a direct product of the positivist focus on proving that climate change is a national security threat. The result is a narrow, linear lens of what constitutes national security, allowing for performative rhetoric to obscure the material interests being safeguarded. For all its progress integrating climate change into strategic planning, the Pentagon's decoupling of security threat outcomes from causes illustrates an overly narrow perception of the full feedback loop of their origins and the complex realities of their impacts.

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<sup>339</sup> Neslen, A. 2015. Pentagon to lose exemptions deal under Paris climate deal. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/14/pentagon-to-lose-emissions-exemption-under-paris-climate-deal>

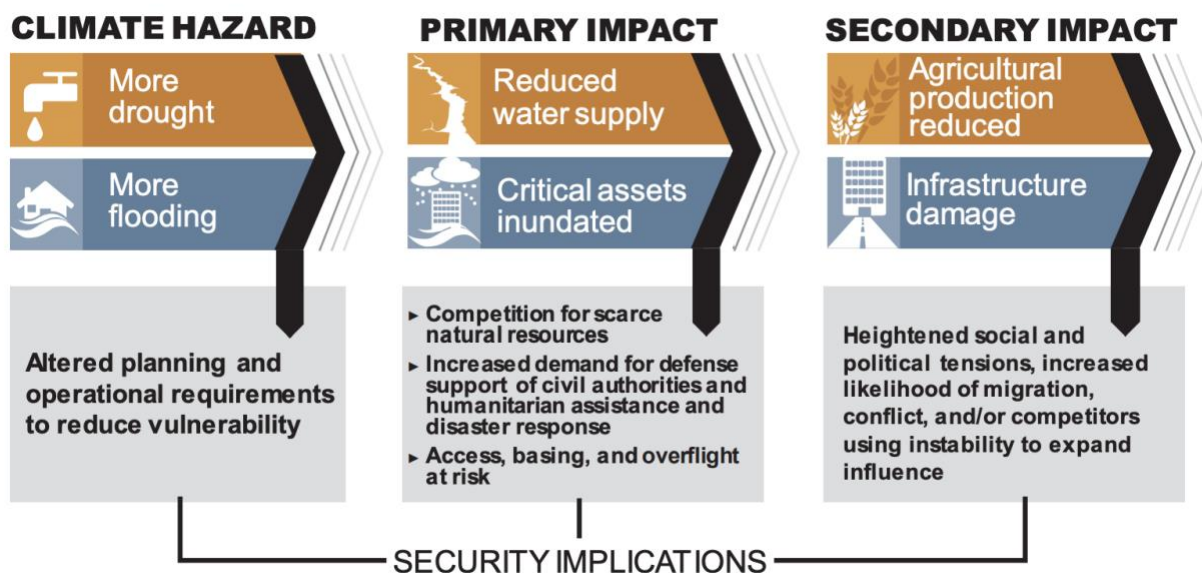


Figure 2. Security Implications of Climate Change. Source: U.S. Department of Defense, Climate Risk Analysis (2021).

Reductionist logic runs through the Pentagon's policy advocacy. According to this logic, climate change must be defined within the parameters of the traditional U.S. national security stressors that the DoD was originally mandated to protect. The Pentagon's threat multiplier framing has been translated into significant amounts of public appropriations, deployments, and military operations around the world. DoD and the broader USG do not believe climate change to be a threat multiplier of enough gravity to warrant the U.S. military reducing its greenhouse gas emissions for climate purposes alone. Potential explanations could include antiquated institutional design, political and special interest pressure to maintain certain levels of emissions-intensive spending, institutional de-prioritization of the impacts of climate change, a selective misunderstanding of how national security threats originate and are propagated, or some combination of the above. The Pentagon's definition of climate change as a national security threat runs directly counter to its stated mission of mitigating the worst potential societal and territorial climate impacts past reduced military operating capacities and securitized border controls.

This threat-dilution-to-responsibility-avoidance cycle represents an attitude of American exceptionalism and frontierism applied to climate change. The U.S. defined its climate exceptionalism in both conceptual and practical terms. This climate exceptionalism is seen, for example, through its military emissions reporting carveout from Kyoto, accomplished at a key moment in time when post-Cold War geopolitics were being realigned. The United States did not consider its own climate action as part of its vital national security interests and would not sacrifice the military protection of its frontier in service of that goal. The U.S., rather, placed the blame on developing countries for their own emissions, which had been exempted from the Rio Declaration on economic development and poverty alleviation grounds. The U.S. affected this blame through UNFCCC negotiations and public statements that provided political and moral cover for its climate exceptionalism. The Clinton administration stated that it wanted 'meaningful participation' from developing countries in the fight against climate change, while simultaneously fighting to exempt the U.S. military from the process. If it were a sovereign country, the U.S. military would rank 47th globally for its annual greenhouse gas emissions, by some estimates.<sup>340</sup> As the world was moving on from the Cold War into the era of the 'peace dividend,' the United States defined itself via a double standard relative to the rest of the world, in a way that must be viewed as climate exceptionalism. The U.S. made managing the effects of climate change an overriding global paradigm, instead of replacing its own fossil fuel use with renewable alternatives.

This analysis joins two central tenets of 1990s policymaking in the United States that provide necessary context for understanding how climate change came to be defined as a national security

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<sup>340</sup> Belcher, O., Bigger, P., Neimark, B., and C. Kennelly. 2020. Hidden carbon costs of the "everywhere war": Logistics, geopolitical ecology, and the carbon boot-print of the U.S. military. *Trans Inst Br Geogr.* 45: 65– 80.

threat within the Biden climate security moment. One is the lens that migration brings criminal 'others' who threaten American prosperity and democratic life. Second is that increased migration will hamper the U.S. military's ability to respond to such threats with force. As a result, the Biden climate security narrative informs how national security officials use climate security discourse to pursue their concerns about migration. Today, these political foundations are imperative to the contradictory ways that elites use climate security discourse in performative terms to further their historical legacies of misinformation.

The framing of climate change as a threat multiplier is not merely rhetorical; it has direct material consequences for policy implementation that I explore in the next chapter. By defining climate resilience and adaptation as security imperatives, the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy structured aid allocation, diplomatic engagement, and regional investments in ways that reinforce migration deterrence. For example, funding for climate adaptation projects in Northern Central America was often justified relative to the countries' ability to reduce migration flows, effectively tying climate aid to migration deterrence. This strategic use of climate security discourse parallels the Pentagon's threat multiplier posture in ensuring that adaptation efforts serve U.S. national security goals rather than addressing the structural drivers of climate vulnerability in the region.

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This chapter examines the historical underpinnings of U.S. climate security discourse in Northern Central America. I trace the evolution of migration deterrence as a central element of U.S. national security policy since the implementation of NAFTA. The chapter highlights how migration,

initially framed as an economic issue, became securitized in the 1990s to support a post-Cold War regional free trade agenda. The chapter argues that the rhetoric of addressing the root causes of migration has long served as a tool to advance U.S. geopolitical interests, with environmental concerns increasingly co-opted to legitimize these policies. This historical foundation demonstrates that climate security discourse is an extension of established strategies aimed at consolidating economic and political control in the region.

This chapter shows that U.S. policymakers have long framed migration as a security threat, using economic integration as a tool for deterring migration more than a mechanism for equitable development. The historical trajectory from NAFTA to contemporary root causes strategies reveals the enduring role of security logics in shaping U.S. engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America. Importantly, these same logics now structure the integration of climate security discourse into migration deterrence strategies. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the Biden administration did not divert from this historical pattern but rather refined it—embedding climate resilience initiatives into an already securitized migration policy framework. Understanding these historical foundations is essential for critically assessing how climate concerns have been instrumentalized to reinforce long-standing migration deterrence goals.

Building on this analysis, Chapter 5 explores how the Biden administration operationalized climate security narratives through the Root Causes Strategy. The RCS integrated the Pentagon's 'threat multiplier' framework to align climate action with migration deterrence goals. Together, these chapters provide a critical lens for understanding how longstanding national security priorities have shaped the framing and employment of climate security narratives in the region.

## Chapter 5: U.S. Climate Security Discourse and Policy in Northern Central America

*Surging irregular migration flows to the United States have increased domestic attention on the politics of immigration, and climate change has the potential to compound related political and social challenges by causing additional displacement. The lack of bipartisan agreement on humane border procedures and immigration policies complicates U.S. efforts to mobilize global support for protecting refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable migrants. The current migration situation extending from the U.S.-Mexico border into Central America presents an opportunity for the United States to model good practice and discuss openly managing migration humanely, highlight the role of climate change in migration, and collaborate with other governments to address these challenges.*

Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. U.S. National Security Council. 2021.<sup>341</sup>

### *Overview*

On February 9, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order (E.O.) 14013, “Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.” E.O. 14013 mandated three outputs from the White House National Security Council: a global *Report on the Impact of Climate Change and Migration*, a *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America*, and an accompanying *Collaborative Migration Management Strategy*. The global Report “marks the first time the U.S. government is officially reporting on the link between climate change and migration.”<sup>342</sup> The Root Causes Strategy (RCS) assessed a “...coordinated, place-based approach to improve the underlying causes that push Central Americans to migrate”<sup>343</sup> to the United States, overwhelmingly via Mexico. The Migration

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<sup>341</sup> The White House. 2021. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, Page 4.

<sup>343</sup> The White House. 2021. U.S. Strategy For Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Northern Central America. Page 4. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf>.

Management Strategy outlined processes for the U.S. government's "strong national security, economic, and humanitarian interests in promoting safe, orderly, and humane migration."<sup>344</sup> These reports joined the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration, the expansion of humanitarian parole for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV), and the creation of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) for third country asylum processing to form the Biden administration's immigration posture for Latin America.

These reports and corresponding programs represent a major evolution in U.S. policy, explicitly linking the impacts of climate change in Northern Central America and Mexico on U.S.-bound migration as being "in the national security interest of the United States."<sup>345</sup> In other words, national security elites mainstreamed climate security discourse in a serious way. In this chapter, I consider the collision of these two policy paradigms, the Root Causes Strategy and climate change as a threat multiplier. I reflect on the ways in which the Biden administration allowed for a collision of various political interests to produce a climate security moment incorporating the United States' regional relations with Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In addition, I explore how national security officials used the narrative around climate security to advance their underlying political interests through a contested set of priorities that have haphazardly fused climate change and national security.

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<sup>344</sup> The White House. 2021. Collaborative Migration Management Strategy. Page 3. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Collaborative-Migration-Management-Strategy.pdf?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Collaborative-Migration-Management-Strategy.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery).

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

This chapter explores deployment of policies justified by climate security language in Northern Central America through the Biden Root Causes Strategy. I show how the RCS fused this narrative with migration deterrence. I show how U.S. officials incorporated climate security language into new iterations of root causes strategies for migration in Mexico and Central America. The Biden RCS represents an advanced evolution of this integration by positioning resilience and adaptation as critical for migration deterrence. As a result, the Biden iteration of root causes logic used the Pentagon's threat multiplier framing about climate change to incorporate climate security discourse into the migration deterrence goals shaping engagement with Northern Central America.

Building on the historical analysis of Chapter 4, I investigate the development of climate security discourse and its alignment with migration deterrence policies. I detail specific climate adaptation investments made under the banner of the RCS that promote climate resilience as a strategy for migration deterrence. These investments, ranging from agriculture and food insecurity to humanitarian assistance and disaster response, provide the concrete link between climate security discourse and the administration's security goal of stopping migration. Taken as a whole, this chapter outlines how climate security discourse has been strategically co-opted to serve national security interests, reinforcing the central argument that climate concerns are used to legitimize migration deterrence. This chapter extends the argument that climate security language is not a neutral or apolitical response to environmental threats but a continuation of established securitization practices.

I offer two main arguments for why climate change has been labeled as a national security threat by the USG, and how climate security discourse can be understood as part of a political

institutional order shaping and constraining political action. First, national security officials define threats from climate change to be: 1) U.S. economic security, seen through a lens of frontierism, and 2) the accompanying political optics of migration, specifically a concern for high levels of unauthorized migration at the U.S. southwest border. The Pentagon resisting reporting its own greenhouse gas emissions ties these threats together. Second, U.S. elites artificially limit the full national security impacts from climate change by focusing on adapting to the impacts of climate change at the expense of mitigating the foundations of how climate change exacerbates insecurity. This limited view has created a dissonance around how U.S. elites perceive their national security interests, viewing them as tied to the stability of Northern Central American states themselves. This truncated feedback cycle is not as much a conceptual issue as one of rigidity and lack of creativity in policy implementation and neglects other countries' agency in pursuing their own national security priorities.

These tacit rules, which inform national security officials' motivations for linking root causes of migration to climate change as a threat multiplier, carry significant ramifications for understanding U.S. national security postures, climate action, and immigration policy. I argue the USG will continue swimming upstream in 'solving' the root causes of irregular U.S.-bound migration without a recognition of how entrenched political-economic interests reproduce the very problems they claim to solve. This decision making will only become more difficult as climate change contributes increasing strain upon Mexico and Northern Central America. Inadequate investments in climate action in their own right will do little to confront the systemic, institutional interests joined through climate security discourse, which shape how climate change is integrated into national security policies for the United States.

Shifting next to the Biden RCS, I explore how the blanket narrative of climate change as a threat multiplier does not fully capture the contradictory ways that climate change introduces challenges to migration. Such contradictions are especially relevant when considering how human mobility decisions are themselves nonlinear and complex. In the following section, I detail this dynamic by assessing how the transboundary character of climate change causes countries, especially the United States, to think of their own sovereignty and national security as tied to phenomena occurring outside of their political borders and over which they have no sovereign jurisdiction.

#### National Security, Climate-Affected Mobility, and Sovereignty

*I want to highlight the Root Causes Strategy and this idea that if people are on the move, it's a development failure. We really have to push back against that narrative. There's a lot of what I would call fear mongering, that climate change is going to cause all these people to be on the move and it's going to be disastrous.*

Author interview with U.S. official. July 31, 2023.

During the Biden administration, senior U.S. officials faced significant challenges working to curb migration from other countries that they could not directly control. This reality produced even greater focus on climate adaptation as a national security solution. Such a focus came from the elite impression that the U.S. could not change the fact that climate change was contributing to migration from Northern Central America, only respond to the fact that it was happening.

From a climate action perspective, the Pentagon thinking more seriously about climate change and reducing some of its emissions in the process is a positive development. However, a key paradox of climate security discourse is how elites perceive climate change to impact the national security of the United States by affecting phenomena in other countries over which the U.S. does not have

sovereign control. Challenges with sovereignty then complicate already difficult issues of development, governance, and security. For all the rhetoric in the United States about regional prosperity being a shared goal among sovereign states, the national security concerns of the U.S. diverge from the national security concerns of Mexico and the Northern Central American countries, which themselves differ from each other in some respects. The crux of the issue is when the U.S. sees its national security as impacted by the fragility of the Mexican and Northern Central American states' own stability. Through this lens, I delve further into how the climate security narratives of U.S. officials are complicated by issues of sovereign agency in other countries.

A U.S. congressional official noted this imbalance between perceived threats and actual agency in decision making:

Addressing some of those climate change factors is more long term than responding to people showing up at the border in two weeks. There hasn't been that recognition of why it's so important to address longer term issues and have a more strategic plan than just 'what does border enforcement look like?' But the timeline is dramatically different for people who've already lost their homes and their ways of work, and don't have clean water and don't have anywhere to go. From the border security perspective, there is a mismatch there, and what you do about it and how you plan for it. If we're going to address the bigger problem, that needs to be part of it.

But that law enforcement side is an immediate need. Climate is, but asking 'what do you do about it?' does not really help the people already affected. It's how do you plan for it; how do you make places stronger? How do you make it so people don't need to leave? We have the traditional approach with what you saw with the Biden administration, root causes, with investment in jobs and the economy and better government infrastructure. Climate needs to be such a bigger part of that because it's now exasperating so many problems that already exist. Working with law enforcement, climate comes up when talking about long term strategy, but not about what we're doing for next week or next month.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Author interview with U.S. congressional official. November 11, 2022.

In the minds of U.S. policymakers, the constantly shifting parameters of national security threats are complicated when the U.S. lacks agency to combat those threats. In this light, the Biden administration's immigration management represents the strategic apex of how the free trade/criminalization dual lens honed through NAFTA strengthens climate security discourse. As discussed earlier, the Biden immigration strategy involved three central tenets: regional migration management coordinated through the Los Angeles Declaration, expansion of temporary humanitarian parole and family reunification programs for Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (CHNV), and the RCS.<sup>347</sup> While the three programs were designed to work in tandem with each other, I focus analysis here on the RCS as the most explicitly concerned with climate change as a national security threat, as opposed to more procedural and administrative concerns around regional migration management.

### *The Biden Root Causes Strategy*

The RCS was clear in its aims to deter U.S.-bound migration. In Vice President Harris's first visit to Guatemala shortly after assuming office, her comments at a press conference alongside then-President Alejandro Giammattei underscored that the RCS was a predominantly U.S.-led initiative responding to U.S. national security goals, rather than one with shared concerns for Northern Central America: "I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border: Do not come. Do not come."<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Selee, A. 2023. The Border Crisis That Wasn't: Washington Has Found a Formula for Managing Migration—and Now Must Build On It. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/mexico/border-crisis-wasnt-united-states-migration>

<sup>348</sup> Naylor, B. and T. Keith. 2021. Kamala Harris Tells Guatemalans Not To Migrate To The United States. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/07/1004074139/harris-tells-guatemalans-not-to-migrate-to-the-united-states>

The most salient contribution of the RCS was its political rhetoric and posturing. The document served as an umbrella narrative mostly for existing programs.<sup>349</sup> In addition, the RCS provided high-level guidance that civil servants in USAID and the State Department had to interpret themselves when implementing it.<sup>350</sup> The RCS neatly packaged threat multiplier logic with the root causes of migration as national security priorities for the United States:

It is in the national security interest of the United States to promote a democratic, prosperous, and secure Central America...Persistent instability and insecurity in Central America have gone on for too long. Poverty and economic inequality, pervasive crime and corruption, and political leaders' drift toward authoritarian rule have stunted economic growth and diverted critical resources from healthcare and education, robbing citizens of hope and spurring migration. The worsening impacts of climate change, manifesting as prolonged periods of drought and devastating storms, have exacerbated these conditions and undermine U.S. and international interests. All of these factors contribute to irregular migration, and none of them can ultimately be addressed without honest and inclusive democratic governance that is responsive to the needs of citizens in the region...This Strategy [will] use the policy, resources, and diplomacy of the United States, and...leverage the expertise and resources of a broad group of public and private stakeholders, to build hope for citizens in the region that the life they desire can be found at home.<sup>351</sup>

Central to the RCS was Vice President Kamala Harris's Call to Action for the private sector to join the U.S. government in its engagement with Northern Central America. The Call to Action focused on two efforts since its launch in 2021: the Partnership for Central America (PCA) and Central America Forward. The PCA:

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<sup>349</sup> Root Causes Initiative. 2023. Resetting U.S. Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris root causes strategy. [https://www.hopeborder.org/\\_files/ugd/e07ba9\\_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf](https://www.hopeborder.org/_files/ugd/e07ba9_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf)

<sup>350</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. June 27, 2023.

<sup>351</sup> The White House. 2021. U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. Page 4. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf>

...is a non-profit organization that was developed in support of the Vice President's Call to Action. The Partnership aims to coordinate practical solutions to advance economic opportunity, address urgent climate, education and health challenges, and promote long-term investments and workforce capability in support of a vision of hope for Central America.<sup>352</sup>

The PCA launched another public-private partnership called Central America Forward in 2023 to coordinate private sector commitments under the banner of the RCS.<sup>353</sup> In March 2024, the PCA shared that it had secured commitments for \$5.2 billion in investment in Central America.<sup>354</sup> In June 2024, the State Department stated that \$1.3 billion of the pledged total had been deployed on the ground,<sup>355</sup> albeit without full transparency for what constituted the money deployed. In contrast, a team of Central American researchers, De la Torre et al., noted that only 14% of the total PCA commitments, worth roughly \$750 million, were scheduled to occur during the first term of the Biden administration.<sup>356</sup> Of this \$750 million, \$700 million came from the telecommunications firm Milicom to expand mobile and broadband networks.<sup>357</sup> The private

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<sup>352</sup> The White House. 2021. Vice President Harris Launches a Call to Action to the Private Sector to Deepen Investment in the Northern Triangle. May 27, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/27/fact-sheet-vice-president-harris-launches-a-call-to-action-to-the-private-sector-to-deepen-investment-in-the-northern-triangle/>.

<sup>353</sup> The White House. 2023. Vice President Harris Launches Next Phase of Public-Private Partnership for Northern Central America. February 6, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/06/fact-sheet-vice-president-harris-launches-next-phase-of-public-private-partnership-for-northern-central-america/>.

<sup>354</sup> U.S. Embassy Honduras. 2024. VP Harris Announces Public-Private Partnership Has Generated More Than \$5.2 Billion in Private Sector Commitments For Northern Central America. <https://hn.usembassy.gov/vp-harris-announces-public-private-partnership-has-generated-more-than-5-2-billion-in-private-sector-commitments-for-northern-central-america/>

<sup>355</sup> U.S. State Department. 2024. Progress on Central America Forward. June 2024. <https://www.state.gov/progress-on-central-america-forward>.

<sup>356</sup> De la Torre, J., Peralta, B. and K. Rivas. 2024. "Do Not Come": The US Root Causes Strategy and the Co-optation of the Right to Stay. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* (00)0: 1-26. Page 7.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

sector commitments were made alongside the Biden administration’s RCS commitment of \$4 billion in foreign assistance to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador over the four years of its first term.<sup>358</sup> De la Torre et al. found that while USAID pledged to funnel a significant portion of U.S. public investment in the RCS through a localization effort called Centroamérica Local, the private PCA investments generally lacked independent oversight and monitoring and were not designed with local communities in mind.<sup>359</sup>

The climate adaptation and resilience components of the RCS comprised a wide range of public and private investments. Within the climate components of the Strategy, improving food security and climate-resilient agricultural productivity were a central priority for deterring small-scale farmers from migrating to the United States. Within the actual text, the stated mechanisms for improving climate resilience to deter migration within the RCS revolved around “...the development of agricultural practices to ensure farmers can better respond to the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events, which have contributed to food insecurity.”<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Meyer, P. 2024. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2025 Appropriations. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R48266/2>.

<sup>359</sup> De la Torre, J., Peralta, B. and K. Rivas. 2024. “Do Not Come”: The US Root Causes Strategy and the Co-optation of the Right to Stay. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* (00)0: 1-26. Page 10.

<sup>360</sup> U.S. State Department. 2021. Report to Congress on A Strategy to Advance Economic Prosperity, Combat Corruption, Strengthen Democratic Governance, and Improve Civilian Security in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and to Curb Irregular Migration from the Region Section 352(a) of the United States – Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (Div. FF, P.L. 116-260). Page 7. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/RCS-English-Merged.pdf>.

These practices included supporting:

...improved agriculture production and income generation to reduce food insecurity while supporting sustainable food systems...efforts to improve crop resilience, adopt environmentally and economically sustainable agricultural practices, and improve land and water management; improve the resilience of residential, commercial, and public buildings and core public infrastructure; mitigate the impacts of and support a more rapid recovery from hurricanes and other severe weather events.<sup>361</sup>

At a program level, the climate components of the RCS took many forms and used public and private sector funding. While the U.S. government has long funded environmental initiatives in Northern Central America, this segment of foreign assistance was strongly oriented towards populations that were assessed to be likely migrants. For example, within public U.S. foreign assistance, the Biden administration reported that USAID’s Feed the Future programs helped an estimated 63,000 farmers in Guatemala and Honduras use “...innovative technologies intended to increase production and income on more than 75,000 acres of farmland.”<sup>362</sup> In tandem, the administration reported that it “...helped unlock more than \$57 million in private sector agricultural finance” as well as committed to launching “...two \$6 million soil mapping projects through the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Guatemala and Honduras.”<sup>363</sup> Likewise, in December 2024 USAID and NASA launched a Central America hub for SERVIR, the two agencies’ flagship partnership, aimed at agriculture and disaster preparedness forecasting. SERVIR hubs provide NASA Earth monitoring data to support development efforts through

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> U.S. Embassy Guatemala. 2024. Update on the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. <https://gt.usembassy.gov/update-on-the-u-s-strategy-for-addressing-the-root-causes-of-migration-in-central-america/>.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

“...resilience against environmental challenges including hurricanes, droughts, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.”<sup>364</sup> In particular, the Central America SERVIR hub will align with larger information and climate monitoring systems aimed at forecasting environmental impacts as well as supporting humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR) capabilities in NCA.<sup>365</sup> HA/DR funding works through both the State and Defense Departments in coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.<sup>366</sup> These efforts constitute a snapshot of the climate components of the deterrence-focused Root Causes Strategy, which De la Torre et al. argued “...became the framework for the U.S. diplomatic engagement with the region.”<sup>367</sup>

Private sector funding for climate-related projects through the PCA and Central America Forward complemented the migration deterrence focus of U.S. foreign assistance under the RCS. Many significant PCA commitments supported the same segment of rural farmers with the goal of deterring their migration. These included pledges from agribusiness giants Cargill, Peet’s, Agroamerica, and Nespresso/Nestle to provide technical assistance and purchase commitments to Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran smallholder farmers, particularly coffee producers.<sup>368</sup> In

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<sup>364</sup> National Aeronautics and Space Administration. 2024. NASA, USAID Launch SERVIR Central American Hub. <https://www.nasa.gov/missions/servir/nasa-usaid-launch-servir-central-american-hub/>.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Meyer, P. 2024. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2025 Appropriations. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R48266/2>.

<sup>367</sup> De la Torre, J., Peralta, B. and K. Rivas. 2024. “Do Not Come”: The US Root Causes Strategy and the Co-optation of the Right to Stay. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* (00)0: 1-26. Page 8.

<sup>368</sup> U.S. State Department. 2024. Progress on Central America Forward. June 2024. <https://www.state.gov/progress-on-central-america-forward>.

addition, while many of the PCA pledges focused on supporting economic development through financial inclusion, entrepreneurship support, broadband access, and strengthening supply chains, these pledges were largely aimed at providing rural, women, and/or indigenous communities with tools to either improve climate-impacted small businesses or else pivot into alternative sectors, largely manufacturing. For example, Central America Forward highlighted the financial inclusion pledge from the large financial services provider Banco LAFISE, which was entirely focused on increasing agricultural loans to smallholder Honduran farmers in conjunction with a large food processing firm.<sup>369</sup> Heifer International pledged to fund an entrepreneurship program providing business coaching to “...high-potential enterprises led by indigenous people” that largely focused on helping cacao producers export to foreign markets.<sup>370</sup> The Argidius Foundation, working with USAID’s Guatemala Entrepreneurship and Development Initiative, supported “...rural enterprises in coffee, mushroom, and honey sectors.”<sup>371</sup> These rural entrepreneurship pledges joined other major commitments to invest in food and beverage, retail, textiles, and auto manufacturing made by large multinational firms such as Gap, Parkdale Mills, PepsiCo, Chobani, Columbia Sportswear, Target, Visa, Mastercard, Davivienda, and Ficohsa.<sup>372</sup>

While the climate components of the RCS deliver climate benefits, their political framing underneath the root causes umbrella orients them to serve as dual climate adaptation and migration deterrence programs. On one hand, the Global Commission on Adaptation assessed that a

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> De la Torre, J., Peralta, B. and K. Rivas. 2024. “Do Not Come”: The US Root Causes Strategy and the Co-optation of the Right to Stay. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* (00)0: 1-26. Page 7.

hypothetical investment of \$1.8 trillion in actions such as strengthening early warning systems and improving other infrastructure and agricultural resilience could generate a total return of \$7.1 trillion in increased productivity and mitigating potential costs in the future.<sup>373</sup> In addition, these programs are addressing acute humanitarian concerns. As a report from the Migration Policy Institute, the World Food Programme, and MIT noted, food insecurity and natural hazard vulnerability are major factors that contribute to U.S.-bound migration from NCA, alongside perceptions of safety and belonging.<sup>374</sup> However, tying climate adaptation and resilience programs to the root causes of migration needs to tread a delicate balance of improving peoples' lives while not encroaching on their human rights. In this case, as De la Torre et al. argued, the Biden RCS got that balance wrong; the administration, in their words, "...co-opted Northern Central American communities' right to stay to promote a restrictive notion of the right to migrate."<sup>375</sup> The climate security discourse underpinning the climate components of the Biden RCS meant that these climate adaptation programs contributed to a larger securitization push for migration to the United States.

To this end, the few independent reviews of the RCS have been mixed, largely in terms of concerns over the social, political, environmental, and overall efficacy of the Strategy. As seen by independent, grassroots voices in Northern Central America that represent the very communities the RCS alleges to support, thus far, the RCS has mostly maintained existing programming through

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<sup>373</sup> Global Commission on Adaptation. 2019. *Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience*. September 10, 2019. <https://gca.org/reports/adapt-now-a-global-call-for-leadership-on-climate-resilience/>.

<sup>374</sup> Ruiz Soto, A.G., Rossella Bottone, J., Williams, S., Louie, A. and Y. Wang. 2021. *Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration*. Rome, Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: World Food Programme, Migration Policy Institute, and Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>375</sup> De la Torre, J., Peralta, B. and K. Rivas. 2024. "Do Not Come": The US Root Causes Strategy and the Co-optation of the Right to Stay. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* (00)0: 1-26. Page 3.

large U.S.-based companies. Existing programming includes both foreign assistance as well as PCA commitments. As noted above, the Biden administration trumpeted the fact that \$4 billion in foreign assistance funds (separate from PCA commitments) would be delivered over the four years in office with a focus on strengthening rule of law by promoting local entities. However, in the words of an independent assessment by the Root Causes Initiative, a respected group of faith-based, grassroots associations in NCA countries, much of this U.S. funding has gone towards "...a small circle of U.S.-based companies and NGOs to manage almost all of its portfolio in Northern Central America, and [USAID has] locked itself into a number of large multi-year projects with international contractors,"<sup>376</sup> which have been called into question for their effectiveness. The same assessment noted that, regarding climate change as a priority, while there were "...\$54 million in obligations in FY2021 and FY2022 that mentioned 'climate change' somewhere in their project descriptions, only \$17 million were listed as having an activity start date during 2020-2023. The remaining obligations were from projects initiated prior to the Biden-Harris Administration."<sup>377</sup> The Root Causes Initiative also noted that "...many Call to Action commitments pose serious concerns regarding environmental displacement workers' rights. For instance, beverage companies, like PepsiCo, which has made a \$190 million investment, have previously depleted communities' water supplies. In a context of more severe and frequent droughts and hurricanes in the Central American Dry Corridor, these investments can contribute to aggravating food

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<sup>376</sup> Root Causes Initiative. 2023. Resetting U.S. Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris root causes strategy. Page 6.  
[https://www.hopeborder.org/\\_files/ugd/e07ba9\\_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf](https://www.hopeborder.org/_files/ugd/e07ba9_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf)

<sup>377</sup> Ibid, Page 7.

insecurity and scarcity of resources, driving more internal displacement to cities and, ultimately, to other countries."<sup>378</sup>

The RCS focus on the Northern Central American countries relative to stated U.S. policy also rested on a performative foundation. The regional migration corridor, rather than decreasing in activity, had in fact seen an exponential increase of migrants traveling through the Darién Gap in Panamá from countries further south.<sup>379</sup> A similar contradiction between stated policy and reality lay in the entrenched corruption of many Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran elites.<sup>380</sup> U.S. Representative Norma Torres (D-California), an influential lawmaker on the region and a first-generation Guatemalan-American immigrant herself, responded to USAID Administrator Samantha Power's budget request at a 2023 congressional hearing by saying: "I don't know how we can look at a U.S. taxpayer in the face and say ... 'what we are doing is preventing people from coming north.'"<sup>381</sup> The well-respected analyst Manuel Orozco stated that the RCS "...seems more a media exercise in public relations than a cohesive development strategy in motion."<sup>382</sup> Additional scholarly assessments of the RCS argued that its focus on migration deterrence inherently works

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<sup>378</sup> Root Causes Initiative. 2023. Resetting U.S. Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris root causes strategy. Page 11. [https://www.hopeborder.org/\\_files/ugd/e07ba9\\_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf](https://www.hopeborder.org/_files/ugd/e07ba9_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf)

<sup>379</sup> IFRC. 2024. Echoes from the jungle: Unseen human stories from the Darién Gap. April 9, 2024. <https://www.ifrc.org/article/echoes-jungle-unseen-human-stories-darien-gap-0>

<sup>380</sup> See: Papadovassilakis, A. 2024. Attacks on Guatemala's Anti-Corruption President Growing. *Insight Crime*. August 15, 2024. <https://insightcrime.org/news/attacks-on-guatemalas-anti-corruption-president-growing/>

Suazo, J.H. 2024. In Honduras, an Ambitious Presidency Hits Turbulence. October 24, 2024. *Americas Quarterly*. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/in-honduras-an-ambitious-presidency-hits-turbulence/>

<sup>381</sup> Oswald, R. 2023. Democratic appropriator urges end to aid to Northern Triangle countries. *Roll Call*. <https://rollcall.com/2023/05/03/democratic-appropriator-urges-end-to-aid-to-northern-triangle-countries/>

<sup>382</sup> Inter-American Dialogue. 2022. Will U.S. Pledges to Central America Lower Emigration? <https://thediologue.org/analysis/will-u-s-pledges-to-central-america-lower-emigration>.

counterproductively to those stated goals, and that the RCS missed the opportunity to co-design development assistance with recipient communities, rather than impose it from the top-down.<sup>383</sup>

The Root Causes Initiative concluded:

Without credible engagement with reliable, local stakeholders, the traditional strategies—unaccountable private investment, large development projects managed by private companies, and an emphasis on hardening borders—will yield the usual results: the continued capture of economic and political institutions by elites and ongoing suffering among ordinary people in Northern Central America.<sup>384</sup>

Overall, the Biden RCS framed climate adaptation and resilience investments as tools for migration deterrence, integrating them into broader economic and security policies for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The Partnership for Central America (PCA) and Central America Forward mobilized \$5.2 billion in private sector commitments, but only between \$750 million and \$1.3 billion was deployed, with limited transparency, and most investments favored multinational firms over local communities. Public climate initiatives under the RCS included those such as USAID’s Feed the Future program, \$57 million in agricultural financing, and NASA’s SERVIR Central America Hub to enhance disaster response and food security, all explicitly targeting at-risk populations to reduce migration pressures. Critics argued that tying climate adaptation to migration deterrence undermined human rights, as faith-based and grassroots organizations found most funding was funneled through U.S.-based contractors, limiting local participation.

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<sup>383</sup> Gerschutz-Bell, J. M. 2022. Root Causes of Migration, Development, and US Aid to Northern Triangle States. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 10(3): 173-189.

<sup>384</sup> Root Causes Initiative. 2023. Resetting U.S. Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris root causes strategy. Page 16.  
[https://www.hopeborder.org/\\_files/ugd/e07ba9\\_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf](https://www.hopeborder.org/_files/ugd/e07ba9_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf)

Ultimately, the securitization of climate resilience efforts underlined concerns that the RCS prioritized short-term migration control over long-term sustainable development.

The following section further explores how this securitized framing has permeated U.S. foreign assistance and development planning, with climate adaptation investments increasingly linked to reducing irregular migration rather than fostering regional resilience on its own terms. U.S. government agencies, particularly USAID and the State Department, restructured their strategies to reflect this migration-first approach, as seen in the shifting priorities of Country Development Cooperation Strategies for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The evolution of these programs highlights how climate adaptation policies justified restrictive migration governance, reinforcing U.S. national security interests at the expense of locally driven solutions.

#### *Climate Securitization and the Biden RCS*

The Biden administration's securitization of climate policy within the Root Causes Strategy reflects a broader U.S. tendency to frame migration as a national security threat rather than a structural development challenge. This section examines how climate security discourse influenced both high-level policy narratives and concrete U.S. foreign assistance programs, embedding migration deterrence as a core priority. By analyzing shifts in USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS) for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, it becomes evident that officials increasingly tied climate resilience funding to reducing irregular migration. The implications of this trend extend beyond funding mechanisms, shaping how U.S. agencies interact with Northern Central American governments, prioritize investments, and ultimately entrench migration control as a central objective of climate governance.

The historical evolution of climate security discourse in the United States helps explain the contradictions of the RCS. The political nature of viewing migrants through a criminalization lens oriented the RCS as a response to perceived national security threats. This faulty approach is not lost on civil servants in the U.S. government:

Biden Root Causes first showed up right when the new administration started. It was like ‘Boom,’ there was this ninety-day plan. It instantly took off when Biden took office, which was interesting to watch. We were actually reporting every day for ninety days: ‘What have we done to address migration, and what are the numbers?’ This was all a focus, as if you can solve migration in ninety days, right? So, it was really kind of re-educating another administration on the impossibility of those goals after we had seen similar political pressures under Obama and Trump.<sup>385</sup>

The IRCA Commission’s caution to have patience when allowing complex development planning to take hold was replaced by an overriding hyper-focus on the number of migrants at the U.S. southwest border, which served political purposes. This focus exemplifies another tenet of climate security discourse: the simplified narrative of migration as a national security threat, in contrast to its immensely complex reality. The notion that investment can be targeted towards this simplified hyper-focus on U.S. border arrivals deeply pervaded U.S. thinking. Importantly, attention on migration deterrence illustrates the divergent views between U.S. national security goals and those of NCA countries. As a U.S. official explained of U.S. foreign assistance to Guatemala:

Central America Route 1 has run through Guatemala since it was built with U.S. assistance during World War Two. We wanted to be able to connect the Panama Canal to the United States. It's still there. And it is still terrible. It’s just barely good enough to get high-value horticultural crops out, a pillar of CAFTA[-DR]. You go to your supermarket and you see cherry tomatoes, maybe sugar peas, the occasional other product from Guatemala. The road is good enough to get high-value products to Guatemala City and then on an airplane to the U.S. But other than that, if we look at Quetzaltenango, the second city of Guatemala, it

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<sup>385</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. September 18, 2023.

continues to lag behind. I was just talking to a former Guatemalan government minister, now an entrepreneur, very connected, and he said ‘I want to help you with the Root Causes Strategy. Why don't we open up a tech incubator in Guatemala City?’ And I said we are not going to pay for that. I said we are not going to benefit the most developed city in the country with another development. You put that tech incubator in Quetzaltenango, we will help you. And he looked at me and couldn't believe what I was saying.<sup>386</sup>

The United States has used the Root Causes Strategy not only to discount the interests of Northern Central American countries, but also to further criminalize migration. For example, building on the core RCS political narrative, elites conditioned foreign assistance to places that U.S.-bound migrants are leaving, which are increasingly believed to be worsened by climate change. This deterrence focus has taken hold of climate security narratives to a significant degree. USAID's 2015-2019 Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for Honduras, for example, listed 'migration' seven times throughout its 82 pages, with its three main Development Objectives focusing on "citizen security," "extreme poverty," and "public administration" (i.e., corruption).<sup>387</sup> In comparison, the 2020-2025 Honduras CDCS lists 'migration' 101 times, with its three main Development Objectives being "Socio-economic Opportunities Improved to Reduce Irregular Migration," "Democratic Governance to Meet Citizens' Needs Enhanced to Reduce Irregular Migration," and "Justice and Security Improved to Reduce Irregular Migration."<sup>388</sup> The patterns hold for Guatemala and El Salvador as well: migration references in the Guatemala CDCSs jump

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<sup>386</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. April 7, 2023.

<sup>387</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2016. Country Development Cooperation Strategy: Honduras, 2015-2019. [https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1862/HondurasCDCS\\_2015-2019.pdf](https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1862/HondurasCDCS_2015-2019.pdf)

<sup>388</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2021. Country Development Cooperation Strategy: Honduras, 2020-2025. [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/USAID\\_Honduras\\_CDCS\\_Public\\_Version\\_CLEAN\\_b.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/USAID_Honduras_CDCS_Public_Version_CLEAN_b.pdf)

from two to 72 over the same 2015-2019/2020-2025 split,<sup>389 390</sup> while from the 2013-2017 to 2020-2025 El Salvador strategies, references increase from two to 78.<sup>391 392</sup>

Interestingly, the U.S. hyper-focus on curbing migration at both strategic and programmatic levels has some positive benefits for NCA countries and communities. Importantly, Northern Central American leaders understood they could leverage the fact that deterring U.S.-bound migration intersected with climate change as political priorities for the Biden administration, and they secured significant adaptation investments in response. Under President Biden, the U.S. worked to deploy and share a wide range of technological capabilities with NCA countries to bolster early warning and monitoring systems for hurricanes, sea-level rise, wildfires, drought, food insecurity, and infrastructure exposure.<sup>393</sup> In-country, USAID conducted sophisticated analysis of mobility drivers, especially as they relate to climate change and food security, suggesting that patterns of U.S. border apprehensions are being complicated by the impacts of drought and depressed agricultural productivity, especially in coffee-growing regions.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2016. Country Development Cooperation Strategy: Guatemala, 2015-2019. [https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1862/GuatemalaCDCS\\_0.pdf](https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1862/GuatemalaCDCS_0.pdf)

<sup>390</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2021. Country Development Cooperation Strategy: Guatemala, 2020-2025. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/CDCS-Guatemala-2025-Amended-30Aug2021-Public.pdf>

<sup>391</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2018. Country Development Cooperation Strategy: El Salvador, 2013-2017. <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1862/CDCS-El-Salvador.pdf>

<sup>392</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2021. Country Development Cooperation Strategy: El Salvador, 2020-2025. [https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CDCS-El\\_Salvador\\_PUBLIC.pdf](https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CDCS-El_Salvador_PUBLIC.pdf)

<sup>393</sup> The White House. 2023. Marking the Two-Year Anniversary of the Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/01/fact-sheet-marking-the-two-year-anniversary-of-the-report-on-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-migration/>

<sup>394</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2023. Climate Change, Food Security, and Migration: Honduras. [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00XXBJ.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XXBJ.pdf)

However, the impact of these adaptation resources paled in comparison to U.S. rhetoric encouraging Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans to stay and find hope in their home countries while simultaneously discouraging U.S. travel to the region due to unsafe conditions.<sup>395</sup>

As a former U.S. official commented:

There's a lot of money that's spent without any real understanding of whether it's effective. Knowing what happens and what's good independently of whether we as the government say it works or not is really critical to me. In particular, all of the money that is spent on messaging people not to migrate, 'don't go, it's not safe, don't put your lives at risk, the cartels are right there.' We spend that money year after year after year. And I've never seen a single study saying it has deterred a single individual or even influenced their choices.<sup>396</sup>

As a result, the imposition of migration-deterrent development policy onto Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador as a result of stated climate security priorities overrides any significant potential for deep, bilateral co-creation of approaches with lasting runway past short-term political cycles in the United States. Most damagingly, the U.S. hyper-focus on migration deterrence erodes trust across the spectrum: with prospective migrants, who will forgo sparse and complicated lawful pathways when unsure of those pathways' longevity amidst political turmoil; with NCA governments and civil society, whose cooperation is needed to implement and sustain any medium- or long-term strategy; and with a domestic audience in the United States, who will continue treating immigration as a criminalization crisis as long as that is the message being delivered. As a result, U.S. national security officials have entangled climate change with migration deterrence as an overriding national security priority, with any climate action conditioned on mitigating these constructed national security threats to the United States.

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<sup>395</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. August 11, 2023.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

The climate securitization framework of the Biden Root Causes Strategy paved the way for deeper U.S. engagement with the private sector, reinforcing migration deterrence as a core national security objective. As the following section explores, private investment through the Partnership for Central America and Central America Forward became the economic and security counterbalance to the RCS's governance and aid-driven components. U.S. officials presented a narrative that corporate interests aligned with national security priorities, framing business investments in Northern Central America as essential to reducing irregular migration. However, these initiatives primarily served multinational firms, replicating past U.S. economic policies in the region rather than fostering truly localized, climate-resilient development. Understanding how migration deterrence and economic expansion have become intertwined helps contextualize how private-sector engagement functions within the broader U.S. national security landscape. This context helped anchor the climate components of the RCS within the broader efforts to deter and securitize migration from Northern Central America.

#### Private Sector Investment and Migration Deterrence as National Security

*The Partnership with Central America has been really good at mobilizing private sector investments. And they take steers from around the interagency. If we say, hey, can you work more in the Dry Corridor or can you do more in this sector, can you do more in soil development, whatever we ask, they are pretty open to that. I think the private sector really does want to be involved in this cool Vice President's club, because it truly is just a badge of honor. They get nothing from us. We don't get funding from them. They just get the visibility and the props.*

*I also think Central America Forward is one of the coolest things because it is helping people. It does underscore the things that we care about with governance, but it's also good old-fashioned capitalism. Companies here can make money and we don't need them to be altruistic angels and do it for the right reasons. They can do it because they want to improve their bottom line, that's perfectly fine. We want actual good business opportunities that are reliable, and worth investing in a good investment climate.*

*There are a lot of reasons that we want to see the region succeed. In general, if you look at trends in the region more broadly in the Western Hemisphere and Latin America, the turn to China and*

*how others, especially Russia, are pushing back against democratic norms, and I think we all agree that's not a good thing for many reasons. Especially in a region that we do care about, have so many interests, we do want to see these things hold.*

Author interview with U.S. official. March 8, 2023.

Private sector-led investment, through the Partnership for Central America and Central America Forward, serves as the economic rationale of the dual U.S. national security lens first developed for Northern Central America during NAFTA ratification. U.S. multinational investment, through free trade and less-restricted capital flows, joins criminalized immigration as the foundations for the regional political institutional order. Continuing with the underlying logic of the Biden Root Causes Strategy, a critical analysis of climate security discourse provides insight into how the U.S. has packaged the PCA and Central America Forward within its national security determinations, facilitating a heavy emphasis on migration deterrence.

There is very little to distinguish private sector investment in Northern Central America through the PCA and Central America Forward from earlier iterations of U.S. multinational investment in the region. The evolution, instead, lies in the political narrative that the Biden Root Causes Strategy advanced, which saw enabling large multinational corporations to pursue their interests as being central to the U.S. national security priority of stemming and deterring irregular, U.S.-bound, and climate-affected migration. In this way, multinational firms, in concert with the U.S. government, have infused migration with similar rhetoric around democratic values as earlier versions deployed by the fossil fuel industry in the Middle East and against the perceived threat of communism during the Cold War.

Key interest groups in Washington, and Northern Central American elites who have been beneficiaries of regional free trade alike, understand U.S.-bound migration as a national security threat to the extent that it compromises the U.S. economic frontier. The 2021 congressional testimony of Anderson Warlick, CEO of U.S.-based Parkdale Mills, to the House Homeland Security Committee highlights how the U.S. private sector has understood this dynamic. Parkdale Mills is the largest spun yarn manufacturer in the world, the largest U.S. consumer of cotton after its 2008 acquisition of U.S. Cotton,<sup>397</sup> and a major anchor of the PCA (following emphases mine):

Starting in the mid-1990s, China emerged as a large-scale predatory force benefiting from virtually limitless government programs intended to ensure that China's textile industry dominated world markets and displaced foreign competitors and workers. China leveraged the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s to steeply devalue its currency and slash prices for textile and apparel exports by 30-80 percent virtually overnight. China paired its persistent currency devaluation with heavy industrial subsidies to its state-owned factories which has shrouded market forces, undervalued the true cost of its products, and displaced virtually all competitors.

Of course, all this economic chicanery has had an adverse impact not only on U.S. manufacturers and workers, but also directly on our valued political and economic allies in the Western Hemisphere, contributing to economic instability and outward migration. Despite promises of preferred access to our consumer market through free trade agreements, our trading partners find themselves at a distinct disadvantage to China's aggressive trade tactics. As the U.S. was poised to finalize CAFTA-DR and enable the region to compete for the U.S. consumer apparel market against a rising China, the major developments noted above—China's adoption of deplorable trade and economic tactics, and the liberalization of trade policy—served to directly counteract that opportunity. To be clear, these events directly impacted investment, sourcing, and production decisions in the CAFTA-DR region, which was not equipped to compete with the aggressive, predatory policies and practices employed by the Chinese Communist Party. **As customers for American textiles decline, we would also lose vital warm industrial base capacity for mission critical military procurement—creating a national security threat.** Further, a severe contraction of U.S. textile manufacturing would cause U.S. cotton farmers to lose

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<sup>397</sup> Parkdale Mills. About Us. Accessed December 15, 2022. <https://www.parkdalemills.com/about/>.

their sole domestic customer, devastating the market for American cotton. **These U.S. manufacturing and farm jobs would be lost forever to China's dominant position in the hemisphere.**

...To be clear, the main reason that we have a domestic textile industry is because we have created a strong co-production arrangement in this hemisphere through the development of strategic free trade agreements (FTAs) that provide tangible incentives to make capital investments and manufacture products throughout North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. **The success of Parkdale's operations in the U.S. is entirely dependent upon the success of our supply chains domestically and throughout the region.** We recognize the serious problems posed, both in the U.S. and in Central American countries, by increased levels of outward migration from Central America. **Our hemispheric trade platform requires a dependable business environment and stable workforce throughout the production chain.** Sufficient economic and employment opportunities must exist for workers both at home and abroad, and this is one of the root causes of outward migration that must be addressed.<sup>398</sup>

This securitized treatment of immigration serves to advance an expansive vision of the economic frontier. Private sector leaders like Warlick have sounded the alarm around the threats of deteriorating regional supply chains, consistent and predictable U.S.-bound flows of inexpensive labor, and consumer markets. As a result, these private sector interests have furthered the narrative that irregular migration is a threat to U.S. national security. The regional trade bloc extending to the CAFTA-DR signatories, especially its natural resources and labor pool, is also believed to contain "...vital warm industrial base capacity for mission critical military procurement," constituting a national security threat to the United States. China serves as a convenient and all-encompassing danger to this construction of national security. Parkdale Mills neatly tied its own success to the USG's assistance in securing a profitable regional market for domestic labor

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<sup>398</sup> Testimony of Anderson Warlick. 2021. "Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Northern Central America." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 11 June 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/LC66878/text>.

certainty. Warlick defined this joint public-private interest as: "...a dependable business environment and stable workforce throughout the production chain" for the sake of U.S. national security. This narrative discursively expands the national security frontier far beyond the U.S. southwestern border. While U.S. incursions in Latin America have long demonstrated two-sided regard for sovereignty since the Monroe Doctrine, it is notable how the U.S. has responded to these perceptions of immigration as a national security threat by treating immigration as the root cause endangering U.S. elite economic interests, rather than considering the root causes of migration.

As the Farm Bureau, the lobbying arm of the U.S. agriculture industry, states in its public policy platform (emphases are originals):

The Farm Bureau also believes **the most critical component of border security is to fix the immigration system**—including creating legal ways for agricultural workers to enter the country to fill jobs. Our government should focus on preventing those with real criminal intent from entering our country, rather than wasting time and resources locking up farm workers. As long as there is demand in the U.S. for farm workers, hard-working people will continue to enter the U.S. to earn a living for themselves and their families back home. Creating a legal way for them to do so, and a way to know who they are and what they're doing while they are here, makes us more secure.

A Farm Bureau-commissioned study shows enforcement-only immigration reform, including **mandatory E-Verify, would cause production to drop by \$60 billion and food prices to rise 5 to 6 percent.**<sup>399</sup>

As the Farm Bureau and other industry groups well know, a significant portion of the U.S. workforce is undocumented, as reflected by the aforementioned estimate of 11 million undocumented people residing in the United States in late 2024. Elites in the United States have

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<sup>399</sup> U.S. Farm Bureau. Agriculture Labor Reform. Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://www.fb.org/issue/labor/agriculture-labor-reform>.

articulated that the intersection of political concerns about immigration with the reality of the integrated regional labor market represent a key crux of securitization narratives.

As a former Member of Congress noted:

I think the type of threat that people perceive migration to be totally varies. There are people who are concerned, on the left, of migration, and you have many, many people on the far left who don't like immigration, because of overcrowding in your community, the idea that immigrants are taking resources that we don't have. There's another argument in terms of immigration, because it represents people taking American jobs, and leaving American workers behind, and the threat of, we heard this from President Trump, 'you're letting in criminals and rapists,' that kind of nonsense, which is real to a lot of people, as well as the increase in crime because of migration. Jobs, crime, climate, overpopulation are all different threads that are perceived differently by different groups of people.

All the big agriculture groups want workers here to pick crops and then to send them back off-season. Other groups are concerned with the idea that the U.S. is overcrowded already and that we can't afford to let immigrants come and consume scarce resources that we don't have enough of 'for ourselves,' which I say with quotation marks. And then there is that whole fear factor that doesn't align with reality. If you or I were in another country that was suffering drought, wouldn't you seek a better life for your family? It's become so parochial and degrading, unfortunately. There's no enemy over there.

Business groups largely support high skilled immigrants, people getting green cards after going to university in the U.S., those kinds of pathways. There isn't as much support for people coming across the border that people perceive to be a drain on social services, going on food stamps, or that will be unemployable, children going to school and public education costs. I don't think there is political will or public support for unlimited immigrants. What are the numbers here? Do we just not have any numbers, and say whoever wants to come, that's fine? Or do we create a pathway, but then what does that mean, are your children not able to go to school? So, I think again those overcrowding issues are paramount.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Author interview with former Member of Congress. December 12, 2022.

Private sector assumptions of how to secure regional value and supply chains incorporate a sophisticated understanding of this reality. As J. Welby Leaman, Senior Director of Global Government and Multilateral Affairs at Walmart, testified to the House Homeland Security Committee in 2021:

One of the strongest incentives for businesses in Central America to raise their standards is so they can have a shot at being a supplier to U.S. businesses. But to harness that requires working with U.S. business on systemic reforms that build the trust they need to begin looking for more local suppliers.

U.S. multinational corporations have positioned themselves as leading an effort to secure 'trustworthy' relationships in Northern Central America. Welby Leaman highlighted this link with regards to the rule of law (emphases mine):

...reengineering incentives in the four regulatory systems where **weak rule of law most undermines businesses' ability to expand opportunity and hope to those who most need it**...tax, customs, permitting, and public procurement. Consider them twofers. The two biggest root causes intersect here. Take tax: if local businesses are high risks for not paying their taxes, U.S. businesses will avoid onboarding local suppliers. This hits hardest those who most need hope: small suppliers, especially in regions of high informality. Or take permitting: **U.S. businesses' best-laid investment plans for underserved communities may not get to break ground if permits are unpredictable.**<sup>401</sup>

As Greg Grandin and many others have noted, private sector leadership in U.S. foreign policy is not a new phenomenon. Welby Leaman made clear that this focus on investor security extends across the entire supply and value chain:

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<sup>401</sup> Testimony of J. Welby Leaman. 2021. "Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Northern Central America." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 11 June 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/LC66878/text>.

Corruption and lack of economic opportunity are not two separate challenges that can be addressed on separate tracks; they are two sides of the same coin: U.S. business cannot adequately expand economic opportunity to those who most need it in Central America without better rule-of-law, and the private sector is an irreplaceable partner in getting rule of law right.

However, the narrative around addressing the root causes of irregular migration to the U.S. from Northern Central America and Mexico does not fully incorporate how the U.S. government has outsourced responsibility for what it considers to be national security concerns in the public interest. As U.S. Congressman Lou Correa (D-CA) stated in 2021:

We cannot expect migrants to stop making the dangerous journey to the U.S. until they have hope in a better life at home. Building this hope will take time and collaboration across the public and private sectors. Although [the Department of Homeland Security] and the U.S. government have committed significant resources toward helping the Central American governments bolster their security and improve customs enforcement, there is only so much the U.S. government can do to help create jobs and support economic development. We have learned that simply sending aid money to these governments will not create the meaningful and sustained change that is required. However, this is an area where our private sector partners are best suited to help create some unique new opportunities for the people of this region.<sup>402</sup>

The extent to which domestic elites in Northern Central American countries capitalize on this logic for their own benefit is often lost in these discussions. With respect to the foundation of a prominent collection of regional business associations, the Honduras-U.S.-Guatemala-El Salvador Business Council (HUGE), a private sector leader, stated (emphases mine):

HUGE was based on the idea that the four countries were suffering from a common problem, which was the desperately bad standard of living of the common people in the

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<sup>402</sup> Correa, L. 2021. "Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Northern Central America." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 11 June 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/LC66878/text>.

Northern Triangle countries. That was pushing them to do mass migration, often irregular migration, at great personal expense, pain, and risk coming into the United States, putting a burden on social services, on employment and other things. They said we have a common interest in addressing that situation and we're losing a lot of our best people, because it takes a lot of guts and moxie to do that.

**And these people ideally would stay in their countries and be happy, productive citizens. Do a full life. Have the American Dream in Honduras, or in El Salvador, or Guatemala.**<sup>403</sup>

The HUGE language of recreating the American Dream in Northern Central America directly mirrored the Biden Root Causes Strategy. The message of achieving prosperity by not migrating is a powerful rhetorical tool. Here, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran private sector elites recycled the national security concerns of the United States as central to investment flowing into Northern Central America. The U.S. government and its private sector partners' rhetorical uniformity in explicitly discouraging migration went hand in hand with prescribing resilience—individual resilience, community resilience, economic resilience, and national resilience—as the overriding solution for national security and economic prosperity. As a result, the PCA, in concert with NCA private sector elite-led initiatives, produced programs concentrated on facilitating free trade and foreign investment. U.S. officials and their private sector partners in the PCA leveraged climate-facing programs as part of the broader effort to discourage migration and cement sustained foreign investment into Northern Central America.

In addition, independent analysts have found the mechanisms for transparency and accountability in the RCS lacking. As noted above, PCA investments to date have been concentrated in textiles, finance (largely to facilitate remittances), communications, and agriculture, with some productive

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<sup>403</sup> Author interview with private sector leader. July 13, 2023.

efforts on gender inclusion and education.<sup>404</sup> However, as the grassroots coalition, the Root Causes Initiative, noted about the PCA:

...To date, there has been no public accounting regarding actual investments realized or documentation of impact...there is a lack of clear explanations for the connection between investments and the root causes of forced migration. For instance, Millicom, owner of the popular phone carrier Tigo, is the largest partner with a commitment of \$1b in expanding mobile and internet networks in the region. However, the company does not mention how increasing connectivity can alleviate forced migration, nor is there evidence in the literature that such investments have an impact on reducing the number of people fleeing...there are no mechanisms for civil society organizations to monitor Call to Action investments.<sup>405</sup>

The financial sector illustrates how longstanding concerns around corruption highlight the civil society concerns of reduced transparency for PCA investments. One notable example was reported by Connectas, the Latin America arm of the International Center for Journalists. Connectas detailed how the Honduran bank Ficohsa, listed as a "Strategic Partner" to the Partnership for Central America,<sup>406</sup> was the subject of significant money laundering investigations into World Bank and IFC loans by the U.N.-backed anti-corruption body MACCIH.<sup>407</sup> Indeed, the PCA had a limited number of potential partners in NCA countries for the kinds of investments at scale it aspired to. This was especially true given the rapid surge of investment it promised in response to

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<sup>404</sup> Root Causes Initiative. 2023. Resetting U.S. Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris Root Causes Strategy. Pages 9-10. [https://www.hopeborder.org/files/ugd/e07ba9\\_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf](https://www.hopeborder.org/files/ugd/e07ba9_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf)

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Partnership for Central America. Strategic Partners. <https://www.centampartnership.org/strategic-partners>. Accessed on December 24, 2023.

<sup>407</sup> Andrés, A. and C. Gamazo. 2023. IFC: el socio silencioso de la corrupción en Centroamérica. *Iniciativa Para El Periodismo De Investigación en las Américas*. <https://www.connectas.org/especiales/ifc-el-socio-silencioso/>. Accessed on December 24, 2023.

the urgency articulated around migration deterrence as a national security priority for the United States. As Javier Bú, chargé d'affaires at the Honduran embassy in Washington, said of the RCS:

This initiative sets aside previous ones by mobilizing investment from the private sector, a different approach that goes beyond the traditional schemes of cooperation, so the expectation is to have a faster impact on creating opportunities.<sup>408</sup>

However, such a narrative about the scale of those political goals, and the speed associated with them, deserves closer analysis. There are alternative courses of action that would involve more participation from smaller firms and community-based organizations without the baggage that often comes from ties to establishment elites—they would just be more time-consuming and less profitable. Coupled with the voluntary nature of any related PCA commitments themselves was the Partnerships' stance on 'Rule of Law': PCA partners were only "...encouraged to adhere to the OECD Guidelines for Business."<sup>409</sup> The PCA's simplistic framing, coupled with its flexible administration, made it a useful vehicle for multinational firms to exploit its hyper-focus on migration deterrence.

In contrast, the Root Causes Initiative echoed the IRCA Commission's caution that increasing remittances and other short-term infusions of income for NCA residents can lead to increased migration as people gain the ability to invest in the journey north. This is especially true of the PCA's focus on financial inclusion and expanding digital access. While these are important steps for broader economic development, they have the potential to provide resources and information

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<sup>408</sup> Inter-American Dialogue. 2022. Will U.S. Pledges to Central America Lower Emigration? <https://thediologue.org/analysis/will-u-s-pledges-to-central-america-lower-emigration>.

<sup>409</sup> Partnership for Central America. Program Areas. <https://www.centampartnership.org/program-areas>. Accessed on December 24, 2023.

that allow would-be migrants the ability to start the journey to the United States. The largest difference the PCA brings relative to previous root causes strategies is its focus on gender equity. This focus is pursued through the 'In Her Hands' program, which stated a goal to "...expand opportunities to 5 million women through financial inclusion, digital skilling, manufacturing and textiles, and agricultural programs."<sup>410</sup> Amidst these contradictions, the PCA has generated momentum for profitable enterprises. A private sector leader detailed the competing priorities for Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran elites, including:

...speed to market logistics, because even though we're very close to the United States, with how long it takes to get some things through customs to get them out of Central America, you might as well be on the moon... We specifically focused on the infrastructure business and logistics, which are needed to make the Northern Triangle a strong platform for nearshoring into the U.S. market... In Guatemala, one of the projects is a private sector road, which I believe is the only one that's been allowed in the country. But we're hoping to create a model and do a lot more of that kind of private sector-led development.<sup>411</sup>

It is difficult to see how logistics, nearshoring, and private sector-led infrastructure development thread various forms of investment together outside of the continued facilitation of long-standing capital flows. There is little evidence of an integrated vision for wholesale and climate-responsive economic development focused on strengthening human capital that would lead to growth benefitting Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans other than the fact that elites have learned to exploit the geopolitical moment for their own gain. As the Root Causes Initiative stated, "...while private investment is an important element in economic development, longtime experience in the

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Author interview with private sector leader. July 13, 2023.

region demonstrates that it is possible to generate return on private investment without broad-based economic improvements. Indeed, some investments can generate forced displacement."<sup>412</sup>

The PCA, and the broader RCS, stem from core truths underscoring the difficult contradictions at play. Most notably, violence and underdevelopment do drive outmigration, and the private sector is an important partner in supporting job creation to build broader-based wealth and prosperity in any country. However, national security officials in the Biden administration made clear that investment in underdevelopment and insecurity would be conditioned on its ability to facilitate migration deterrence, precisely because of the national security concerns invoked. In this way, broader climate security discourse helped performatively address the core sensitivities of real insecurity, fragility, violence, and desperation that plague Northern Central America. At the same time, this discourse provided political narratives that elites on all sides of the spectrum could harness to materially benefit from the same problems that are very well understood by the United States. Vice President Harris's voluntary Call to Action for private sector investment, by its elective nature, attracted private investors who saw opportunity that aligned with their own interests over any public sector goals involved. The PCA is a salient example of two truths: that all dollars are not equal in their societal impacts, and that multinational firms took advantage of the opportunity presented by the USG's apparent endorsement of the logic that all investment is equal to further their own interests. The PCA provided private sector elites the opportunity to leverage the national security framing inherent in the simplified narratives linking climate change and migration as threats to capture or expand market share in Northern Central America.

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<sup>412</sup> Root Causes Initiative. 2023. Resetting U.S. Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris root causes strategy. Page 9-10.  
[https://www.hopeborder.org/\\_files/ugd/e07ba9\\_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf](https://www.hopeborder.org/_files/ugd/e07ba9_a858dc6993004e7e9312740aca72493b.pdf)

The words of Aracely Martínez Rodas, Claudia González-Muzzio, and Victor Marchezini ring especially true with regards to the RCS's novel political packaging of recycled approaches to multinational investment-led development (translation mine):

These preconceived ideas bring us to generate concepts from above about what is considered as 'wellbeing' or 'what should be,' and feel like we are experts, from afar, about what 'they need.' This inhibits our ability to understand these communities, speak with them, and include them as co-participants in processes of research and intervention for change.<sup>413</sup>

Unfortunately, as a former U.S. official described, the ongoing lesson of the RCS is cautionary:

The challenge in dealing with root causes of migration is that it requires you to completely redo an economy and a society. Good luck with that. I personally would not have used that as how I would explain U.S. policy because I think if you try to tell this to Americans, their attitude is going to be: 'what are you talking about?' Are we supposed to undo hundreds of years of history in these countries? We could deal with this. We have the means and the capability to deal with it, but we're not thinking about it in any structured way.

The other larger question is what should we be doing on an international basis more broadly? If we have drug wars in Honduras and drought in El Salvador, or vice versa, do we say just come here, and then we continue to have those issues because of practices that are outdated and environmentally inefficient, do we not address those issues? Maybe we should be working with their governments in a more committed way. When we talk about our institutional preparedness, does that mean our institutions in the U.S. or does that mean being prepared to lend our support to lift these other communities so that migration from Central America, because of climate change and crime, doesn't happen? With crime, we know that the U.S. is a big reason for why that's happening, we're the consumers of drugs and producers of weapons. We have a moral responsibility for that, and we don't seem to think that's our job.

If you think about it in terms of different populations of people that are on the move, you have traditional forced migration that is at an all-time high. That's a population which I truly question the use of the Root Causes Strategy on. The idea of long-term investment is

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<sup>413</sup> Martínez Rodas, A., González-Muzzio, C. and V. Marchezini. 2022. El Diálogo Continúa: Descolonización de la Ciencia de los Desastres en Latinoamérica y el Caribe. *Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Reducción del Riesgo de Desastres REDER* 6(1): 1-8. Page 2.

great, and in our political reality, getting corporations to do something is great. But we need massive inflows of infrastructure and support for building democracy. The USAID and State Department budgets for the region would have to quadruple if we were to actually do something that would be meaningful. In some cases, there might be regime issues, and there are certainly civil society issues.

Without question, there's a huge mismatch on where the money's flowing, where it's needed, and where it's going to be more effective. The focus is always a question of how you stop somebody who needs to flee from fleeing.<sup>414</sup>

The trumpeted yet uneven rollout of the RCS reflects core tenets of the discourse underpinning the Biden climate security moment. This discourse fused the political enthusiasm for climate action with longstanding regional emphases around migration deterrence and unfettered capital flows in an uncomfortable tension. These dynamics distort the national sovereignty of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In addition, the approach limits the agency that policymakers feel in being able to use climate change as a justification to advance more foundational work on climate-affected migration beyond elite national security prerogatives, exemplified by the Pentagon's focus on warfighting readiness at all costs.

While this chapter argues that climate security discourse has been instrumentalized for migration deterrence, I acknowledge that others view these initiatives as genuine efforts to promote climate resilience. Proponents of the Root Causes Strategy argued that by investing in climate adaptation and resilience in concert with corruption and other security measures, the U.S. was helping reduce forced displacement and fostering regional stability. However, this chapter demonstrates that these investments remain securitized—framing migration as a risk to be mitigated rather than a right to

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<sup>414</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. January 20, 2023.

be protected. Even well-intentioned climate resilience programs risk reinforcing deterrence-first policies by tying adaptation funding to migration control goals. Recognizing these contradictions is essential for evaluating the broader political implications of how climate security discourse shapes U.S. engagement with Northern Central America. Below, I conclude this chapter with reflections about what theoretical implications the construction and deployment of climate security discourse through the Biden Root Causes Strategy carries for climate securitization.

### *Reflections*

This chapter has examined the use of U.S. climate security discourse in Northern Central America, with a focus on the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy. It highlights how the Pentagon's threat multiplier framework, originally developed to frame climate change as an amplifier of traditional security threats, has been adapted to align climate action with migration deterrence objectives. The chapter argues that this fusion of climate security narratives and migration deterrence reflects the broader U.S. strategy of leveraging environmental concerns to pursue longstanding national security priorities. Central to this approach is the emphasis on resilience and adaptation—narratives rooted in fossil fuel industry discourse that prioritize managing the impacts of climate change over mitigating its causes.

My analysis aligns with and extends key debates in securitization theory, particularly as developed by the Copenhagen School and its critics. Traditional securitization theory, as formulated by Buzan et al., posits that security threats are socially constructed through speech acts, where political actors label an issue as an existential threat that demands extraordinary measures.<sup>415</sup> My analysis

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<sup>415</sup> Buzan, B., Wæver, O. and J. de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner.

demonstrates how U.S. policymakers have strategically employed climate security discourse not just as a rhetorical move but as a bureaucratic and policy-making mechanism that normalizes migration deterrence under the guise of resilience and adaptation. This aligns with scholarship that critiques securitization as more than just a performative act but also as an institutional process embedded in governance structures.<sup>416</sup> My research suggests that U.S. climate security discourse in Northern Central America represents a form of bureaucratic securitization, where adaptation and resilience policies are framed as essential tools for stabilizing vulnerable regions, justifying increased foreign assistance, and legitimizing migration control measures. This finding contributes to work that examines how securitization unfolds not just through public declarations but also through policy instruments and funding mechanisms.<sup>417</sup>

This chapter challenges the state-centric focus of securitization theory. The framing of climate adaptation as a national security issue in the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy exemplifies how securitization is embedded in transnational governance arrangements that extend beyond the traditional state apparatus. This aligns with Claudia Aradau's work, which argued that securitization often operates through governance practices that obscure the coercive dimensions of security policy under the guise of humanitarianism.<sup>418</sup> This chapter reinforces this angle by showing how U.S. climate adaptation funding, rather than serving purely developmental ends, is structured around preventing displacement and reinforcing territorial containment. Furthermore,

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<sup>416</sup> Balzacq, T. 2011. *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*. Routledge.

<sup>417</sup> McDonald, M. 2008. Securitization and the Construction of Security. *European Journal of International Relations* 14(4): 563–587.

<sup>418</sup> Aradau, C. 2004. Security and the Democratic Scene: Desecuritization and Emancipation. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7(4): 388–413.

the securitization of climate resilience in Northern Central America reflects an evolution of the threat multiplier framework, which scholars have critiqued for depoliticizing climate change while simultaneously legitimizing security interventions.<sup>419</sup> By demonstrating that the U.S. government employs climate security discourse as a flexible and politically palatable justification for migration deterrence, I extend critical debates on how security discourses enable the reconfiguration of foreign aid, border governance, and economic policy in ways that reinforce existing power asymmetries. This situates my research within a growing body of work that examines the intersections of climate governance, securitization, and migration control in global politics.

By tracing how these narratives have shaped U.S. engagement with Northern Central America, this chapter paves the way for Chapter 6, which explores the political dynamics created by this discourse. Specifically, Chapter 6 examines how the Biden administration's use of climate security language has created what I label 'safe spaces'—a mechanism through which officials avoid direct political accountability by embedding deterrence policies within climate adaptation initiatives—while generating tensions between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America. I move from the construction of climate security discourse to its political deployment in U.S. foreign policy. Chapter 6 also examines how climate security narratives provided the Biden administration with a politically neutral framework to expand migration control measures without overtly framing them as such. The Biden RCS represents an advanced iteration of this integration, using place-based climate adaptation investments to reinforce migration deterrence while masking these efforts under the guise of apolitical development.

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<sup>419</sup> Floyd, R. 2019. *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization*. Cambridge University Press.

The integration of climate security discourse into U.S. migration deterrence policies reflects a broader securitization of environmental governance. By prioritizing adaptation over emissions reduction and resilience over rights-based migration protections, U.S. policymakers have reinforced a deterrence-first approach under the banner of humanitarian concern. This securitized framing has significant long-term implications—not only for how climate adaptation is funded but also for how migration is governed in an era of intensifying environmental instability. If climate security discourse continues to help shape U.S. engagement with Northern Central America, future adaptation policies may serve as a tool for reinforcing border regimes rather than addressing the structural causes of displacement. The next chapter further examines how these securitized narratives shape U.S. political and diplomatic interactions with Mexico and Central American states, exploring the tensions and contradictions that emerge from this policy framework.

## **Chapter 6: Political Dynamics of Climate Security Discourse as an Apolitical ‘Safe Space’ Between the United States and Northern Central America**

*Climate change, national security, and the nexus with migration is right on the frontier of where we are as the interagency because we do a lot of climate adaptation and resilience work, but there's a discomfort with talking about it in relation to migration. I think that's in part because of negative learning on trying to talk about root causes in the congressional space, because there was some major blowback when our representatives went to the [Capitol] Hill to say we're doing this Root Causes Strategy, here's what it looks like, climate change is part of that, and were basically laughed out of the room for saying that any work on climate change could have any meaningful impact on migration. Then it was like, well, that hurt. So then are they going to say that we can't do climate change work if we say it's about migration?*

*There's a fear of adding the migration lens because it could politicize the climate adaptation and resilience work even more, but at the same time, our teams are talking about the need to spotlight that work because there is a relationship and in practice they do work in tandem.*

Author interview with U.S. official. September 18, 2023.

### *Overview*

I have argued that concern about climate change was an important part of the narrative that Biden officials used to build a case for investing in migration deterrence through the Root Causes Strategy. To build that argument, Chapter 5 examined how the RCS fused climate adaptation to migration deterrence. This chapter shifts to assess the political dynamics surrounding officials' strategic use of climate security rhetoric within the RCS. I argue that a key feature of this discourse was its ability to create 'safe spaces' for elites to promote politically sensitive migration deterrence policies. By safe spaces, I refer to language that allows officials to pursue policies aimed at reducing migration without seeming overly political. Focusing on climate change adaptation gave these officials a comfortable way to address migration issues. As a result, climate security discourse played an important role in allowing U.S. officials to advance migration deterrence goals while framing their policies as technical climate adaptation initiatives. By situating migration

within an apolitical climate framework, U.S. policymakers were able to better navigate domestic and international tensions, avoiding the political fallout that often accompanies direct discussions of migration control. This chapter unpacks how these safe spaces were structured, why they served as a strategic bureaucratic tool, and the contradictions they created in U.S. engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America.

To unpack the resulting political dynamics between these countries, I first discuss the basis for U.S. political interventions in foreign engagement, stemming from the statutory definition of fragility. I use the legal foundation of fragility to explore why climate security discourse is an avenue for elites to further political migration goals through apolitical climate interventions. I then consider how the Biden Root Causes Strategy served as a key vehicle to creating such safe spaces through removal of historical agency, conditionality and desirability of migrants, and the place-based approach for root causes climate adaptation investments in high outmigration areas. As a result, using climate security discourse to pursue migration deterrence goals played an important role in creating political tension between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America due to the conflict between the development rhetoric used and the desired deterrence outcomes.

This chapter delves into various components underpinning the political utility of climate security narratives as a safe space for advancing controversial migration policies. The first subsection discusses how U.S. officials framed development assistance and disaster response initiatives as purely humanitarian efforts to obscure their underlying political motives aimed at stopping migration. The second subsection examines the foundational role of private sector investments in these initiatives, highlighting how they benefit from and reinforce climate security narratives. The

third subsection further links the actors involved to their policy priorities by exploring the avoidance of comprehensive immigration reform in the United States. Finally, I explore the administrative components of these political dynamics, which I argue were central to the work of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the State Department's Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs)—which provided limited asylum and refugee screening without the need to travel to the U.S. border—during the Biden administration. Taken together, I demonstrate how climate security discourse provided political cover for maintaining the migration-deterrent status quo in Northern Central America. These subsections underscore the central argument that climate security discourse served as a strategic tool for advancing migration deterrence and economic agendas under the guise of neutrality. This chapter highlights the performative nature of climate security, showing how it was used to navigate political tensions and maintain existing power structures.

Scholars such as Peter Andreas, David Keen, and Ruben Andersson have focused on how the U.S. government uses political 'border games' to justify national security determinations for migration and security in the Western Hemisphere. Here, I explore an inverse perspective: how government officials and private sector elites justify political actions through apolitical and depoliticized narratives that incorporate climate change into national security policies. My consideration of these justifications centers on constructed narratives of climate security through the safe spaces that policymakers and elites operate within. National security officials use these safe spaces to advance a diverse set of interests underneath the umbrella of root causes investment for migration.

I consider this question by extending the analysis of the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy. The RCS, aiming to deter U.S.-bound migration, reflects a political-economic safe space

that, while requiring technical, apolitical framing to advance U.S. priorities, perpetuates securitized and politicized responses to perceived national security dangers that climate change worsens as a threat multiplier. This safe space is a defining feature of climate security discourse, and its origins in U.S. foreign engagement spanning Latin America to the Middle East illustrate its longevity as a pillar of future national security doctrine across political administrations.

Officials carved out a safe space for climate security discourse through the Root Causes Strategy in a way that has created bureaucratic disaggregation within the U.S. government, influencing the execution of national security policies both in the United States and in Northern Central America. By disaggregation, I refer to the fact that the 'whole of government approach' to climate change championed by the Biden administration was far from homogenous. While the RCS was only one component of the administration's overall migration management strategy promoted through the Los Angeles Declaration for Migration and Protection—which also included law enforcement, humanitarian protection, lawful immigration pathways, and border management—it is one of the most highlighted aspects of the overall approach and the component that specifically links climate change to national security through the priority of migration deterrence. I also explore how the political functions of the Biden DHS and the SMOs underpinned much of this disaggregation.

Driving this disaggregation is the reality that civil servants and political appointees often carry different material interests for managing how climate change is framed in terms of its impact on U.S. national security, which complicates the design and implementation of related policies. My research showed that civil servants typically view climate-affected migration in Northern Central America as a complex development challenge needing patient and broad-based investment. Civil

servants focused on confronting the development and security realities in NCA in many ways considered the RCS as unfeasible and counterproductive to its stated goals. On the other hand, political appointees were largely focused on reducing the number of unauthorized arrivals at the U.S. southwest border. However, there is expected variation within these categories as well: defense and security officials, for example, applied more of a law enforcement perspective than some diplomats and development practitioners.

Critically, the Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran governments themselves were largely cut out of most meaningful components of the design and implementation of the RCS. While this exclusion in some cases resulted from legitimate concerns about corruption in parts of these governments, the practical effect was that willing partners were sidelined by broad generalizations. As a result, this bureaucratic disaggregation reduced the agency of key actors who still play important roles in migration outcomes, whether they are included in U.S. policy or not. In this way, the centrality of the safe space compounded the contradictions of climate security narratives, which respond to very real problems but often do so in rushed and detached ways. Through this perspective, and despite its apolitical framing, the RCS can be understood as a political agenda that ran counter to analysis from the officials tasked with its implementation. The contradictions of the RCS hampered its success and call its strategic efficacy into question relative to alternatives.

I provide an analysis of the decision making that reflects the priorities decision makers center while juggling multiple and often contradictory variables. This analysis helps map out what the safe space looks like in practice. I align the RCS, focusing on development assistance, with a parallel U.S. consideration for the insecurity that is viewed as both a cause and effect of the root causes of

migration: fragility and conflict stabilization. Taken together underneath the banner of U.S. foreign assistance, these postures emphasize two central tenets of the 1990s shift in the United States to criminalization rhetoric around immigration, explored in Chapter 5: removal of U.S. historical agency and a focus on the relative conditionality and desirability of migrants. The result was an effective focus on climate adaptation over mitigation, which in many ways perpetuates the very causes of migration that the RCS was tasked with 'solving.'

The apolitical focus on adaptation often plays out through the logic of place-based investment in high out-migration areas, with the goal of migration deterrence. The place-based focus brings uncomfortable political legacies between urban and rural arenas to the fore that are in practice nearly impossible to navigate from an apolitical standpoint. These contradictions around place-based migration deterrence were compounded by an interplay between perceptions of migration as failure in the national security space. Namely, when transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) like gangs and drug cartels have reduced control over territory, and migration corridors become more feasible, national security officials tend to view the resulting migration as a failure of development assistance and climate policy. That is a highly political choice in practice, privileging a vision of national security where migration does not occur over reducing TCO activity. Which is the negative outcome in that situation: organized crime or migration?

Given this complex and often irreconcilable set of considerations, policymakers leveraged the safe space afforded by climate security narratives to navigate decision making while keeping their own positionality and influence as intact as possible. Unfortunately, the safe space of apolitical focuses is only strengthened by these deferrals of political agency, leaving many of the political

determinants of underdevelopment in NCA intact. Predictably, these dynamics then perpetuate and extend that very underdevelopment. As a result, the safe space illustrates how technical, apolitical framings of climate change as a national security threat create an uncomfortable tension with the political realities of insecurity and fragility. These uncomfortable tensions exacerbated complex political dynamics between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America stemming from the use of climate security narratives to help promote migration deterrence policies.

### Political Determinants of Climate Security Discourse

*Northern Triangle governments appear to be supporting climate initiatives. I think some, more than others, even see it as a positive, that it can be a helpful frame. I think the struggle is in part that it is so complicated. There's a whole system that's in place and when you push in some areas, you're running up against interests that are, in some cases, pretty strong and entrenched. If you're going to clean up some areas where people have long standing interests that include a lot of corruption, a lot of money, you're getting in the way of someone's bottom line or someone's power base. They're going to make your life very difficult. That's a very real challenge and from the high level, if you're looking at it as the national government and national level leaders, who really have the desire for change, to the very local level when it's mayors or community leaders who are faced with this every day—in Honduras, for example, you see this a lot, environmental defenders who are constantly on the front lines, and pay with their lives—it's just a very complicated network. While the desire might be there, none of us are there in terms of how best to support and protect.*

Author interview with U.S. official. June 27, 2023.

I begin this section with a discussion of how the basis for U.S. political interventions stems from the statutory definition of fragility. The discussion of fragility provides the foundation for understanding why climate security discourse is one way for elites to further political migration goals through apolitical climate interventions. Later in the chapter, I tie these pieces together by exploring how the Biden Root Causes Strategy served as a vehicle for political interventions through the safe space, and how DHS and the SMOs represent much of this logic. The discussion of fragility underpins key components of the safe space: removal of historical agency,

conditionality and desirability of migrants, and the place-based approach for root causes climate adaptation investments in high outmigration areas.

Research on how the United States incorporates climate change into its national security determinations has focused on the role of political drivers and considerations. As discussed, the work of Peter Andreas illuminated how elite officials have perceived climate change's impact on U.S. national security as a contributor for U.S.-bound migration. Andreas argued that climate change contributes to migration being a longstanding driver of the political machinations, or 'border games,' that the U.S. has played with its southern neighbors, Mexico in particular.<sup>420</sup> Andreas drew a contrast between the root causes focus on development and the militarized, border security emphases that have dominated U.S. regional engagement and its immigration policies since the end of the Cold War and the implementation of NAFTA. As detailed in Chapter 2, for many scholars of migration politics between the United States and its southern neighbors, the root causes approach to migration, linking climate change and other drivers to the U.S. national security concern of irregular migration, prioritizes technical development interventions over the political border games that have dominated foreign relations.

However, development interventions, especially those explicitly imbued with the language of national security, are never fully technical or apolitical in nature. James Ferguson's *Anti-Politics Machine*, a seminal critique of the development industry (using the World Bank as its primary example), provides a useful point of departure from which to view the aims, shortcomings, and

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<sup>420</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

potential impacts of the RCS. Ferguson argued that 'development institutions' frame 'development' in apolitical ways that lead to technical problems, largely resulting from geography, which require corresponding technical solutions that only these institutions can provide.<sup>421</sup> Ferguson argued the conceptual apparatus of 'development' is a construct that is framed in apolitical ways and offers solutions to common technical problems which can only be solved by the development institutions themselves. The apparatus attributes underdevelopment to geography and technology, instead of politics, history, and sociology, and creates a savior complex where these institutions are the only actors with the ability to bring about an assumed set of desired outcomes.

Technical development interventions can never be fully divorced from their political origins. A significant body of work in political science and the political economy of development has recognized the central role of politics in development, anchored in work such as Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's *Why Nations Fail*,<sup>422</sup> as well as the good governance agenda advocating for not losing sight of progress in pursuit of abstract perfection.<sup>423</sup> However, Ferguson's critique still holds, because much politics-related development policy still frames political dynamics themselves as technical issues that again require specialized intervention. The actors involved are a key consideration within this debate. The U.S. government and the World Bank, for example, have different mandates that shape their interventions in the development realm, even if often

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<sup>421</sup> Ferguson, J. 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>422</sup> Acemoglu, D., and J.A. Robinson. 2012. *Why nations fail: the origins of power, prosperity and poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers.

<sup>423</sup> Grindle, M. 2007. Good Enough Governance Revisited. *Development Policy Review* 25(5): 553-574.

accomplished in concert with each other. How development is pursued, by whom, and for whom, is always predicated on the actors involved and the political goals that animate their actions.

The political nature of migration-deterrent, root causes development policies has been understudied relative to their policy vogue within national security frameworks. Migration studies and border criminology literature has centered the artificial constructions of immigration legality and enforcement,<sup>424</sup> the subjective treatments of globalized migration realities,<sup>425</sup> and the political origins of the aforementioned border games. Within these narratives, however, root causes approaches have been scrutinized for their political outcomes more than their design and execution. David Keen and Ruben Andersson, for example, usefully highlighted what they called the proliferation of 'wreckonomics': how national security paradigms wired with counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and irregular migration focuses have resulted in preferential outcomes for the vested interests that advocate for their maintenance much more than the actual problems they claim to be solving.<sup>426</sup> Keen and Andersson argued that as a result, wreckonomics push poor communities and migrants into 'geographical buffer zones' of liminality.<sup>427</sup> Keen and Andersson's work, while important in highlighting the importance of political constructions for understanding the often counterintuitive outcomes of national security paradigms, is bound to the interventions that are explicitly stated as being of a political nature. On a parallel line, Julia Irwin argued that

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<sup>424</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>425</sup> De Haas, H. 2023. *How Migration Really Works*. Penguin: New York.

<sup>426</sup> Keen, D. and R. Andersson. 2018. Double games: Success, failure and the relocation of risk in fighting terror, drugs and migration. *Political Geography* 67: 100-110.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

U.S. foreign assistance supporting disaster response has always been a core political consideration used to advance U.S. interests abroad through 'catastrophic diplomacy.'<sup>428</sup> However, Irwin's analysis focused on short-term disaster response rather than development assistance, although she rightly noted their often blurred relationship.<sup>429</sup> The Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy presents the opportunity to consider how national security paradigms treat climate action as apolitical development assistance more than a political intervention. This critical analysis unpacks why the migration deterrence focus of the RCS illuminates how climate security discourse was applied in practice. As a result, we can better understand how national security officials used fragility as one approach to justify political interventions focused on migration deterrence and pursue those interventions through the safe space of apolitical climate language.

#### Root Causes as a Safe Space

*DoD, if anything in the last 20 years, has learned a lot of tough lessons about trying to militarize a response to a development problem or a diplomatic problem. You read things from pretty much most of the DoD leadership, all these retired generals, and all they talk about is the State Department and USAID, because they've realized that they want to solve these challenges with diplomacy and development resources. We only want to bring the military in when that is the last and only option, and you need to exercise force. I think the DoD is prepared to exercise the threat and the projection of force. The thing is, though, you want to exercise the projection of force against Iran, against North Korea; you don't really want to be in the business of exercising forward-deploying force against a bunch of villagers in somewhere like Niger or El Salvador. I don't think the DoD wants to be in that business.*

Author interview with U.S. official. April 7, 2023.

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<sup>428</sup> Irwin, J. 2023. *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

The Biden Root Causes Strategy and its public-private partnership implementing agents, the Partnership for Central America and Central America Forward, tied climate change to the root causes of migration from Mexico and Northern Central America through the threat multiplier-driven climate security narrative. This narrative created a bureaucratic safe space within the U.S. government in three main ways: removing the appearance of historical agency, selective conditionality and desirability of migrants, and a focus on adaptation over mitigation through a place-based migration deterrence emphasis.

By removing the pretense of historical agency, the Biden Root Causes Strategy recycled central components of the 1990s shift in the U.S. to a dual-lens rhetoric around immigration, where trade and financial capital were liberalized through NAFTA while immigration was criminalized.<sup>430</sup> The RCS made surface-level attempts to engage with its own institutional legacy in perpetuating the structural conditions contributing to the underdevelopment and insecurity in Mexico and Northern Central America that serve as mobility push factors:

For decades, our nation has engaged in Central America. Often well intentioned, the engagement has often not been consistent. [...] Persistent instability and insecurity in Central America have gone on for too long. [...] U.S. foreign assistance cannot substitute for political will in these countries.<sup>431</sup>

Without being critical to the point of abstract determinism, framing U.S. historical engagement in Central America as "often well intentioned" refers to intentions first and foremost as they relate to

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<sup>430</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>431</sup> The White House. 2021. *U.S. Strategy For Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Northern Central America*. Pages 1, 4, 5. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf>.

shifting U.S. interests rather than the outcomes of U.S. interventions, in a removed fashion. This is a highly political statement driving a political document. The narrative leverages passive voice to diminish U.S. agency and political exposure for the outcomes it deemed as undesirable. In this telling, U.S. interests are paramount to the discussion, rather than the U.S. (and other governments') agency steering them.

In this way, the RCS represents an evolved acknowledgement that the United States cannot violate the political and territorial sovereignty of foreign states. This acknowledgement reflects the painful lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan applied to the Central American and Caribbean theater, historically full of U.S. interventions to such a degree that amounts to it being, in Rubrick Biegon's words, an 'American lake.'<sup>432</sup> This is an uncomfortable posture, referencing political goals while simultaneously defining the limits of political agency that exist to pursue them.

Following the U.S. institutional memory created through the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan, the RCS reflects one component of how the removal of historical agency anchoring the safe space helps navigate this discomfort: insecurity in foreign countries is the result of weak state capacity in those countries. The U.S. approach to fragility provides a useful elaboration of this logic through the first U.S. Global Fragility Strategy (GFS). The GFS is a State Department report to Congress mandated every ten years by the U.S. Global Fragility Act of 2019. The GFS defined fragility and conflict stabilization as preventing extremism, violent conflict, and potential for catastrophic outcomes along the lines of genocide, famine, civil war, and other atrocities. The GFS requires

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<sup>432</sup> Biegon, R. 2017. *US power in Latin America: Renewing hegemony* (Routledge studies in US foreign policy). London, [England]; New York, New York.

that fragility and stabilization efforts be focused on a narrow band of priority countries. In both the selection of these priority countries as well as subsequent engagement, the GFS centers political considerations in its attempt to refocus U.S. foreign policy away from the nation-building debacles of Iraq and Afghanistan to one of narrowly targeted national security interests:

...the United States will pursue a different approach from previous efforts. Rather than externally driven nation-building, the United States will support locally driven political solutions that align with United States' national security interests. Rather than fragmented and broad-based efforts, the United States will target the political factors that drive fragility.<sup>433</sup>

The discursive sleight of hand that frames underdevelopment on its own as the cause of fragility and national security concerns is a well-intentioned overcorrection from the neoconservative overreach that has defined U.S. foreign policy since 9/11. Instead of imposing its interests onto other countries, the U.S. has committed itself to a more selective targeting of its interests it can support through "locally driven political solutions" that are ostensibly led by actors in those localities. National security officials frame this selectivity as an overdue evolution in U.S. interests that focus on local solutions when and where they align with U.S. national security, rather than imposing the solutions themselves. As a result, the statutory basis for an intervention on the grounds of fragility is set as a higher bar than other development assistance. In theory, the U.S. can use these varying legal classifications to determine which political solutions it supports, and how these local political solutions align with a more narrow, selective application of U.S. interests.

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<sup>433</sup> United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. 2020. Page 3. <https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/>.

The applied threshold for engagement on grounds of fragility and conflict stabilization is so high that Haiti is the only country in the Western Hemisphere identified in the initial Global Fragility Strategy. This threshold for what qualifies as fragility, and requires stabilization support, is telling: several other countries in the region struggle with the high levels of violence and climate change vulnerability that the Global Fragility Act identifies as key determinants of fragility. Even though Haiti is the only GFS country in the region, U.S. officials still use the legal parameters of fragility to structure political priorities. As a former U.S. official involved with writing the Global Fragility Strategy stated, the threshold for stabilization is, in essence, politics:

The difference between humanitarian assistance, development assistance, and stabilization, at least as defined by the U.S. government, is: humanitarian assistance can be provided anywhere, and there is no restriction, at least in theory, or at least per budgeting cycle, meaning we are going to stop starvation in country X because that is just the right thing to do, reducing suffering, and we will try to fix that on a longer time frame. Whereas we could allocate similar types of assistance in a stabilization context, but there is a political goal, meaning we are providing this assistance—we might be constructing a wall or a school, doing rubble removal—but there is an overtly political aim, meaning to increase the perceived legitimacy of the government, local or national.

We intentionally tried to stay away from humanitarian and development assistance in that we wanted those to be bracketed as their own nonpolitical entities and then focus more on stabilization assistance, which does have that political determinant.<sup>434</sup>

How, then, does the United States engage in contexts it considers important for U.S. national security interests but do not rise to the level of 'political' intervention in contexts of conflict stabilization or fragility? In Northern Central America, the alignment of U.S. interests with local

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<sup>434</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. August 22, 2023.

realities was portrayed in the RCS through a focus on the conditionality and desirability of migrants (emphasis mine):

The United States believes that all individuals should be able to find safety and achieve a stable and dignified life within their own countries, while ensuring that asylum and other legal migration pathways remain available to **those who need them**.<sup>435</sup>

In this way, the safe space for the RCS existed within how politically feasible officials viewed the perceived impacts of migration for the U.S. itself, rather than the countries it was engaging through its foreign policy. Within this safe space, climate change, economic development, corruption, and violence were considered determinants of regional security and economic stability through the threat multiplier narrative. Insecurity and its underpinning socio-political institutions were labeled as the root causes that needed to be addressed by U.S. policy, in selective partnership with partner governments and the private sector.

While the root causes of migration often mirror the root causes of instability, this alignment can be understood to be predominately a bureaucratic and administrative exercise. For national security officials, the overriding factor governing the integration of climate change into policymaking was the expected impact on U.S. domestic politics. Elite concerns about domestic politics superseded facilitating action to address the root causes of those perceived national security threats, so long as they were situated outside of U.S. agency. This selective application of political engagement means that meaningful political reform requiring deep systemic overhaul will present greater

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<sup>435</sup> The White House. 2021. Collaborative Migration Management Strategy. Page 5. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Collaborative-Migration-Management-Strategy.pdf?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Collaborative-Migration-Management-Strategy.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery).

perceived risk than rhetorical narratives. This emphasis on performative rhetoric over tangible change exists precisely because reform at scale could perpetuate the perceived insecurity and fragility leading to the very outcomes the U.S. seeks to prevent.

As a result, national security officials treated the perceived threat of U.S.-bound migration, especially as it related to climate factors addressed through the RCS, as a matter of selectively addressing the outcomes of insecurity rather than its political drivers. As long as climate change is not perceived as carrying the potential for catastrophic atrocities per the GFS, it is treated as an apolitical phenomenon. It is certainly clear that civil society advocacy influenced the Biden administration's approach, at least rhetorically, to include strong focuses on climate change, gender empowerment, and a generally progressive, comprehensive assessment of the root causes of migration and immigration enforcement. In practice, however, the U.S. largely treated the root causes of migration as conditions that simply exist without much genuine reflection as to its own corrosive role in perpetuating instability. This narrow engagement also extended to the political interventions needed to truly reorient long-run development trajectories. This truncated national security threat assessment is particularly stark in key policy areas featuring a blended exportation of what Elana Zilberg called the melding of zero tolerance military, law enforcement, and immigration scaffolding through 'crimmigration' counterterrorism governance,<sup>436</sup> as well as overall selective strengthening of state capacity along political-economic lines. As the RCS stated:

Weak rule of law is often cited as the top factor limiting new investment in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. [...] The United States will work regionally, bilaterally, and, if we must, unilaterally to root out corruption and enhance transparency across the region.

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<sup>436</sup> Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. London: Duke University Press.

[...] The United States will work with governments to strengthen legal frameworks and the enforcement of labor laws, promote decent work, and support workers in exercising their freedom of association and collective bargaining rights.<sup>437</sup>

Unfortunately, the disconnect between the rhetoric of the RCS and its implementation, outlined in Chapter 5, meant that U.S. officials often had to pursue these political goals through the safe space of climate security discourse. In this way, the safe space illustrates that U.S. talking points reflect systemic thinking that has persisted for decades. This systemic thinking skirts around addressing, among other considerations, a fundamental lack of trust that exists for many decision makers in NCA countries as they understand the uncomfortable tension of U.S. political goals, the often-apolitical solutions offered in response, and the agency that exists to pursue them. Policy reliability cannot be underscored enough: an incomplete accounting of how U.S. policies have served as key determinants of these phenomena that the United States now label as national security threats inhibits the implementation and long-term efficacy of any related goals. As a former Guatemalan government official stated:

Everyone knows that American money is conditional on politics in Congress and doesn't mean that anything will change. It is the same people making decisions and rotating between agencies that are responding to the same American multinationals as always. They just want to make sure that capital is flowing and that they can win elections back home without too many migrant caravans in the news around November.<sup>438</sup>

The mutual lack of trust between regional governments strongly influences the safe space for elites. First, it increases responsibility for the private sector to deliver policy results by providing jobs

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<sup>437</sup> The White House. 2021. U.S. Strategy For Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Northern Central America. Pages 8, 11, 13. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>438</sup> Author interview with former Guatemalan government official. December 11, 2022.

through the RCS. This deferral of agency reflects a core U.S. anxiety: that economic issues are a safe space to operate in because tackling more thorny political questions around bilateral government relations, corruption, and the rule of law are immensely complex and difficult problems. As a U.S. official commented (emphasis mine):

It's a challenging environment right now. I will say in the rule of law, democracy, good governance sense, **I think the issues of climate change and private sector investment are potentially less controversial, weirdly enough.** Like agriculture, for example, these are areas that we may have been better owners in the room. We've been clear in our policy that we will not turn a blind eye to corruption, rule of law, all those things that we care about. We do want to help the people in the region, so if we can't work directly with the Central American governments because they're not good partners, how do we work directly with international organizations, NGOs, private sector, and civil society so we can still help the people. We don't want to hold back on doing good things that will help them because their governments are not helping them.<sup>439</sup>

This safe space is evident in bureaucratic assessments of the Partnership for Central America, Central America Forward, and the Root Causes Strategy outside of public statements. Framing climate and economic development investments as technical inputs to development rather than political engagement allows for action along the lines of U.S. national security without wading too far into political intervention in sovereign states. The disconnect in the RCS between the political origins of U.S. national security, the stated political means of engagement through its stabilization foreign assistance, and the apolitical framing of the tools being deployed created an uncomfortable tension. As a former U.S. official noted:

We're in an impossible place right now. I mean, we've got this effort to promote private sector investment. But even then, we're reluctant to work with local businesses and entrepreneurs, because we're concerned about their corruption. It's all about what

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<sup>439</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. January 22, 2023.

MasterCard or Chobani yogurt can do in Central America, and it's just not going to be much, quite frankly. You can talk all you want about banking the unbanked, and expanding credit, and using cell phones and the Internet to connect people to economies, and those things are all good. But they're not going to fundamentally change how people understand their life opportunities. And because of the transnational nature of our region, people are comfortable with the idea of going to the United States.<sup>440</sup>

National security officials used the climate security narrative as part of a safe space that aligned political maneuverability and private sector risk tolerance. In this safe space, there was enough room for elites to publicly project success while obscuring the underlying dissonance of the rhetorical games being played over the issues at stake. As a result, there was a gap between public sector deferral and private sector hesitance that left a complex issue without a leader. The effect was that national security officials shifted implementation of U.S. policy and national security interests to the Northern Central American and Mexican governments. As a Salvadoran civil society leader testified to Congress in 2021:

In this context, migration is just the peak of the iceberg of a long list of structural deficits in countries like mine. Good service delivery is a simple aspiration if citizens are not even able to understand where the money goes. Moreover, if citizens are not able to hold their government accountable, probably there won't be any public service at all, and their taxes will end up in corrupt hands. When we think about the roots of any issue, such as migration, we are acknowledging that the problem is systemic in the sense that there is more than one solution and that these are long term.<sup>441</sup>

The United States certainly understands this sense of hopelessness and the need for deep systemic reform but is politically unwilling (and unable) to substantially engage on issues of domestic

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Testimony of Claudia Araujo. 2021. "Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Northern Central America." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 11 June 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/LC66878/text>.

politics in Northern Central America. As a result, U.S. policies defending the U.S.'s own interests supersede the local, political perspectives they are alleging to empower. A former U.S. official outlined this posture with respect to the Root Causes Strategy:

Most of the migration has been indigenous peoples who were leaving communities where they could no longer divide up the land. It had been divided up so many times, and this emerging group of younger people knew that. There was no hope for them. They stayed and so they really felt they're being driven off. And that they had to go north. As a result, your average Guatemalan government official wasn't particularly keen about pumping the kinds of resources necessary into the Western Highlands because they weren't confident about how they were going to be used in indigenous communities, or what the impact was going to be politically. They wanted to focus their economic development elsewhere in Guatemala and draw people out of the Western Highlands to work wherever on the coast or in the South. We just didn't think that was going to work, and we had real disagreements with them. And those disagreements are going to continue.<sup>442</sup>

As a result, the place-based framing of the Root Causes Strategy was another component of the safe space for how U.S. officials could manage these core anxieties. The simplistic logic was clear: provide jobs to the communities from which most U.S.-bound migrants leave, and migration would decrease. This approach served the twin U.S. interests of migration deterrence and promoting U.S. commercial opportunities abroad. Internally, it was perceived to facilitate bureaucratic streamlining:

The place-based framing makes for an easier overlay of U.S. foreign assistance and then national assistance in Northern Central America because these countries themselves have identified at risk communities or regions of the country that tend to pull more people towards the United States.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. January 22, 2023.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

Underneath the political framing of those targeted interventions, however, the realities of history, perceived lack of agency, and unwillingness to intervene in Northern Central American politics set in. Officials perceived intervention in domestic politics to be outside the boundary of the safe space. Compounding these challenges, any intervention needed to be benchmarked against the U.S. political interests at play that often envelop what the evidence is around mobility realities. As a U.S. official stated:

Many U.S. civil servants in Central America are really thoughtful about the links between migration, climate, and security, and there's a lot of language about the importance of a systems lens. At the same time, almost every conversation I'm in, in the interagency and with senior leadership, there's always this urge to pit the drivers against each other like it's some kind of competition between, like, are migrants really going for economic reasons, climate reasons, are there really people leaving for security reasons, which is the reason?

Most of all, you must be mindful and look at the full story to know what's happening underneath. One common example would be someone whose whole farming system failed because of ongoing drought and then went to a city and tried to open a small business. But she was in an area that was gang-controlled, and so they were extorted. And then from there, she goes, okay, I need to feed my family, so I need to leave. And then CBP [U.S. Customs and Border Protection] interviews her when she gets to the Southwest border, why did she go? At that point, and in a credible fear interview, she went for economic reasons, right? But her whole story has climate change, violence, and corruption, because say she tries to report to the police department, but they're all in cahoots with the gangs.<sup>444</sup>

Through the RCS, the U.S. worked to 'solve' the immensely complex root causes of climate-affected mobility by hoping to determine the technical interventions that could accomplish its political goals. This posture confused the twin goals of migration deterrence and development assistance that were purported to balance each other. The U.S. official continued:

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<sup>444</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. July 21, 2023.

Another gap and tension or dissonance would be that the overarching goal statements in the region for USAID are to have a Honduran to see their future in Honduras on the one hand, but then we're also doing temporary labor pathways work, bringing people abroad, and we're supportive of regular versus irregular migration. I don't think the conflicting incentives are often thought out and usually migration is captured in one bucket. It's a well-known fact in the migration literature that as one gets more educated, one is more likely to want to migrate. Well, USAID has education programming that tries to do exactly that, educate people. So how do you justify doing that work from a migration deterrence lens? We've also started to see that with more education, people had less interest in migrating without a visa, but more interest in migrating in general. It's virtually impossible to pursue these goals in tandem with each other.<sup>445</sup>

The twin goals of the RCS, migration deterrence and development assistance, are in many ways wholly contradictory, at least in the short- and medium-terms. As people gain access to greater education and disposable income, they are more likely to seek greater economic opportunity in the United States, especially if they wish to reunite with family already in the U.S.<sup>446</sup> These hopes are often cyclical; for example, seasonal work permits are highly desired. In addition, the nature of not just U.S.-bound migration but internal mobility in Northern Central America means that the place-based migration deterrence approach runs into problems when rural areas are privileged for investment by the United States. In reality, urban areas are often the natural next step for residents of Northern Central American countries that respond to both push and pull mobility factors and view temporary relocation as a pragmatic climate adaptation response.<sup>447</sup> In addition, the

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Boustan, L. and R. Abramitzky. 2022. *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>447</sup> Huckstep, S. and M. Clemens. 2023. "Climate Change and Migration: An Omnibus Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners." CGD Policy Paper 292. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

exponential growth of nationals from South American countries as well as regions such as West Africa and South Asia traveling north through the Darién Gap has augmented these patterns.<sup>448</sup>

As a result of these dynamics, civil servants often were unsure which competing incentives to privilege at any one given time. As a U.S. official stated:

I would always push back on the urge to say why people are going has to fit in a discrete bucket and that in fact, the biggest gap for USAID that stands out, that's still a growing curve, is that USAID has a mandate to support the poorest of the poor and people who are in really indigent, vulnerable situations. Those people are not necessarily the people who have the means to migrate, so I would say there's some dissonance there in a policy like the Root Causes Strategy where the first pillar focuses on economic opportunities and supporting anti-poverty work. That anti-poverty work, if successful, in the short term would lead to increased migration. I think there's at least a gap there in our rhetoric.<sup>449</sup>

A final compounding element of this discontinuity is that when climate change becomes part of this narrative, it is recycled according to how officials perceive migration as a national security threat. This determination was then benchmarked against the resulting political impacts for the United States. As a former U.S. official stated:

I don't think most Americans have factored climate change into migration. I think they still see it as largely driven by criminal activity, smugglers, and a desire to make a better life. I think most Americans, first of all, don't like the disorder, they don't like this idea of unlawfulness, they don't like people making a conscious decision to break our laws to come to the U.S. and to reap the benefits of our economy. That just sits poorly with people, even though they understand the desperation behind it. And they hate the idea that these people are using criminal organizations to do it.<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> International Crisis Group. Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap. Latin America Report Number 102: November 3, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/102-darien-gap%20%281%29.pdf>.

<sup>449</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. January 28, 2023.

<sup>450</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. January 22, 2023.

U.S. officials navigate complex factors in managing the interplay between domestic politics, the immigration policies they make possible, and the foreign engagement that is both an additional cause and outcome of those policies. This chapter has outlined important foundations of these political priorities in the Global Fragility Strategy. These foundations for political interventions within foreign engagement played a significant role in shaping how U.S. officials used the removal of historical agency, conditionality of migrants, and the place-based approach for root causes investments, which centered climate adaptation, in migration origin areas. The remainder of this chapter delves into bureaucratic vehicles—DHS and the SMOs—that were important venues for U.S. officials to package their political priorities within technical climate adaptation investments underneath the umbrella of the Root Causes Strategy. While climate security discourse did not comprise the entirety of the broader migration deterrence push, the analysis of DHS and the SMOs under the Biden administration highlights where the political dynamics created by the central intersection explored in this thesis—climate security and migration deterrence—exacerbated tensions between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America.

*Bureaucratic Disaggregation: DHS and the SMOs*

Within these contradictory policies and political dynamics, the U.S. government is certainly not a homogenous monolith. Different agencies, and different classes of staff, whether appointees or civil servants, bring different perspectives to the debates that shape these climate security narratives. Large U.S. federal agencies such as USAID, the DoD, and DHS are often referred to as ‘interagencies’ of their own—and there is certainly a significant degree of variance within them. Taken together, these perceptions of how priorities vary shape resulting policy architectures, like

the Root Causes Strategy. The heterogeneity of the U.S. government further delineates the disconnect between political goals being stated and the various maneuvers through which those goals are pursued. For example, a former U.S. official stated:

Certainly, whether it's strictly a development focus or security, there has been a gap in looking at the interagency process. No matter the administration, Republican or Democrat, climate change will surface. If there is a Republican in office it will come from civil servants who say, "look, this is the evidence and the data. If this is the outcome, then you really need to be looking at climate change." Democratic administrations will have political appointees offering that up, and then the data being provided by civil servants reinforces those points. Whether or not climate makes it into final policy documents and associated funding and focus, you see that more in the Democratic administrations. We see this now: the Biden administration rightfully has a large focus on climate change. But as seen during legislative debates, you have Members of Congress on the right trying to slice down funding focused on climate. The domestic political sphere and arena really is a key factor.

The data is what it is, the evidence is there, climate change keeps happening regardless. Whether or not it makes it into decision making and funding is driven by politics, campaign politics, to some extent bureaucratic politics, but really campaign politics.<sup>451</sup>

Two U.S. apparatuses, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department's Safe Mobility Offices, provide utility for understanding the political discomfort and resulting safe space that the RCS provided during the Biden administration. DHS, created as the centerpiece of the post-September 11th counterterrorism bureaucracy, is the lead U.S. agency for most immigration processing and border management. DHS is understood within the federal bureaucracy to be a binary agency exceptionally privy to the whims of electoral politics. The perception by many that DHS is political persists even while its actual function, like every U.S. agency, is governed by legal statute and funds (or lack thereof) appropriated by Congress. On one hand, DHS is a law

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<sup>451</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. July 21, 2023.

enforcement body implementing national security policy legislated by Congress. As the government 'face' of the perpetual border security debate in the public sphere, however, DHS is leveraged in service of prevailing political goals that in effect create a double standard, turning it into both a political agency as well as an apolitical law enforcement entity. House Republicans' baseless impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in February 2024, which then-Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called "...the least legitimate, least substantive, and most politicized impeachment trial in the history of the United States,"<sup>452</sup> powerfully illustrates this reality. In practice, DHS' severe funding mismatch of immigration adjudication compared to border security resources means that yearslong backlogs for a wide range of immigration pathways frustrate any short-term immigration political efforts in any direction.<sup>453</sup> Elites use the apolitical realities of DHS both to hamstring and activate its political functions.

In parallel, and at a much smaller scale compared to the 240,000+ employee DHS, the Biden State Department introduced the Safe Mobility Offices initiative (*Movilidad Segura* in Spanish) in 2023. The SMOs represented an effort to facilitate applications for a limited number of immigration pathways before migrants reached the U.S. border. The SMOs, created in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador, had the stated goals of deterring irregular migration towards the United States and simultaneously increasing humanitarian protection of vulnerable groups.<sup>454</sup> The idea

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<sup>452</sup> Choi, M. 2024. Texas Republicans rue Democrats for dismissing Mayorkas impeachment without trial. *The Texas Tribune*. April 17, 2024. <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/04/17/mayorkas-impeachment-texas-republicans-cruz-cornyn/>.

<sup>453</sup> Macías-Rojas, P. 2018. Immigration and the War on Crime: Law and Order Politics and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(1): 1-25.

<sup>454</sup> U.S. State Department. 2024. Safe Mobility Initiative: Helping Those in Need and Reducing Irregular Migration in the Americas. *Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration*. <https://www.state.gov/safe-mobility-initiative/>.

was simple: enable vulnerable people to apply for legal pathways to the United States, Canada, and Spain without needing to make the harrowing trip north to do so at the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>455</sup> The SMOs were targeted at supporting those potentially eligible for refugee status but expanded to include those crossing the dangerous Darién Gap; Ukrainian, Afghan, Ethiopian, West African, and other migrants from all over the world; and persons fleeing volatile security situations in Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, and the NCA countries.<sup>456</sup> The SMOs can largely be seen as a response to the politics of border games and their resulting impacts in worsening the extent to which transnational criminal organizations prey on vulnerable migrants. While the particulars of each SMO are different—Colombian nationals were not allowed to apply for U.S. pathways through the Colombia SMO, as it was reserved for Venezuelans and Haitians, for example—a general worry about the scheme was that SMOs will serve as a pull factor for marginalized groups to the SMO host country, further straining already sparse humanitarian resources and exacerbating concerns about human trafficking and TCO presence. On the other hand, over 30,000 refugee applications were granted through the SMOs through early 2024, a significant figure relative to previous years under the first Trump and Biden administrations.<sup>457 458</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> International Refugee Assistance Project. 2024. What We Know about the Biden Administration’s Safe Mobility Initiative. January 18, 2024. <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/safe-mobility-offices-smos-101-what-we-know-about-the-biden-administrations-smo-initiative>.

<sup>456</sup> Villarreal, A. 2023. Explainer: What Are Safe Mobility Offices? *National Immigration Forum*. August 2, 2023. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-what-are-safe-mobility-offices/>.

<sup>457</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. February 20, 2024.

<sup>458</sup> Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Available at [www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/](http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/).

DHS and the SMOs represent much of the challenging incentive structure behind how climate security discourse influenced the Root Causes Strategy. The U.S. guaranteed that varying pockets of its bureaucracy will compete to tie selective political engagement to national security concerns. Beyond high-level statements about democratic values, the reality of these issues' complexity results in a collision of internal positioning (or 'equities,' in USG parlance), within the federal government. These tensions confuse the overall U.S. posture in practice.

In particular, the GFS focus on selective political engagement became lost in the messy way the main drivers of the RCS required different political trajectories and approaches. As a civil society leader explained:

Obviously, we're not assuming that anybody coming from Central America is doing so solely because of climate change. But insofar as climate change is a factor, the need to bring the issue into the political forum creates a lot more pressure there and urgency in part because it's in the news, it's in your face, and it's easier to comprehend. That drives some of the short-term attention for the longer-term issue. Then on the other hand, trying to figure out how to respond to some of these long-term issues with short-term pressures is always a challenge, and that sort of thinking, the in-your-face nature of migration is a little bit different than the more convoluted climate security space.

Part of it is that because climate change is a toxic subject and because immigration is a toxic subject, what that means is there isn't a cohesive strategy. So even for the SMOs, it's unclear who's in charge, what the strategy is, what the purposes are. As a nation, the United States could be doing better about all of this. Without the political will, you don't have the cohesive strategy, and without the cohesive strategy, you impact that political will. It's a chicken or egg type of thing. The solutions are there, we're just not applying them because of the politics.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> Author interview with civil society leader. July 21, 2023.

In practice, it is nearly impossible to separate the interplay between the political drivers of the perceived issues and perceived solutions themselves. This dynamic presented a significant challenge for the administrative exercise of aligning incentives for various pieces of the climate security narrative. In response, U.S. officials' impulse was to fall back on the selective application of national security interests as they directly related to domestic political considerations. This resulted in an elite focus on stopping migrants from coming to the U.S. border.

As a former U.S. official commented:

The Biden administration thought about it as the interior, the border, and everything else. There are certainly people that are thinking critically about this, but the main thrust of things is focused on those three boxes and then the goal of all of the policymaking now has been completely diverted by this desire to ensure that numbers of arrivals are reduced pretty much at any cost and to burden shift within the region. It's really zeroed on "how do we get numbers down at any cost" and not thinking about the long term.<sup>460</sup>

National security officials injected this simplified lens of the climate security narrative into both the creation and early implementation of the Root Causes Strategy. The resulting migration-deterrent framing provided bureaucratic cover if it was benchmarked against domestic political expectations. U.S. officials, especially career civil servants, carry a nuanced understanding about how underdevelopment in Northern Central America and parts of Mexico result from a long-run and complex set of phenomena that predate the climate crisis and involve structural U.S. political-economic involvement and, in many cases, manipulation. As a result, national security officials predominately used the RCS as a performative tool: the priority was ensuring that the U.S. domestic audience saw the administration responding to security breakdowns without a full

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<sup>460</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. August 11, 2023.

acknowledgement of the immensely complex and conflicting timescales and lack of strategic direction they represented. As a U.S. official stated:

Saying that we're never going to solve migration, or violence, is like saying we haven't solved human rights, so we shouldn't try to do it. These are big issues; they're really structural issues. You have entrenched elites in the region, you have structural inequality. They're complicated things. You do really need to devote the time and can see results. But also, we've done a lot of things in the region, and I think we do need to take some risks, try new things, and get creative. And there is some work here, like with place-based localization efforts, working more with local partners, working with diverse partners, and some more coalition building.

Some of this is happening, but there is such a concern that any indication of failure will be judged by immediately shutting down efforts and completely turning them off, as opposed to just course correction, that we often don't take those options. Whether we use the root causes focus on this or not, these issues will always be here. Whether we stop migration—say we build a perfect wall, and no one can scale it—we still care about gangs in our backyard. We still care about people starving.<sup>461</sup>

In addition, the political calculus around the perceived challenge of drawing direct causal links between climate change and national security threats was a powerful mediating force within the U.S. government. As a U.S. official noted:

We don't have enough science data to go up to Congress and say it's climate change in western Honduras that is causing security breakdowns. Somebody in Congress—it would be a political thing—would ask: what evidence do you have that it's global climate change? It could just be a drought, droughts happen. Or it could be coffee rust. How do we prove that coffee rust is caused by climate change? There has been coffee rust since there's been coffee—100 years, 200 years. And we know that when there's crop failure, people move.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. March 8, 2023.

<sup>462</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. April 7, 2023.

Root causes framing created a safe space for national security officials by providing broad, blurry, and indirect cover for talking about climate change and national security. In addition, the threat multiplier logic underpinning it created an institutional understanding across key USG offices that a safe space existed around the notion of climate security from a removed distance. It was acceptable to talk about climate change in relation to its potential national security impacts, but these impacts needed to happen before there could be direct action for both climate adaptation and mitigation. This bureaucratic delay means the threat multiplier logic becomes self-fulfilling: once a security breakdown has occurred, it is too late to act preventively. The threat multiplier label therefore ends up multiplying the threats it is supposed to guard against.

In addition, climate security discourse influenced broader interagency perceptions across the USG but could be difficult to reference outside of a narrow military context. At a programmatic level, threat multiplier logic can get buried behind the need for bureaucratic clarity. This is especially applicable for development and humanitarian aid, public spending which is highly scrutinized in Congress.<sup>463</sup>

As a U.S. official noted:

Climate and security is something that's well understood, but sometimes it's hard to distinctly draw the connection. I think it's more straightforward for drought, coastal areas, infrastructure...the actual first order effects of climate change. I think we do have pretty good coordination there.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. August 8, 2022.

<sup>464</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. May 21, 2023.

This is where the debate around the direct causality challenge between climate change and national security can be most clearly seen from an administrative standpoint. There needs to be a direct link, or at least the perception of a direct link, between climate change and resulting impacts. This political function of causality within climate security discourse drove a wedge between the enforcement side of the RCS—carried out by DHS and the SMOs—and the development agenda run by USAID and other State Department bureaus. The U.S. official continued (emphases mine):

Climate in general is one of the issues that is sort of interwoven throughout the different pillars of our work. **I don't think we have climate-specific programs or issues in practice.** It's more when we talk about food scarcity, agriculture, economic development, the things that we're already doing, how do we inject and inform what we're doing by climate decisions, climate change, climate resilience, crop insurance or risk insurance, all these things that we know make up the existing landscape? If it's successful and sustainable, we need to make sure that we factor this into it, that's the bottom line. **But I don't think there are any specific climate issues per se.** We don't specifically integrate or target our issues based on climate both at [the] State [Department] and at USAID. But I think it's fair to say some of the issues where we see climate as more of an issue are the places where we see high out-migration and are the issue places, like the Dry Corridor [of Northern Central America]. We work specifically in these areas, but it just might not be specifically for climate reasons.<sup>465</sup>

In this climate security narrative, not only was climate change understood as an indirect threat multiplier, but the threat multiplier logic was also the only framing considered. Climate change is only as relevant as it relates to other priorities for national security officials. These priorities revolve around challenges to reducing instability and fragility: rising temperatures, unpredictable growing seasons, and more frequent and intense storms occurring because of cumulative greenhouse gas emissions. A U.S. official stated:

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

In Africa there probably has been more evident climate change. What's famous, of course, is the desertification of the Sahel. And there's insecurity there. Now how much are those two things tied? We can say they're tied, and we can say we have some evidence. And, of course, it makes sense: you have pastoral people, the grasslands go down in productivity, and you lose your goats or other assets. So, you look for other ways to live, and then people pay you money to go attack things. Makes sense, right? And people get on the move and migrate to Europe and to urban parts of coastal Africa. All of that seems to make sense. But the climate security link wouldn't stand up to a whole ton of real scientific scrutiny.<sup>466</sup>

However, in the security and development arenas, it is much harder to advocate for climate action—here understood to mean direct action to mitigate further greenhouse gas emissions or adapt societies in response to climate vulnerabilities—or to even know what form such action would take. These determinations differ across the various organs of government, as well. This includes the legislative branch, where, as this chapter has explored, officials implementing the Root Causes Strategy were frequently preoccupied with illustrating concrete links between climate change, migration, and national security. A former U.S. official detailed this thinking:

Migration is not seen as a particular motivator from the legislative side to work to curb climate change. There are so many different reasons and that isn't a real salient one in negotiations.

If it's migration from Central America or it's conflict in the Middle East, it might be that where there is a drought or there are declining crops that are leading to something that's a very specific issue. We have policies to try to address that one way or another. Climate and migration bifurcate that way: if it's trying to deal with reducing our emissions, migration is one reason among many. It might be one compelling reason, but there are a lot of compelling reasons. It just hasn't stood out enough to merit a strong response on its own grounds. That's on the one hand. Then on the other is the specific regional problem of migration. That, people are concerned about: it's very specific to that particular circumstance and how you address it, and climate would be one factor out of many.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. October 29, 2022.

What the administration understood was the need to draw specific links to security breakdowns to ensure political buy-in that could bridge the executive and legislative branches. This political capital was crucial for tying together the enforcement and development arms of the RCS. As a U.S. official stated:

With climate, [the] State [Department] knows there is a hook there, and USAID also knows there's a hook there, but both have issues specifically defining what it is, and then also what the answer is as opposed to it being just a straight development project or a straight security project. And maybe it doesn't need to be just understanding that climate makes these existing things worse. But that was sort of the struggle I was having...we would work with DoD a lot on scenario planning, and there are related pieces in their work, mainly around humanitarian disasters and emergency relief. And we were thinking: what happens if there's a mudslide somewhere where there's already a gang presence, or already other existing issues? How could that exacerbate these things? If we already know there are these precondition issues that lead to instability and could lead to violence or insecurity, and then climate change happens, or a natural disaster happens, how does this get worse?<sup>468</sup>

The political considerations that make the threat multiplier label attractive allowed for climate change and security to be thought of in tandem, while at the same time deployable to pre-empt action towards each other. This happens asymmetrically: typically, climate change becomes securitized more than national security is imbued with climate action. This was especially true when development concerns specifically involved Pentagon planning. As a U.S. official stated:

National security comes up for interagency conversations on the Darién Gap, a huge focus of this administration, where the Department of Defense is involved and there's been a huge crackdown of transnational criminal organizations. That is very ironic because there was this push that we need to do something to make the Darién Gap safer and help people with the humanitarian crisis, and then there's been some success in going after these gangs who have been extorting and doing terrible things to migrants and, surprise, surprise, now it's a

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<sup>468</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. March 3, 2023.

safer migration route. And so you see increasing levels of migrants. That's been a really interesting and challenging conundrum for the international community, Colombia, and Panama, which has come out and said that IOM and UNHCR are to blame for being a pull factor for migrants. And now that the environment is better, people are saying "hey, let's take this route."<sup>469</sup>

National security officials can cite climate concerns from a national security perspective to delay or rethink programming, while national security concerns are needed and/or supersede direct climate action. Elites have performatively labeled climate change as contributing indirect causality to national security threats in a way that bridges multiple scales of understanding, from the policy realm to individual decision making around migration. National security officials then use this intentional dissonance to integrate policy perceptions into the governance structures that manage national security outcomes. As a former U.S. official noted:

Climate adds a whole new dimension to this, as does insecurity generated by gangs, because it's an additional driver and oftentimes not a driver that's usually identified by of your average farmer in Honduras or Guatemala. Climate change rarely is like a bolt of lightning. It's something that builds over time and has an impact over time in terms of rain patterns and its impact on soil and all the rest. It creeps up on people until they finally realize that that their life is no longer tenable or viable, and therefore they have to move.<sup>470</sup>

National security officials used the varying understandings of climate change, from agrarian communities to elite policymakers, to condition climate action on tangible, visible impacts. This dissonance both fits neatly within and reproduces the safe space of climate security discourse. The political solutions needed to confront the systemic origins of underdevelopment and insecurity can

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<sup>469</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. September 18, 2023.

<sup>470</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. January 22, 2023.

align with climate change only so long as they correspond directly to U.S. national security interests. As a U.S. official summarized (emphases mine):

We know that climate change is probably going to put stress on communities, families, and individuals. Some of them are going to migrate in response to crop damage, hurricanes, drought, wildfire, etc. We know that. But I think for the most part, we don't see it as a security issue. For the migrant population, you go through the Darién [Gap] or you go through Mexico or you go through any place that's dangerous, where there's impunity. The authorities are not going to protect you, especially if you're a woman or a girl. You could get sexually violated. You could get trafficked. We have our eye on that kind of violence, more personal security than armies, but I don't think we think about it particularly in climate change terms. People have been migrating to the border for all the reasons that are in the Root Causes Strategy, right? Primarily economic opportunity, poor governance, gender-based violence, and human rights. That's why people move. Then, while they're moving, there are security violations, but mostly to the person.

**It's not like the border is under attack. Migrants don't show up to the border with guns, right? It's not a military maneuver. It's just people.**<sup>471</sup>

While U.S. policymakers deployed climate security discourse to create safe spaces for advancing migration deterrence, this narrative does not operate in isolation. Government officials in Mexico and Northern Central America also strategically engaged with these framings to secure aid, negotiate bilateral agreements, and shape their own domestic policies. For example, while Honduran and Guatemalan officials publicly aligned with U.S. climate resilience initiatives, they also leveraged these frameworks to secure funding for unrelated development and security projects.<sup>472</sup> In Honduras, an important example of this negotiating tradeoff was relenting on U.S. demands for migration deterrence as part of the push for assistance in renovating the commercial

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<sup>471</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. April 7, 2023.

<sup>472</sup> Author interview with Honduran official. January 29, 2023.

airstrip at the country's largest international airport, outside the capital Tegucigalpa, which also houses the U.S. military's Soto Cano base.<sup>473</sup> In this sense, the intersection of climate security narratives and migration deterrence functioned not only as a tool of administrative capacity but also as diplomatic currency, shaping the broader power dynamics of U.S.-NCA relations.

A potential counterargument might claim that climate adaptation and migration deterrence remain largely separate policy arenas and that the alignment between them is incidental rather than intentional. Some policymakers insist that climate resilience programs in Northern Central America are purely development initiatives rather than part of a broader migration deterrence strategy. However, as this chapter demonstrates, the bureaucratic structure of the Root Causes Strategy suggests otherwise. By explicitly linking adaptation funding to migration stabilization, U.S. policymakers ensured that resilience investments were not neutral interventions but securitized tools, designed to manage migration flows rather than address climate vulnerability on its own terms.

### Implications of the Safe Space

*From my perspective, it's such a paradox where at the U.S. border, all the attention is on numbers going across, and that's not a secret. At least in theory, the Root Causes Strategy is directly tied to the idea that if we invest in causes, people will not show up at the border. But it seems like in practice those two are very, very separated and to me the key missing piece of that political positioning is what the agency of Northern Triangle governments and community leaders themselves looks like. It seems like it's a very one-way kind of strategy and kind of the extent to which those were co-created with host country governments and how it differs with [Vice President Kamala Harris's Call to Action,] all the private sector money. It's the same money that would be going that direction anyways. It's just being packaged and framed in this political way, which I mean, especially when you're talking about USAID and U.S. bureaucratic machinery, it can serve other purposes that I understand are beneficial, but it does seem like kind of, at the end of the day, even if your goal is deterrence at the border and keeping numbers down, it seems*

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

*counterproductive if there isn't a whole lot of substantive change on the part of the U.S. government and it's just this new framing.*

*The politics in Washington are not changing individual experiences that are forcing people to migrate. That to me seems like a big discontinuity.*

Author interview with former Honduran official. November 4, 2022.

Safe spaces are critical performative areas that national security officials leverage to pursue their material interests. These aligned incentives for the climate security narrative mean that actors' options are constrained by the "coalitions...that seek to secure and exercise governing power in demographically, economically, and ideologically structured contexts that define the range of opportunities open to political actors."<sup>474</sup> In other words, as Andreas noted, the overriding goals are not in themselves to stabilize migration flows, reduce violence, or slow the drug economy. While these are legitimate policy aspirations, national security officials have used the performative language of climate security discourse to label as security threats issues that would otherwise become politicized and more difficult to navigate in practice. These dynamics led to policy development that complicated or undermined publicly stated aims. Our understanding of how climate change fits into this safe space for policymakers and elites—the tacit rules of what is allowed, what is commonly thought, and where contrasts and tensions exist—is crucial for a comprehensive awareness of policymaking that aligns climate change and national security.

The root causes framing for U.S.-bound migration created a safe space through three main tools: removal of historical agency, focus on conditionality and desirability of migrants, and an emphasis

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<sup>474</sup> King, D. and R. Smith. 2005. Racial Orders in American Political Development. *American Political Science Review* 99(1): 75-92. Page 75.

on climate adaptation rather than mitigation. No matter how many experts testify to Congress that the RCS identifies a problem that cannot be solved—e.g., "...development is more efficient at shaping how migration occurs—promoting legal over illegal migration—rather than deterring migration altogether"<sup>475</sup>—the safe space will continue governing the policy response according to a narrow and long standing political institutional order.

These illustrations of how elites used technical language to provide bureaucratic cover for political decisions are instructive in helping to understand the intensely political decision matrix policymakers consider for the root causes of migration. As a result, the apolitical framing of climate security discourse for the root causes of migration constitutes a key component of regional political dynamics. For climate change and national security, this faux-technical policymaking is yet another contributing factor to Andreas's border games around the politics and political economy of U.S-bound migration.

My contributions to this literature are twofold. I argue that these problems came to a head in the context of the emergent focus on the RCS, where complex, climate-focused development interventions aimed at migration deterrence were framed in similarly apolitical ways. In addition, the apolitical nature of these interventions led to a conceptual dissonance around state sovereignty in their design, by dismissing agency in NCA countries while simultaneously requiring those states' cooperation in enforcing international borders and migration management. The implications for climate security narratives and policymaking are that their full implementation

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<sup>475</sup> Testimony of Ruiz Soto. 2021. "Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Northern Central America." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 11 June 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/LC66878/text>.

and success is hamstrung by a strategic focus on the political safe spaces available to various pieces of public sector bureaucracies involved. As a result, these safe spaces reinforce a tangential approach to climate action when national security considerations are paramount. This slow-walking ties migration pressures to the short-term, cyclical variations predicated on the political considerations that the root causes approach is supposed to alleviate.

As a result, future safe spaces for elites and policymakers will not be conditioned solely by blanket political generalizations, but instead the character of institutional histories that shift with climate change and geopolitical waves. As climate change increases insecurity and further blurs the lines between economic migrants and refugees, hard line approaches to U.S. immigration policy will only conflate elite opportunism with the reality of decades of underdevelopment, political manipulation, and militarized law enforcement. In this way, climate change will continue to exacerbate governance challenges that are already strained.

El Salvador, with its cryptocurrency-staked neo-dictatorship, provides a cautious example for what to expect if the economic-criminalization dual lens persists for policymaking that integrates climate change and national security. If Nayib Bukele becomes the model for Northern Central America, the only feasible and realistic development bargains will come in the form of autocratic and blended state-military control coupled with full elite domination of the financial and productive industrial sectors. These choke points will further sideline democratic institutions and any emphases on human rights or environmental justice. For the public, however, these arrangements could continue to be increasingly appealing to guarantee public order and relative safety in the face of increased security threats and stressors. Policymakers will respond to voter

preferences by locking in the institutional structures and political games that can deliver them, regardless of their impacts on human rights, development efficacy, and the environment.

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This chapter investigates the political dynamics generated by the fusion of U.S. climate security discourse with migration deterrence goals under the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy. It introduces the concept of "safe spaces," defined as the language and framing that enable U.S. officials to advance migration deterrence policies under the guise of apolitical climate interventions. By emphasizing climate change adaptation, these officials framed migration issues as technical challenges rather than politically charged matters, allowing them to pursue deterrence without overtly engaging in contentious political debates. However, this framing produced significant contradictions, particularly in U.S. relations with Mexico and Northern Central America. The chapter highlights how the RCS removed historical agency, imposed conditionality, and prioritized place-based adaptation investments in high-outmigration areas, generating tensions between the development rhetoric of U.S. policies and their deterrence-driven outcomes.

These dynamics underscore how climate security discourse has reinforced inequitable power relations and hindered genuine development efforts in the region. Over time, the securitized framing of climate change may lead to long-term policy distortions, where climate resilience initiatives become permanently linked to migration control, reducing the effectiveness of genuine adaptation efforts. As the next chapter explores, these contradictions were even more pronounced when the intersection of U.S. climate security discourse and migration deterrence policies was tested in real-world humanitarian crises, especially the response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020.

## Chapter 7: Implications of U.S. Climate Security Discourse on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response from Hurricanes Eta and Iota

*If we don't risk anything, we don't live. There aren't any other options.  
No one ever wants to migrate. The whole thing is a fight not to become invisible.*

José Luis Hernández, quoted in Jonathan Blitzer, *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*.<sup>476</sup>

### *Overview*

Hurricanes Eta and Iota, two powerful Category 4 hurricanes, struck Northern Central America just two weeks apart in November 2020, causing catastrophic impacts across the region. These back-to-back hurricanes exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inflicted severe damage on infrastructure, agriculture, and human livelihoods. Eta and Iota brought unprecedented devastation to Northern Central America, affecting millions of people and causing extensive physical, socio-economic, and health impacts.

A Honduran official reflected that:

...the storms were almost a hallucination from a planning and response perspective. We were already dealing with the devastations of Covid-19 when Eta decimated us, and then Iota completely scrambled it all over again. Responding to layered sets of disasters like that is virtually impossible and overwhelming. And the sequencing meant that we weren't even providing enough emergency aid to begin with, let alone thinking about long-term development with the money that was coming in. It was complete and utter destruction, and years later, we still haven't really recovered.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Blitzer, J. 2024. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis*. New York: Penguin Press. Page 391.

<sup>477</sup> Author interview with Honduran official. August 2, 2023.

The previous chapter demonstrated how U.S. policymakers strategically framed climate security discourse as a safe space for advancing migration deterrence under the narrative of climate adaptation. This chapter examines how those dynamics functioned in a real-world humanitarian crisis. Hurricanes Eta and Iota—two of the most devastating storms to strike Northern Central America in recent history—offered a critical moment for the U.S. to demonstrate its commitment to climate adaptation and resilience. However, as this chapter unpacks, the fusion of climate security and migration deterrence resulted in a fragmented, inadequate response that undermined rather than strengthened resilience. By tracing the bureaucratic and humanitarian failures that emerged in the wake of these disasters, this chapter further illustrates the contradictions embedded in U.S. climate security discourse. While previous chapters explored how U.S. officials framed climate security to justify migration control, this chapter further examines how this framework falters in practice. By analyzing U.S. responses to Hurricanes Eta and Iota, I highlight the contradictions between deterrence-driven climate adaptation policies and alternative resilience-building efforts.

In this chapter, I explore how the migration deterrence focus that elites promoted through climate security discourse resulted in an emphasis on climate resilience as the overarching goal for U.S. policy. Climate resilience is popularly understood to mean the ability of a person, community, state, or system to rebound or recover from an external shock.<sup>478</sup> National security officials view climate resilience as a multidimensional salve for the full indirect feedback loop of negative outcomes resulting from climate change, including irregular migration; fragility, violence, and

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<sup>478</sup> The White House. 2024. U.S. Framework for Climate Resilience and Security. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/US\\_Framework\\_for\\_Climate\\_Resilience\\_and\\_Security\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/US_Framework_for_Climate_Resilience_and_Security_FINAL.pdf).

organized crime; and reduced economic growth.<sup>479</sup> As it relates to climate change, resilience has almost become synonymous with national security: national security cannot exist without climate resilience, and vice versa. The adaptation agenda promoted by threat multiplier framing hinges on resilience as a set of societal characteristics that at once are achieved through adaptation while also facilitating further adaptation. Climate resilience, and the response capacities it centers, is a critical determinant of climate security discourse.

Here, I examine some of the implications and impacts of U.S. climate security discourse that resulted from the focus on resilience through the Biden Root Causes Strategy. The response to Eta and Iota reveals that, contrary to stated U.S. claims, fusing climate security discourse with migration deterrence decreases resilience. I find this through an analysis of a bureaucratic gap, or a ‘missing middle,’ between how the U.S. government funds disaster management and development assistance. The missing middle is particularly evident in the U.S. approach to humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR) and is a key outcome of fusing climate security discourse with migration deterrence through the Biden Root Causes Strategy.

Overall, the case study of Hurricanes Eta and Iota furthers the thesis’s analysis of how deterrence and development agendas contradict one another when concerning U.S. engagement with Northern Central America. As a result, using climate security discourse to pursue migration deterrence reinforces harmful political dynamics between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America, and ultimately decreases climate resilience.

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

The discussion of the missing middle in U.S. humanitarian assistance and disaster response builds on the themes of adaptation and securitization discussed in previous chapters. The first subsection analyzes the immediate response to hurricanes Eta and Iota, highlighting the focus on short-term relief efforts. The second subsection examines the structural gaps in medium- and long-term resilience-building, showing how these gaps undermine sustainable recovery. The third subsection explores the broader implications of this missing middle, connecting it to the perpetuation of instability and marginalization in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Overall, this chapter illustrates how the emphasis on immediate disaster response reflects and reinforces the limitations of adaptation-focused policies. This analysis advances the thesis's critique of climate security discourse, demonstrating how it serves to mask deeper systemic failures in addressing the root causes of migration and climate vulnerability. By highlighting these gaps, this chapter reinforces the argument that climate security narratives often prioritize political and economic agendas over what could be constituted as building resilience.

Past rhetorical platitudes, however, the tangible specifics of what climate resilience really means are complicated by different uses of the concept by key stakeholders incorporating it into climate security discourse. The concept of climate resilience has a much longer history among climate change experts. In particular, scholars of political ecology have considered how climate resilience frameworks stem from the ecological concept of an ecosystem performing adaptive functions to external interventions.<sup>480</sup> However, the use of climate resilience in elite national security circles is

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<sup>480</sup> Watts, M.J. 2015. Now and Then: The origins of political ecology and the rebirth of adaptation as a form of thought. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G., and J. McCarthy (Eds.). 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*.

a much newer evolution.<sup>481</sup> As a result, much of the scholarly literature on climate resilience begins in a climate perspective. These definitions come from subject matter experts largely seeking to increase the potential for climate action, namely the ability to invest both in greenhouse gas mitigation as well as societal adaptation.<sup>482</sup> In parallel, the national security establishment has coalesced around the perception of climate resilience as an all-encompassing pursuit to facilitate a very different set of priorities. As detailed in earlier chapters, the main material interests for national security officials are to reduce irregular migration and opportunities for the illicit smuggling of narcotics, arms, gold, oil, and critical minerals, wildlife, and humans. Within these broader climate security discussions, the use of climate resilience by the national security establishment has been relatively under-examined relative to its use by the climate community. I build on this literature by emphasizing how this emergent perspective played a foundational role in elevating climate security discourse to the fore of many Biden administration priorities.

Because of these disparate foundations for climate resilience, there is still a struggle to define what climate resilience looks like in material terms. As a result, societies, infrastructures, and ecosystems are labeled either as climate resilient or not. U.S. national security officials leveraged this constructed binary to positively frame their material interests within what was said to constitute climate resilience in practice. In other words, elites used this climate security discourse to perpetuate false binaries between instability and development, border control, and climate action

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Davoudi, S. *et al.* 2012. Resilience: A Bridging Concept or a Dead End? “Reframing” Resilience: Challenges for Planning Theory and Practice  
Interacting Traps: Resilience Assessment of a Pasture Management System in Northern Afghanistan  
Urban Resilience: What Does it Mean in Planning Practice?  
Resilience as a Useful Concept for Climate Change Adaptation?  
The Politics of Resilience for Planning: A Cautionary Note  
Edited by Simin Davoudi and Libby Porter. *Planning Theory & Practice* 13(2): 299–333.

and national security. These in turn led to an overwhelming applied focus on strengthening humanitarian assistance and disaster response capabilities as a significant national security prerogative. The HA/DR focus stemmed from the fact that inadequate responses to sudden-onset climate shocks were perceived to carry negative consequences for humanitarian outcomes and contribute to insecurity, instability, and fragility.

However, this national security perspective in many cases obscured the climate debate playing out in the background. The U.S. focuses on adaptation over mitigation, in public and in UNFCCC meetings, because national security concerns are perceived to be resolved through adaptation funding. In addition, the U.S. is unwilling to concede the admission that the impacts of U.S. historical emissions cannot be reversed. As a result, national security officials have embraced the adaptation focus over an emphasis on mitigation to avoid the legal exposure that loss and damage frameworks would bring.

As a result, these assumptions anchoring climate security discourse augment what Kayly Ober and Rachel Schmidtke called the 'Missing Middle' of humanitarian assistance and disaster response: that a gap exists between short-term response funds and longer-term, formal development assistance.<sup>483</sup> The challenge of aligning emergency responses with overarching development goals is a significant focus for the humanitarian community. Multilateral leadership bodies such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the OECD have developed programming specifically to this end, described as the 'Humanitarian-Development-

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<sup>483</sup> Ober, K. and R. Schmidtke. 2023. Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala. Refugees International.

Peace (HDP) nexus.<sup>484</sup> The HDP nexus describes efforts to "...[strengthen] the coherence between humanitarian, development and peace efforts...effectively reducing people's needs, risks and vulnerabilities, supporting prevention efforts and thus, shifting from delivering humanitarian assistance to ending need."<sup>485</sup>

I argue that the missing middle of HA/DR is in practice much more expansive than the ability to increase the scale and longevity of relief programs to natural hazards. The thesis's analysis of climate security discourse underlines a deeper, structural dissonance within the U.S. national security establishment that requires far more than simply evaluating needs-based emergency aid capabilities. This dissonance stems from the crippling treatment of migration as a national security threat. As a result, national security officials promoted a corresponding emphasis on migration deterrence through climate security discourse. This migration deterrence emphasis, in one stroke, prioritizes HA/DR resources over development assistance and the HDP nexus while simultaneously ensuring that HA/DR capabilities themselves will fail to meet their needs-based mandate. By definition, disaster responses that prioritize potential would-be migrants with the aim of deterring their mobility are not needs-based. Migration-detering HA/DR, as a result, runs afoul of the international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

However, on a more fundamental level, this missing middle ensures that national security officials promoting climate security discourse that is predicated on migration deterrence will forever be

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<sup>484</sup> OECD. 2024. DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, OECD/LEGAL/5019. <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/public/doc/643/643.en.pdf>.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, Page 3.

fighting an increasingly difficult battle of their own making. Climate security discourse will pair incomplete disaster response with an incomplete awareness of human mobility dynamics as they relate to the multidimensional impacts of climate change, alongside the full range of mobility drivers. As a result, this missing middle will fail to prioritize needs-based HA/DR that is aligned with the HDP nexus in favor of migration deterrence. In this way, the performative rhetoric of national security officials worsens both future disaster response capabilities as well as continuous efforts to manage mobility pressures in a safe, lawful, and orderly fashion.

The remainder of the chapter details how the resilience focus led to migration-deterrent policies, framed by the narrative of the Root Causes Strategy, which hindered the response to Eta and Iota. I argue these policies decreased the resilience they were aiming to strengthen. This approach further strained political dynamics between the U.S., Mexico, and Northern Central America.

#### Resilience as a Performative Determinant of Climate Security Discourse

*Through resilience, we can really decrease the call for humanitarian assistance.*

Author interview with U.S. official. January 27, 2023.

‘Resilience’ is the keyword for climate security discourse’s short-term migration deterrence pillar. Various streams of security studies, political ecology, development studies, and policy literature have converged at resilience as a goal for structural, root causes approaches. The root causes lens is applied to three intertwined phenomena: migration, violence, and climate change. These root causes focuses emphasize the role of resilience in enhancing a wide range of contributing factors

for national security, including food security,<sup>486</sup> water security,<sup>487</sup> and adaptation to drought and sea level rise.<sup>488 489</sup>

However, the conceptual links that resilience creates between migration, violence, and climate change deserve closer scrutiny for the assumptions behind them and their resulting implications for policy development. Resilience frameworks are central nodes through which migration and climate change have evolved for officials to consider them national security threats, and the corresponding policy responses to 'solve,' 'mitigate,' or 'adapt to' these perceived threats. In this way, the function that climate security discourse has played in shaping U.S. policies is part of the climate adaptation task as much as any physical investments themselves.

The variance in how resilience is defined and applied in different contexts is itself an indicator of the fractured foundations it has created for national security doctrine. As referenced earlier, resilience is generally understood to mean the capacity to recover from, respond to, and restore prior system functioning from external or unanticipated shocks. The climate policy community frames this rebound capacity in terms of a natural hazard:

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<sup>486</sup> Bizikova, L., Tyler, S., Moench, M., Keller, M., and D. Echeverria. 2015. Climate resilience and food security in Central America: a practical framework. *Climate and Development* 8(5): 397–412.

<sup>487</sup> Grasham, C. F., Korzenevica, M., and K. J. Charles. 2019. On considering climate resilience in urban water security: A review of the vulnerability of the urban poor in sub-Saharan Africa. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. Water* 6(3).

<sup>488</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2022. Interlinkages between desertification, land degradation, food security and greenhouse gas fluxes: Synergies, trade-offs and integrated response options. In: *Climate Change and Land: IPCC Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems*. Cambridge University Press: 551-672.

<sup>489</sup> Hauer, M.E., Fussell, E., Mueller, V. et al. 2020. Sea-level rise and human migration. *Nat Rev Earth Environ* 1: 28–39.

...the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management.<sup>490</sup>

Diane Davis defined urban resilience similarly in the context of violence and insecurity:

...as those acts intended to restore or create effectively functioning community-level activities, institutions, and spaces in which the perpetrators of violence are marginalized and perhaps even eliminated.<sup>491</sup>

The Biden administration's report on climate migration frequently paired resilience and adaptation as complementary processes:

U.S. resilience programming explicitly recognizes shocks and stresses as perennial features (not anomalies). These programs seek to strengthen the capacity of individuals, communities, and systems to absorb, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses, using layered, sequenced, and integrated development and humanitarian assistance.<sup>492</sup>

In its climate migration report, the Biden administration's wide-ranging interpretation named resilience as an overriding principle in dealing with no less than: migration and forced displacement, general climate change impacts, climate change adaptation, food insecurity and

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<sup>490</sup> United Nations General Assembly. 2016. "Report of the open-ended intergovernmental expert working group on indicators and terminology relating to disaster risk reduction," New York: UNGA. in Huckstep, S. and M. Clemens. 2023. "Climate Change and Migration: An Omnibus Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners." CGD Policy Paper 292. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/climate-change-and-migration-omnibus-overviewpolicymakers-and-development>.

<sup>491</sup> Davis, D.E. 2012. Urban resilience in situations of chronic violence. Boston, MA: MIT Center for Institutional Studies. Page 9.

<sup>492</sup> The White House. 2021. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration. Page 12. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

malnutrition, water security, urban violence, gender-based violence, political marginalization, violent extremist recruitment, economic and 'livelihood' opportunities, human rights protections, democracy and governance advancement, bringing actionable climate information to decision makers, preventing the spread of vector-borne disease, reducing conflict over natural resources, municipal systems, providing public services to migrants, disaster resilience, and energy sector resilience. This institutionalized logic around fostering self-reliance and positive rebounding in the face of external shocks was integrated into 'multi-sectoral' approaches to essentially the full spectrum of policymaking.

Does a focus on resilience make institutions and systems more resilient? Davis, in a comparative global analysis of urban resilience in cities that have seen varying degrees of success in curbing violence, challenged the tautology that promoting resilience creates resilience. Davis identified positive, negative, and equilibrium resilience (seen below in Figure 3), which result from "...whether coping or adaptation strategies will strengthen, weaken, or stabilize the existent forces and conditions of violence."<sup>493</sup> Drawing on the cases of São Paulo, Medellín, Mexico City, Managua, Kigali, Johannesburg, and Nairobi, Davis advocated for a more reasoned approach to theorizing security than is seen in much policy planning, suggesting "...resilience may be neither 'progressive' nor inherently positive, at least if the main point of departure for identifying it is merely coping or adapting."<sup>494</sup> <sup>495</sup> Far too often in situations of negative resilience, the state deploys

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<sup>493</sup> Davis, D.E. 2012. Urban resilience in situations of chronic violence. Boston, MA: MIT Center for Institutional Studies. Page 35.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Davis, D.E. 2005. In Search of the Public Sphere: Local, National, and International Influences in the Planning of Downtown Mexico City, 1910-1950. From the Capulin to the Zocalo: Essays on the History of the Public Sphere in Mexico. Mexico City: Instituto Mora.

military or law enforcement in efforts to mitigate violence, which can rebound and exacerbate chronic root causes of violence. In addition, there is typically a narrow focus on individuals, communities, and specific territorialities of greatest violence without a full reckoning of the institutional, historical, and structural root causes of violence.

Davis's approach towards positive resilience focused on community-based approaches 'from below.' Davis paired this grassroots focus with an acknowledgement that non-state actors, with significant agency and territorial control in determining patterns of social order, constitute their own form of sovereignty.<sup>496</sup> Predictors of positive resilience overlap with what Davis called 'legitimate security,' which can be marked by certain characteristics. First is the prioritization of lived experiences and trade-offs in communities, seen through participatory processes between law enforcement and residents. Second is maintaining adequate expectations around not 'solving' impossible root causes of chronic violence and insecurity but rather mitigating their worst effects and investing in approaches that have already shown promise. Finally, Davis predicated legitimate security on 'institutional networks of accountability' that reflect 'cooperative autonomy' between residents, other private actors (whether organized crime or multinationals), and the state.

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<sup>496</sup> Davis, D.E. 2020. City, Nation, Network: Shifting Territorialities of Sovereignty and Urban Violence in Latin America. *Urban Planning*, 5(3): 206-216.

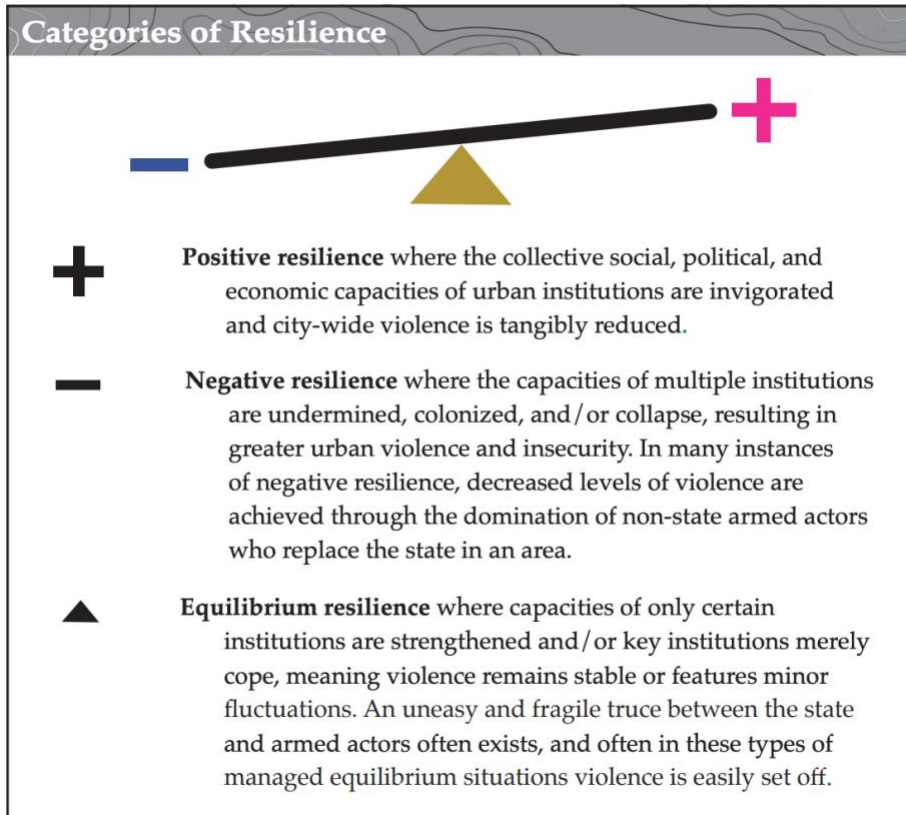


Figure 3. Categories of Resilience. Source: Davis (2012).<sup>497</sup>

While Davis's framework is specifically geared towards urban violence, there is more continuity when resilience is used as an overriding policy approach not just for violence, but also for migration, climate change, and the links between the three. This continuity lies within the discursive power that resilience lends for national security officials who are performatively creating perceptions of stability and national security.

As outlined in Chapter 6, a key complement to the U.S. promotion of resilience is the discussion of fragility. The U.S. defines fragility as:

<sup>497</sup> Davis, D.E. 2012. Urban resilience in situations of chronic violence. Boston, MA: MIT Center for Institutional Studies. Page 35.

...a country's or region's vulnerability to armed conflict, large-scale violence, or other instability, including an inability to manage transnational threats or other significant shocks. Fragility results from ineffective or and unaccountable governance, weak social cohesion, and/or corrupt institutions or leaders who lack respect for human rights.<sup>498</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 6, the Global Fragility Act mandates that the Executive Branch periodically update Congress on ten-year strategies towards combating fragility, which:

...aims to strengthen United States efforts to break the costly cycle of fragility and promote peaceful, self-reliant nations that become U.S. economic and security partners. It advances the aims of the 2017 National Security Strategy, which affirms that the United States will work to strengthen fragile states “where state weakness or failure would magnify threats to the American homeland” and “empower reform-minded governments, people, and civil society” in these places.<sup>499</sup>

The proposed strategy focuses on coordinating the vast interagency process spanning nearly the full range of U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance tools to ‘prevent’ conflict where possible, and then 'stabilize' fragile states and territories. These efforts are all infused with an overriding focus on ensuring that insecurity and fragility are addressed through resilience. These significant U.S. efforts are notable for their combined national security and economic integration focuses. Critically, national security officials consider resilience, security, and stability as means to an end rather than ends in themselves. Instead, the desired ends are mitigating:

...threats to the American people, United States interests at home and abroad, and United States allies and partners.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. 2020. <https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/>.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid, Page 3.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid, Page 4.

Promoting resilience as an antidote to fragility therefore comes only because of:

...selective United States engagement based on defined outcomes, host country political will, respect for democratic norms and human rights, mutual accountability, and cost-sharing.<sup>501</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 6, this selective focus is likely based off humiliating experiences with nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, stemming from the recognition that:

U.S. intervention to address fragility will not be successful without the active engagement of critical local partners. Breaking the costly cycle of fragility and promoting peaceful self-reliant nations must be secured through the action and agency of host-country leaders, organizations, and communities. This effort cannot be imposed from the outside.<sup>502</sup>

The goal of protecting national security in partnership with 'peaceful, self-reliant nations that become U.S. economic and security partners' is underlined in these approaches, with the value proposition that "strategic investments in prevention can save billions of U.S. dollars."<sup>503</sup>

The notion that U.S. national security doctrine is selective and strategic in its promotion of economic and security partners is intuitive. However, the role that national security officials have played in using climate security discourse to tie national security to economic integration has been underexamined. These priorities serve as the guardrails for the regional political institutional order, the boundaries and tacit rules of the safe space for elites and policymakers to operate within.

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid, Page 6.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid, Page 7.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

National security officials have assessed climate change and environmental impacts relative to their ability to cause disruptive, violent conflict that would threaten potential economic partnerships. Accordingly, elites have oriented U.S. national security doctrine towards "mitigating the...environmental and food security dimensions of conflict"<sup>504</sup> as it relates to climate change. These include natural disasters and natural resource management, and mitigation can be oriented around "conflict-sensitive and environmentally sustainable investments."<sup>505</sup> For the United States, labeling climate change as a threat multiplier causes climate impacts to be viewed first and foremost through their capacity to cause conflict, fragility, and instability that threaten the ability of sovereign states to serve as stable commercial partners in the U.S. national interest. Resilience is therefore emphasized in its ability to return states, communities, and markets to a profitable equilibrium, rather than mitigate climate concerns on their own merit.

In the following section, I evaluate the response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota against its stated goals of setting an example for 'resilient' U.S. policy. I assess what lessons the constructed relationship between climate resilience and migration deterrence offers for the ongoing evolutions of climate security discourse, especially as it shapes the design and implementation of national security policies.

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid, Page 9.

## Hurricanes Eta and Iota: Cascading Devastation and Patchwork Response

*It's incredibly complicated, because these security breakdowns are affecting ecosystems and how people live and work in fundamental ways. All of these things add up. From the stabilization lens, we see climate impacts as more of a humanitarian issue. If you look at a hurricane or an earthquake, we're seeing hurricanes are stronger and as a result bring massive amounts of rain which can completely wash out communities. That's an immediate humanitarian concern. Then in the longer term, how do you help to build resilience, and make these places more sustainable and stable? That's the type of thing that we are thinking through. Of course, we have our lines of effort. And climate isn't its own line, but something that needs to weave throughout all of them because from a stabilization perspective, as you think about building resilient institutions, providing alternatives, and mitigating armed actors, climate has a piece in all of it. The environment has a piece in all of it. It is not the central focus because that's not going to ensure the pieces that are needed for long term stability, but it is part of the conversation.*

Author interview with U.S. official. June 27, 2023.

Eta and Iota both made landfall in Nicaragua as major hurricanes. Eta landed first, on November 3, 2020, cruising through Nicaragua and Honduras before veering north up through Cuba and Florida, eventually dying out east of the mid-Atlantic United States. Eta brought sustained winds of up to 150 mph and a storm surge of 26 to 33 feet above normal, which caused widespread flooding and landslides not just in Nicaragua and Honduras but also El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and southern Mexico, particularly in low-lying areas.<sup>506</sup> Eta dumped over 30 inches of rain on the northern coast of Honduras alone, and caused major rivers like the Bermejo, Ulúa, and Patuca to overflow, resulting in significant inundation of nearby communities and croplands.<sup>507</sup> Eta caused 165 direct deaths and displaced over 100,000, though it was reported to have adversely affected around 4.9 million people in total.<sup>508</sup> 6,900 homes, 16 healthcare facilities, 45 schools,

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<sup>506</sup> Pasch R. J. et al. 2021. Hurricane Eta. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Pages 3 and 6. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL292020\\_Eta.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL292020_Eta.pdf).

<sup>507</sup> Ibid, Pages 6-7.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid, Page 8.

and hundreds of miles of roads were lost in Nicaragua alone.<sup>509</sup> Guatemala lost 119,000 hectares of crops due to Eta.<sup>510</sup>

Soon after Eta had run its course, Iota began to form. Iota first devastated the Caribbean Colombian island of Providencia before making landfall on November 17 in nearly the same location as Eta, close to Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua.<sup>511</sup> Iota powered through Northern Central America on a linear, westward trajectory, directly striking Honduras and El Salvador and causing widespread damage throughout Guatemala, Belize, Mexico, Panamá, and Costa Rica.<sup>512</sup> Damage to observation stations from Eta meant that details of Iota's strength are unknown or uncertain.<sup>513</sup> However, it is also estimated that Iota had a storm surge of at least 26 feet above normal.<sup>514</sup> Iota also was responsible for widespread flash flooding owing to the saturation left by Eta just a few weeks prior.<sup>515</sup> Iota caused at least 67 direct deaths and, combined with Eta, is estimated to have impacted approximately 7 million people and caused \$1.4 billion worth of damage, with some estimates listing upwards of 7.3 million people affected.<sup>516 517</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid, Page 9.

<sup>511</sup> Stewart, S. 2021. Hurricane Iota. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Page 8. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020\\_Iota.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020_Iota.pdf).

<sup>512</sup> Ibid, Page 4.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid, Pages 7, 9.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid, Page 9.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid, Pages 8.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid, Page 10.

<sup>517</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance. 2020. Tropical Storm Eta and Hurricane Iota: Six Weeks Later.

The distributional impacts of the storms in Honduras and Guatemala demonstrated pronounced vulnerabilities in heavily exposed regions. In northern Honduras, the Sula Valley and the country's second-largest city, San Pedro Sula, were devastated by both storms. The impacts on Honduras included a complete submersion of the country's largest airport, causing extensive damage.<sup>518</sup> The majority of central and eastern Guatemala, as well as nearly the entirety of El Salvador, also experienced intense rainfall.

The storms caused widespread destruction. Eta and Iota devastated natural habitats, uprooted trees, and destroyed mangroves and wetlands, which serve as natural buffers against storm surges; their loss increases the vulnerability of coastal regions to future storms.<sup>519</sup> The combined effect of the hurricanes displaced over 600,000 people across Central America; in Honduras alone, the storms forced nearly 400,000 people into temporary shelters, exacerbating the country's pre-existing housing crisis.<sup>520</sup> The destruction of homes, schools, and health facilities not only displaced families but also disrupted essential services, complicating recovery efforts.<sup>521</sup> Agriculture, a critical sector, was hit hard, with extensive damage to crops such as maize, beans, and coffee, staples for both local consumption and export. This destruction of crops not only threatened food security but also impacted the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers. The economic losses

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<sup>518</sup> Stewart, S. 2021. Hurricane Iota. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020\\_Iota.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020_Iota.pdf). Page 45.

<sup>519</sup> International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2020. Operation Update Number 2: Emergency Appeal for Honduras, Hurricanes Eta and Iota. <https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/honduras-hurricane-eta-and-iota-emergency-appeal-n-mdr43007-operation-update-no-2>.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance. 2020. Tropical Storm Eta and Hurricane Iota: Six Weeks Later.

in agriculture were compounded by the destruction of infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, which hindered the transportation of goods and access to markets.<sup>522</sup>

The health impacts of Hurricanes Eta and Iota were significant and multifaceted. The immediate aftermath saw an increase in injuries and fatalities due to drowning, landslides, and collapsing structures.<sup>523</sup> The displacement of populations into overcrowded shelters increased the risk of infectious diseases, including Covid-19, which was already a pressing concern alongside the increased risk of waterborne diseases, such as cholera and leptospirosis, due to the flooding and contamination of water supplies.<sup>524</sup> Mental health impacts were also considerable. The trauma of losing homes, livelihoods, and loved ones contributed to a rise in cases of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder among affected populations. Long-term mental health support and psycho-social first aid were identified as critical needs in the aftermath of the hurricanes.<sup>525</sup>

Publicly available satellite imagery from the Honduran, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Mexican, and U.S. governments, displayed in Figures 4-9, illustrate the overlapping impacts the two storms had on vulnerable areas of Northern Central America.

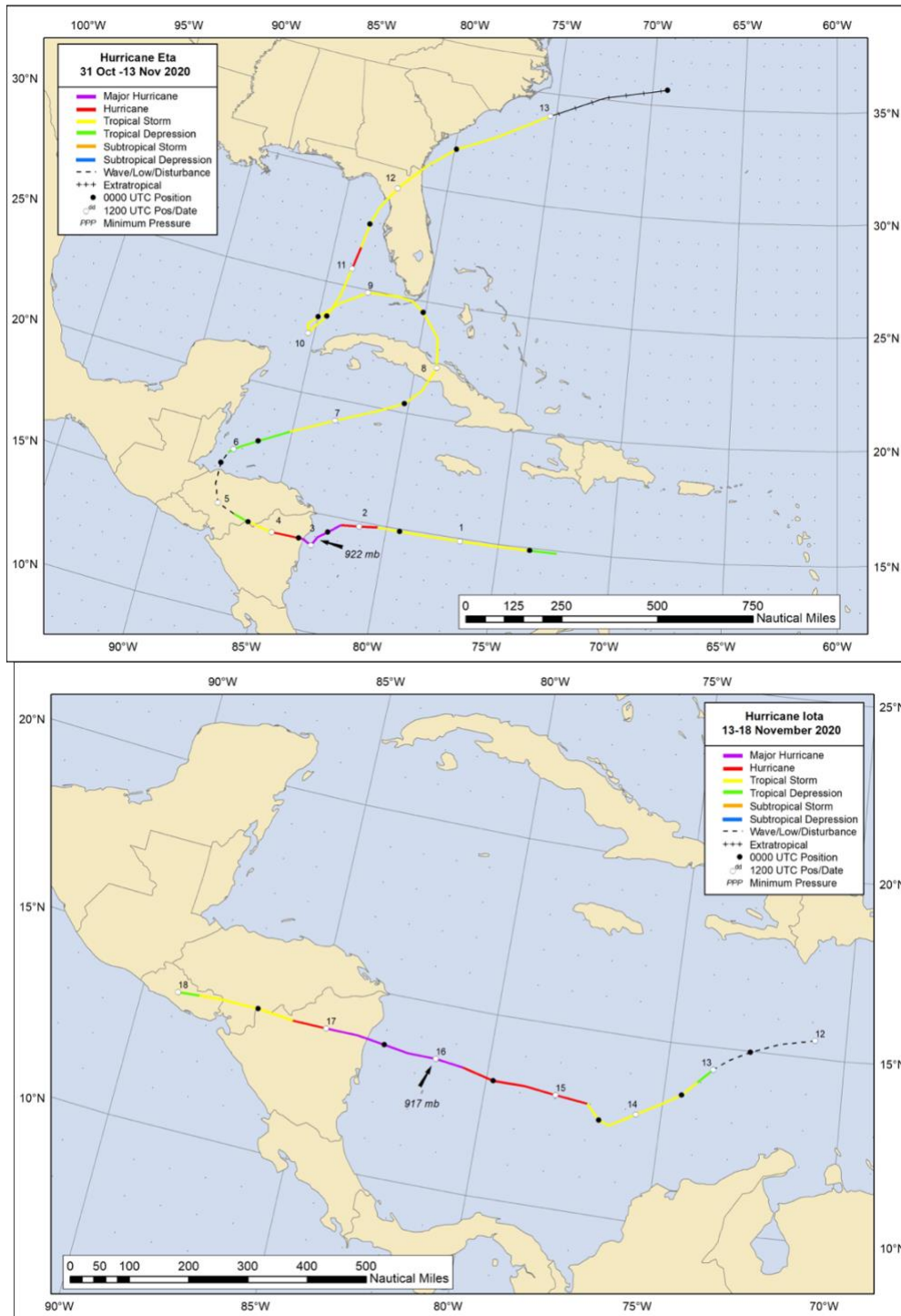
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<sup>522</sup> Cáliz, M. E.. 2020. Informe de CEPAL: Eta e Iota tuvieron un impacto de más de 45 mil millones de lempiras en Honduras. <https://honduras.un.org/es/105947-informe-de-cepal-eta-e-iota-tuvieron-un-impacto-de-m%C3%A1s-de-45-mil-millones-de-lempiras-en>.

<sup>523</sup> International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2020. Operation Update Number 2: Emergency Appeal for Honduras, Hurricanes Eta and Iota. <https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/honduras-hurricane-eta-and-iota-emergency-appeal-n-mdr43007-operation-update-no-2>.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

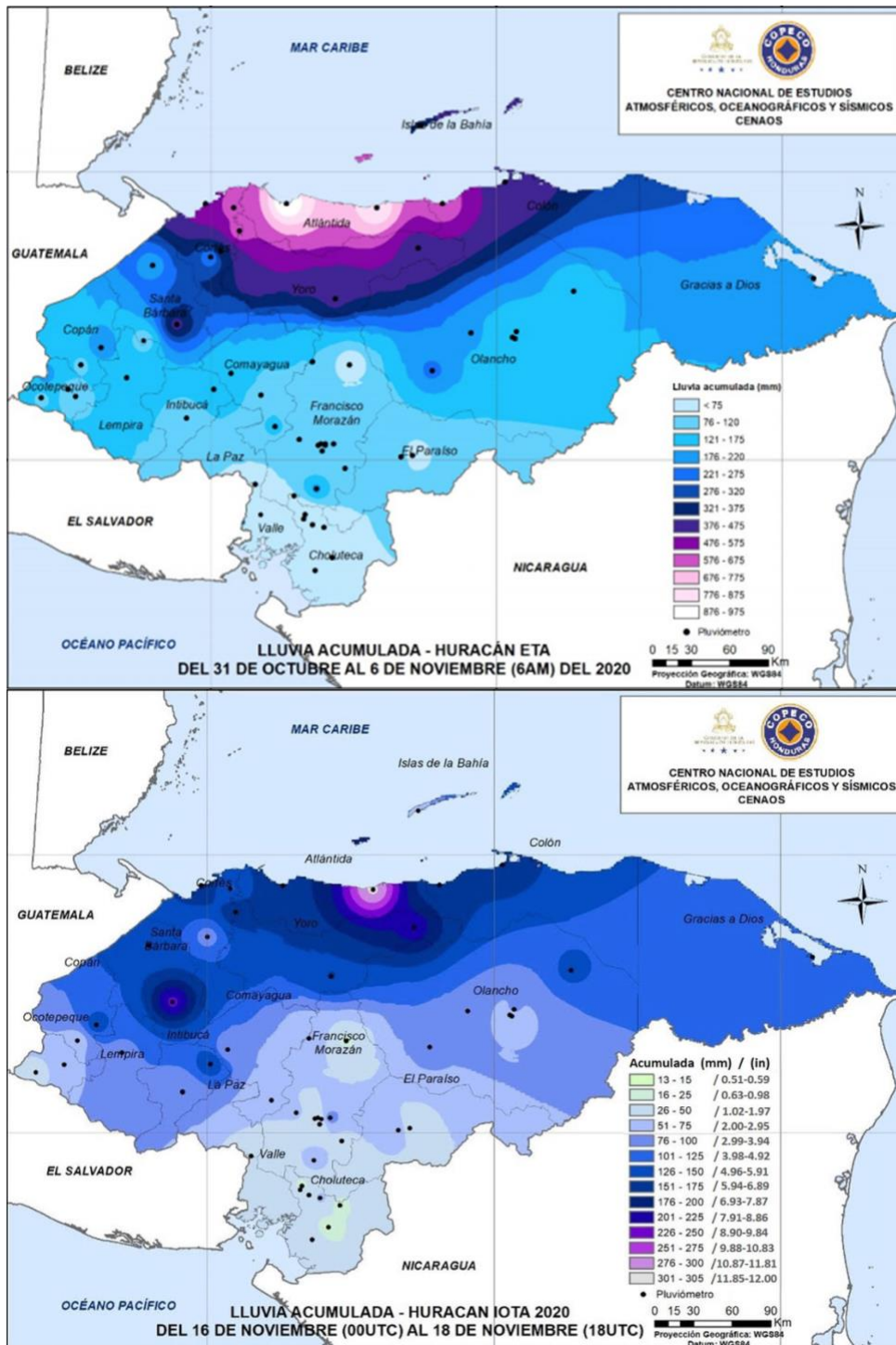
<sup>525</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance. 2020. Tropical Storm Eta and Hurricane Iota: Six Weeks Later.



Figures 4 and 5: Trajectories of Hurricanes Eta<sup>526</sup> and Iota.<sup>527</sup>

<sup>526</sup> Accessed at: Pasch R. J. et al. 2021. Hurricane Eta. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Page 56. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL292020\\_Eta.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL292020_Eta.pdf).

<sup>527</sup> Accessed at: Stewart, S. 2021. Hurricane Iota. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Page 23. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020\\_Iota.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020_Iota.pdf).



Figures 6 and 7: Rainfall on Honduras from Hurricanes Eta<sup>528</sup> and Iota.<sup>529</sup>

<sup>528</sup> Accessed at: Pasch R. J. et al. 2021. Hurricane Eta. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Page 60. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL292020\\_Eta.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL292020_Eta.pdf).

<sup>529</sup> Accessed at: Stewart, S. 2021. Hurricane Iota. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Page 35. [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020\\_Iota.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL312020_Iota.pdf).



The response to Eta and Iota was partial and incomplete. The international humanitarian community was clear about the scope and scale of ongoing needs following its initial assessments. A month after the hurricanes, Felipe del Cid, Head of the IFRC's Disaster Response Unit in the Americas, said:

Millions of people still need immediate humanitarian support: shelter, health care, psychosocial support, access to food, clean water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities. We are talking about a huge disaster, exacerbating an already ruinous combination of Covid-19, poverty and inequality in the region. These overlapping crises are making our operation one of the most complex we have ever mounted.<sup>532</sup>

However, funding was a challenge. NCA countries already reeling from economic contractions of Covid-19 asked for international support, but the result was low relative to the scale of damages. In all, the Inter-American Development Bank estimated that the combined economic losses from the hurricanes could exceed \$10 billion, a significant burden for the affected countries.<sup>533</sup> In return, the Honduran government only reported receiving pledges of roughly \$18.5 million in humanitarian assistance;<sup>534</sup> the Guatemalan government received \$16 million.<sup>535</sup> The result was a

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<sup>532</sup> International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2020. Humanitarian response to hurricanes Eta and Iota one of the most challenging faced by Central America in decades. December 15, 2020. <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/humanitarian-response-hurricanes-eta-and-iota-one-most-challenging-faced-central>.

<sup>533</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). 2021. Impactos de la tormenta tropical Eta y el huracán Iota en Honduras.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> Ober, K. and R. Schmidtke. 2023. Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala. Refugees International. Page 9.

slender response that meant, a year later, "...many communities [continued] to face water and sanitation problems, uninhabitable houses, and lack of access to food."<sup>536</sup>

U.S. HA/DR assistance was also insufficient and hampered by allegations of the ineffectiveness of the NCA governments in administering the response. USAID assistance included emergency food supplies, shelter materials, and support for water, sanitation, and hygiene programs.<sup>537</sup> However, the scale of assistance was criticized by community groups as lacking given the magnitude of the disasters.<sup>538</sup>

The destruction wrought by Hurricanes Eta and Iota exacerbated existing vulnerabilities across Northern Central America, leading to significant migration pressures. The hurricanes damaged over 700,000 hectares of crops, a critical source of livelihood and food security for many families already facing economic difficulties.<sup>539</sup> These adverse impacts contributed to people's decision to leave their homes or join so-called 'migrant caravans' headed towards North America.<sup>540</sup> The

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<sup>536</sup> Bozmoski, M.F., Brizuela de Ávila, M.E., and D. Sadurní. 2021. Addressing Instability in Northern Central America: Restrictions on Civil Liberties, Violence, and Climate Change. Atlantic Council Issue Brief, Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center.

<sup>537</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2020. United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Aid for People Affected by Eta and Iota. Press Release, December 3, 2020. <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/dec-3-2020-united-states-announces-additional-humanitarian-aid-people-affected-iota-eta>.

<sup>538</sup> Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. 2020. Tras los huracanes Eta e Iota, "Solo el pueblo puede salvar al pueblo." November 18, 2020. <https://www.uusc.org/tras-los-huracanes-eta-e-iota-solo-el-pueblo-puede-salvar-al-pueblo/>.

<sup>539</sup> International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2021. Communities affected by Hurricanes Eta and Iota are threatened by food insecurity, displacement and the climate crisis. Press Release, November 11, 2021. <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/communities-affected-hurricanes-eta-and-iota-are-threatened-food-insecurity>.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

storms also took a toll on food security, damaging 130,000 cultivated hectares, including maize, beans, and other staples.<sup>541</sup> This exacerbated food insecurity for 1.8 million already-food-insecure Guatemalans.<sup>542</sup> The resulting economic hardships and lack of governmental support in rebuilding efforts compelled many to migrate in search of better living conditions.

Even as it provided humanitarian assistance, however, the U.S. continued its migration deterrence policies. Notably, this included efforts to deport approximately 50,000 Hondurans back to a country facing humanitarian catastrophe, while also blocking nearly all asylum-seekers at the border.<sup>543</sup> This approach highlighted a dissonance between the provision of disaster relief and the enforcement of stringent immigration policies. Advocacy groups called for the designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for nationals from the affected countries, arguing that the hurricanes had left these nations incapable of safely and adequately accepting the return of their own nationals living abroad.<sup>544</sup> However, TPS designations were not immediately granted, leaving many displaced persons in legal limbo.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> Ober, K. and R. Schmidtke. 2023. Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala. Refugees International.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. 2020. Tras los huracanes Eta e Iota, “Solo el pueblo puede salvar al pueblo.” November 18, 2020. <https://www.uusc.org/tras-los-huracanes-eta-e-iota-solo-el-pueblo-puede-salvar-al-pueblo/>.

<sup>544</sup> Mathema, S. and T. Jawetz. 2020. TPS can support stability and recovery for Central American countries hit by recent hurricanes. *Center for American Progress*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/tps-can-aid-recovery-central-american-countries-hit-recent-hurricanes/>.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

The limited response to Eta and Iota reflects not only a structural disconnect in international HA/DR governance but also the underlying assumptions driving climate security discourse that undercut that very governance. Ober and Schmidtke wrote that the defined mandates of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs—which led the USG's HA/DR process up to and during the Biden administration—and USAID's in-country development missions resulted in inflexible funding streams that are unable to be quickly mobilized in the wake of a disaster. As a result, Ober and Schmidtke argued, this means affected "...population[s] receive just enough aid to help them survive the immediate post-disaster period, but not enough to enable them to recover and rebuild in a more risk-resilient way."<sup>546</sup> While this is unquestionably true, understanding what those development priorities are is as important as the fact that their funding cannot be quickly diverted for other aims. This contradiction became a key defining feature of Eta and Iota's combined legacy, because, as established in Chapter 5, the USAID development priorities in Northern Central America overwhelmingly shifted towards the single, unifying goal of preventing irregular migration to the U.S. southwest border. For the case of Eta and Iota in 2021, national security officials in the United States used Title 42 public health restrictions to bolster migration deterrence efforts and restrict asylum applications on the alleged grounds of keeping Covid-19 out of the country.<sup>547</sup> As a result, one of the natural dynamics expected in the 'immediate post-disaster period' in the NCA countries—internal displacement to less-affected locations within those respective

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<sup>546</sup> Ober, K. and R. Schmidtke. 2023. Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala. Refugees International. Page 10.

<sup>547</sup> American Immigration Council. 2022. A Guide to Title 42 Expulsions at the Border. May 2022. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/guide-title-42-expulsions-border>

countries—was marked by a significant lack of state presence and humanitarian protections for vulnerable populations.<sup>548</sup>

There was a notable amount of variation in these elements of the response. In a key example, the rural areas of central and northeastern Honduras required different investments than the dense, often informal sprawl around San Pedro Sula.<sup>549</sup> However, as a Guatemalan official reflected, "...the unified messaging from the U.S. embassies, from the White House, and from the State Department was that people shouldn't cross borders. They were very committed to tying these priorities to the Root Causes money, that was always clear."<sup>550</sup> As a result, as UNHCR's representative in Honduras stated, "Gangs took advantage of the extreme vulnerability of victims of the hurricanes to tighten their control, imposing restrictions on movements. For many who were displaced by the storms, going back could be dangerous."<sup>551</sup>

In summary, the crux of the issue was not only that U.S. foreign assistance was unable to be rapidly deployed to meet the humanitarian needs of the moment, or even the years following, although that certainly did not help. Rather, the specific migration deterrence focus of those funds actively prevented a more comprehensive recovery from the storms themselves. As a result, the limited

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<sup>548</sup> Fetzek, S. 2023. Climate change, migration and security in the context of urbanization in Northern Central America. United Nations Environment Programme and International Organization for Migration. <https://kmhub.iom.int/sites/default/files/2023-10/Climate%20Change%20Migration%20and%20Security%20NCA.pdf>.

<sup>549</sup> Author interview with Honduran official. February 23, 2023.

<sup>550</sup> Author interview with former Guatemalan official. April 2, 2023.

<sup>551</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2021. "In Honduras, climate change is one more factor sparking displacement." 9 November, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/11/61844eef4/hondurasclimate-change-factor-sparking-displacement.html>.

response pushed vulnerable populations, already displaced by the hurricanes, into increasing precarity and liminality. Communities risked being pushed into heightened violence and coercion at the hands of malign actors if they tried to flee, even as they were often unable to remain in place. In a tragic irony, this meant that the response was both a failure on humanitarian terms and in terms of migration deterrence: the increased vulnerability across Northern Central America still pushed significant numbers of migrants towards Mexico and the United States.<sup>552</sup>

Crucially, the importance placed on climate resilience through U.S. rhetoric was not matched in sufficient foreign assistance to meet these goals. Rather, this dissonance illustrates the core reality of climate security discourse, which serves to bolster U.S. multinational investment above all else. While the Biden administration increased U.S. foreign assistance to Northern Central America to nearly \$1 billion per year under the Root Causes Strategy, these funds were far outpaced by private-sector commitments totaling over \$5 billion through initiatives like the Partnership for Central America and Central America Forward.<sup>553 554</sup> This imbalance underscores how climate security discourse was used primarily to justify and mobilize multinational investment, rather than to significantly expand public aid or humanitarian relief efforts.

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<sup>552</sup> Fetzek, S. 2023. Climate change, migration and security in the context of urbanization in Northern Central America. United Nations Environment Programme and International Organization for Migration. <https://kmhub.iom.int/sites/default/files/2023-10/Climate%20Change%20Migration%20and%20Security%20NCA.pdf>.

<sup>553</sup> The White House. 2024. Fact Sheet: Vice President Harris Announces More Than \$1 Billion in New Private Sector Commitments as Part of Central America Forward. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/03/25/fact-sheet-vice-president-harris-announces-more-than-1-billion-in-new-private-sector-commitments-as-part-of-central-america-forward/>.

<sup>554</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development. 2024. Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2024: Latin America and the Caribbean. [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/FY24\\_CBJ\\_LAC.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/FY24_CBJ_LAC.pdf).

Important policymakers, including those at U.S. Southern Command (the geographic combatant command for the U.S. military in Latin America and the Caribbean), have argued that the challenges of the Eta and Iota response were primarily bureaucratic rather than ideological, suggesting that funding shortfalls and institutional inefficiencies—not the securitized framing of climate resilience and immigration policy—were to blame for inadequate relief efforts.<sup>555</sup> However, this perspective overlooks how the very structure of U.S. foreign assistance predetermines funding allocations and policy priorities. The emphasis on climate adaptation as a migration deterrence tool resulted in a funding model that prioritizes stability and containment over flexible, needs-based aid. This securitized approach helps explain why relief efforts were fragmented and insufficient, as aid distribution was shaped more by migration concerns than by humanitarian necessity.

In the remainder of the chapter, I examine how the fragmented response to Eta and Iota illustrates the ways U.S. policy decreases resilience. This element, which I refer to as the missing middle of HA/DR, reflects the thesis's core argument: that aligning climate security rhetoric with migration-detering policies is counterproductive. I also lay the groundwork for a discussion about how the resulting political dynamics suggest possible alternative approaches, explored in the Conclusion.

### Migration Deterrence as a Negative Resilience Agent

*I don't refer to those [U.S. Root Causes Strategy] documents at all, maybe more the L.A. Declaration, but really, they're just political statements. It feels like a historical statement of okay, they've done some things, but U.S. thinking is pretty simplistic: stop people where they are, stabilize them, stop people on the move. It's like they don't have the patience—here I'm thinking of the Safe Mobility Offices—to think through all the steps because they're in such a rut of being*

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<sup>555</sup> Mathema, S. and T. Jawetz. 2020. TPS can support stability and recovery for Central American countries hit by recent hurricanes. *Center for American Progress*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/tps-can-aid-recovery-central-american-countries-hit-recent-hurricanes/>.

*so reactive of just stopping people from coming to the border. That's all they care about. They could care less about [human rights] protection. They'll say that in closed door meetings. And so, if that's the approach, then the end result is very simplistic policy making of, essentially, some people will get through that might not be the people who most need it. This is what the parole programs [CHNV] are for us. There's no pertinent reason for that, and they don't put in place all the safeguards that really would be needed to help people, instead of seeing, two or three years later, people are still moving. But right now, for Venezuelans, a huge percentage of them on the move have just left, they're not people who have been in Colombia for a long time; the same thing goes for so many people here [in Guatemala] and in Honduras. I think this idea of if you give someone a job, the job has to make enough money where people don't have to move.*

*So, they're failing on both fronts: migration deterrence and root causes. And the irony is that focus is making it a lot worse.*

Author interview with Guatemalan official. January 17, 2023.

The case of Eta and Iota provides a cautionary tale for how climate security narratives, especially in the U.S., have prioritized climate resilience as a primary strategic goal for reducing exposure to the vulnerabilities and instability that are presumed to result from climate change. Climate resilience has enchanted the national security establishment (alongside the focus on disaster risk reduction, which is more prevalent in multilateral and scientific circles) as an easily understood concept for framing security cooperation and foreign assistance as they relate to climate change. Academic literature has assessed the challenges in defining what climate resilience means in practical terms, and how this ambiguity complicates 'operationalizing,' or putting into action, tangible policies to 'build' climate resilience. However, analyses of climate resilience haven't lent equal attention to how perceptions of climate change as a national security threat have bolstered the term's popularity. More work has focused on resulting prospects for climate change than the political-economic foundations of resilience narratives in the national security establishment.

I argue that U.S. climate security narratives that view climate resilience primarily as a tool for deterring U.S.-bound migration in Latin America prioritize national security concerns over climate and humanitarian assistance goals. This national security emphasis has served, in Diane Davis's framework, as a negative resilience agent; 'where the capacities of multiple institutions have been undermined, colonized, and/or collapse.' In doing so, the climate security pillar of short-term deterrence has created a construct of climate resilience that produces and reproduces three central false binaries: between instability and development, the perception of border control, and climate action and national security.

The migration deterrence focus augments the missing middle between HA/DR and development by highlighting the functional role that climate resilience plays in allowing national security officials to pursue their goals. Elites have used the narrative of climate resilience to shape the various bureaucratic stages between the instability and fragility caused by disasters and the stability afforded by development. For the United States, temporal and political considerations are paramount in determining what kind of foreign assistance to provide in the wake of a disaster to bolster resilience. Stabilization concerns, or the prevention of large-scale violence, must be addressed before moving from a disaster response perspective to one of building longer-run development. As has been illustrated in the discussion of the Global Fragility Act, there is explicit recognition that large-scale foreign assistance is heavily conditioned on political considerations.

However, blurred lines define the HDP nexus, where investments made in disaster response contexts both inevitably influence stabilization and development concerns as well as react to their previous iterations. The rigidity and conditionality of this constructed spectrum is underpinned by

the 'bounce-back' fundamental of resilience, which serves as a stress test for institutions at any point in time. As a result, the thresholds between these stasis points are highly subjective. As a former U.S. official commented:

We had, I think, days when we were talked about, alright, how do we define the threshold at which stabilization stops and then development begins? And then, however it's defined, it starts to move toward resilience and we've batted around a lot of potential metrics, timeframes—months, a year—and then ultimately the decision was made by folks at the assistant secretary level to not put a specific time frame in. And to be fair to them, I get it. Contexts differ. So, do we want to say that stabilization has to end after a year when we haven't really completed our objective? So instead of setting a timeframe, we said that it's more trying to achieve an end state where certain political actors have control over that territory, and conditions are in place whereby those actors, whether formal or informal, can prevent a recurrence of large-scale violence. So, once we achieve that, that's when stabilization ends and we can start shifting to development.<sup>556</sup>

The arbitrary nature of these frameworks helps national security officials ingrain the migration-deterrent assumption that a lack of resilience will reduce control over the smooth functioning and predictability of certain political situations. Elites are clearly aware that personal adaptations to extreme circumstances reflect the available options for survival and prosperity. As a result, national security officials have conditioned those available options to be predicated on political stability to ensure that people will not feel the need to flee their homes. Resilience becomes an all-encompassing keyword that is thrown around freely, as it is easily understood as an assumed positive. This performative language, however, clashes with the material interests being pursued.

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<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

As a U.S. official noted:

In the development world, there is a history of discourse that if people are on the move, we failed on development terms. That's not always the case: people can be on the move because they're seeking better opportunities in ways that are going to increase their and their family's resilience. We have to push back against that narrative and discourse within the world of international development and elevate the issue of mobility being a potentially positive thing while recognizing all of the protection aspects that have to go into that to make sure that people aren't being exploited.

I think what's just really important to always keep in that narrative is the link between migration and resilience and cases where migration can lead to increased risks, especially as people cross international borders. But we also see increased resilience with migration, particularly as family units are perhaps migrating in an internal capacity, which is how we imagine most climate-related migration is going to happen. Of course, that could always change, but with the [World Bank Groundswell] reports estimating that about two-thirds of climate-related migration is likely to be internal, as you start to diversify livelihoods among families and to have the opportunity for people in urban areas to be sending remittances to rural areas, and people in rural areas being able to send food to family members in urban areas, you can actually increase resilience.<sup>557</sup>

The twisting applications of resilience again underscore the central argument of this thesis: national security officials know that key pieces of U.S. policy work against each other and use these contradictions to performatively work towards abstract notions of climate security while furthering their material goals of migration deterrence. In the case of resilience, climate-affected mobility is presented here with a slight catch: that mobility can increase family and community-level resilience only if it is internal to a single country. Part of this perception likely stems from the safe space of climate security discussed in Chapter 6, in which U.S. development practitioners can frame migration as indeed having a positive function if it is couched within the boundaries of internal displacement. Critically, national security officials then phrase the outcome of migration policies as contributing to the perceived resilience that anchors the Root Causes Strategy. Even if

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<sup>557</sup> Author interview with U.S. official, July 31, 2023.

policies are not building peoples' capacities to stay in rural areas of Northern Central America, then they at least limit movement to urban areas within those countries.

This dissonance between the acknowledged positive outcomes of mobility and the need to condition its political impact reflects the second false binary that the migration deterrence pillar of climate security discourse leverages as a negative resilience agent. Specifically, national security officials present a false choice between root causes investments and border control to pursue not only national security, but the more altruistic construction of climate security. Because migration deterrence is in many ways the goal for the national security establishment, even those within the whole of government approach seeking to present a more human-centered and realistic assessment of the full range of mobility drivers and patterns in the Americas are constrained in their ability to do so. Elites understand, by definition, the full variety of mobility and immobility patterns that climate change contributes to, in a messy and unavoidable intersection with economic, security, and cultural concerns. That someone's mobility decisions range in complexity significantly beyond the false binary of either staying put because their 'root causes' for remaining in Northern Central America have been satisfied, or otherwise attempting to reach the United States, is not a central driver of analysis for the institutions that have been hard-wired with the zeal of migration deterrence. This tragic, short-sighted irony means that the resilience narrative, when paired with migration deterrence, will reduce the capabilities of the institutions responding to the compounded challenges of structural instability impacted by extreme weather events and other climate shocks.

As a U.S. official stated:

In Central America, the haphazard response to Eta and Iota was an enormous complicator for looking at how people are making these decisions to undertake these longer journeys to the United States, even to Mexico, really, as a final destination after they've made a step in the middle. Especially given that this is a pattern and some of it is driven, obviously, by politics in some places. Obviously, Venezuela is a great example of that. Or Haiti is a great example of that, where the governments don't, perhaps, operate in a way that is best serving their nationals. Many of them have gone from rural to urban. They've gone from Venezuela to Colombia. They don't want to integrate into Colombia. Are we able to really understand what is causing people to make the decision after they've made that first step? I don't think we have a really good sense of how many steps people are making before they make sort of the ultimate step, which is "I'm going to try and get to Mexico or to the U.S. border." And I think that's the part I would like us to understand better. There's a lot of work on Root Causes. But as a policy community we need to better understand what's happening in that middle space. There are very few people who wake up in the morning and say "Today's the day I'm going to go through the Darién." They move somewhere else first and then they decide from there.<sup>558</sup>

The function that migration deterrence plays as a central organizing principle for climate security discourse quickly erodes the institutional capacities needed to respond to the multiplicity of challenges associated with managing climate-affected mobility. This vision of national security is not without alternatives; the Root Causes Strategy and L.A. Declaration are not the only approaches to this multilateral set of issues. The Palenque Meeting, a summit in Chiapas, Mexico of heads of state from Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Panama and Venezuela, was produced as a counterweight to the U.S.-led strategy, including Venezuela and Cuba (political nonstarters as partners for the U.S.) as potential countries

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<sup>558</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. August 21, 2023.

of return, not just of origin for migrants heading to the United States.<sup>559</sup> The United Nations, through UNHCR and IOM, while key partners in the Los Angeles Declaration, also present hemispheric cooperation more in line with humanitarian protection concerns first and foremost, in line with the Global Compact for Migration (which the United States has endorsed)<sup>560</sup> rather than subject to their application against U.S. political goals.<sup>561</sup> I explore these alternative frameworks more deeply in the Conclusion.

To many U.S. regional partners, these alternative frameworks are appealing to consider because of two common understandings. First, attention and funding for HA/DR, disaster risk response, and anticipatory action to proactively think about emergency management pale in comparison to the grinding emphasis on migration deterrence.<sup>562</sup> Second, the institutional conundrums within key U.S. agencies that the Root Causes focus present are in effect very difficult to navigate for partners. For example, the State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), which runs refugee vetting but can't work on internal displacement, isn't deeply involved with the RCS and sends partners to USAID, which doesn't do cross-border migration management, just

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<sup>559</sup> TeleSUR. 2023. LATAM Countries Hold Migration Summit in Chiapas, Mexico. October 22, 2023. <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/LATAM-Countries-Hold-Migration-Summit-in-Chiapas-Mexico-20231022-0014.html>.

<sup>560</sup> U.S. State Department. 2021. Revised National Statement of the United States of America on the Adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. December 17, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/GCM.pdf>.

<sup>561</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2024. Following high-level mission, UNHCR recognizes Central America and Mexico's response to displacement. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/following-high-level-mission-unhcr-recognizes-central-america-and-mexicos#:~:text=Their%20plight%20demonstrates%20the%20need,climate%20change%20and%20natural%20disasters>.

<sup>562</sup> Author interview with Mexican official. September 22, 2022.

root causes and HA/DR.<sup>563</sup> As a result, while the RCS is thought of by the U.S. national security establishment as a joint strategy for climate adaptation as well as migration action, it is more understood as a limited "topical salve" that does not allow for flexibility to cover the diverse range of realities NCA countries are responding to across timescales, especially in disaster response.<sup>564</sup>

In this vein, the U.S. Safe Mobility Offices are a central reflection of the false tension that migration deterrence presents between root causes alleviation and border control. Despite frequent exhortations by U.S. officials that the SMOs were not an extension of the U.S. border,<sup>565</sup> they by definition provide access to similar immigration pathways available to asylum seekers physically at the border. However, their very existence presents a tension between root causes alleviation and border control because of what is referred to as the 'pull factor' described in Chapter 6: that housing an SMO (opened in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador) creates demand for would-be migrants to seek asylum in the United States through those SMOs. The resulting influx of asylum seekers is perceived by countries around the region as a potential contributor to further instability, not a reduction. In this way, the SMOs were understood as a U.S. political tool of migration deterrence first and foremost, regardless of the U.S. narrative around them.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> Author interview with former Salvadoran official. January 28, 2023.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. July 29, 2023.

<sup>566</sup> Author interview with Mexican official. September 22, 2022.

As a U.S. official stated:

What we have tried to do with each SMO is identify some guardrails that will help to address host country concerns on the pull factor. The other piece of it is obviously the domestic political reality for each of these countries. They are engaged in a partnership with the U.S. government to do this initiative, and they want to see benefits to their own countries and to their own citizens. With each country there have been a set of requests each country has had to make sure we are responding to those interests from them. We've tried to, in the process, look at ways that we can provide resources and opportunities to host country nationals as well. We are also starting down that path of how to better engage civil society, both locally in these countries and also with the large group of NGOs and INGOs who work in this space, who have an interest in the issue set and are doing their own innovations and creative programming in this space. So really, we are looking to do more with both versions of that civil society on a local level. Our implementing partners UNHCR and IOM are obviously very engaged with civil society already, especially in making sure people understand what the SMOs are and what they aren't, so we'll have clarity of messaging and clarity of information.<sup>567</sup>

While the implementation of a new program as ambitious as the SMOs will inevitably take time, there seemed to be a significant disconnect between how their deterrence functions were perceived by the Biden administration and their regional hosts. As a Guatemalan official commented:

I don't think civil society is consulted at all. I know this from the Safe Mobility Office here, which does impact Guatemala quite a lot. There is zero consultation, even zero information about the program. I guess I would put the SMOs under the Root Causes Strategy, definitely in the deterrence category, even though it does have protection elements, because it's resettlement. Same in Colombia. Zero consultation around the concepts or the theory, but because some of these things have to be negotiated, at least with the Safe Mobility Offices, some of them have had a say and have had stronger opinions maybe than the U.S. government wanted, certainly in Colombia's experience, less in Guatemala's. Usually there's carrot and stick, there's funding, but the funding beyond USAID is for things our governments are supposed to want, but it's not much – “this one staff person is going to help us try and figure this out.” It's like, what is U.S. funding these days anyways,

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<sup>567</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. August 21, 2023.

especially in terms of deterrence? How much of the policing that goes into migration management are we funding?<sup>568</sup>

The Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran governments had a tacit, embedded understanding that the RCS is a migration-deterrent tool for the U.S. border control narrative promoted through its variety of regional frameworks and engagements. What the U.S. had difficulty acknowledging, publicly at least, is that the conflicting incentives presented through its programming did not align with the reality that wage differentials, persecution, environmental degradation, family reunification, and other factors continued to serve as mobility drivers in the Western Hemisphere. While the RCS aims to deter migration overall, the SMOs aimed to ensure orderly migration that did not physically occur at the U.S. border. In this way, the incongruence of these policies themselves contributed to their functioning as negative resilience agents, exacerbating many of the known stressors contributing to mixed movements in the Americas.

As a Guatemalan official explained:

One main sticking point with the SMOs is the pull factor that none of the [NCA] governments wanted. More people are coming through, and there are huge tensions around, for example, the Colombian government thinking Colombians in Colombia would be eligible and they're not. Guatemalans in Guatemala are, but we have resettlement in Guatemala for Guatemalans already. So that's not new. In Costa Rica all of the programs have cut-off days where you had to be in the country already. All to say it isn't going to solve anything for people on the move, because those people already are stuck or have stayed a long time. In fact, it could topple some of these efforts on integration and other pieces by adding additional strain to the system.<sup>569</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Author interview with Guatemalan official. June 1, 2023.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

The misaligned contradictions around border control that the U.S. migration deterrence focus promotes feed into the final false binary of the RCS, in which there is an opportunity cost associated with investing in climate action as opposed to national security. The national security establishment, broadly, sees this choice as more of a condition, where every climate investment should have national security considerations baked in. As a U.S. official explained of U.S. Southern Command:

[Commander of U.S. Southern Command] General [Laura] Richardson is trying to use war gaming and exercises to build in engineering projects that might help with resilience, whether it's coastal defenses or nature-based solutions. It should be something locally designed and suitable at the community level, but it should be something that a partner country wants, that serves multiple purposes both to improve resilience and address climate insecurities. And oh, by the way, it should ensure that those countries still see the U.S. as a trusted ally and partner, because there's China just around the corner, they'll give you a loan and then you're going to get into a debt payback situation and your infrastructure isn't going to work properly, or they'll take your mine and won't clean up after their waste. Not that U.S. behavior has always been perfect either, we have our share of faults and our share of bad actors, particularly across the Latin American region.<sup>570</sup>

The high-level awareness of potential geopolitical implications is a clearly understood frame for climate change as it relates to national security. However, elites quickly reverted the narrative to dated institutional understandings of the border security construct that engulf any sophisticated analysis of climate change impacts, as well as potential solutions, once migration deterrence enters the picture. The RCS, as a result, was fundamentally shaped by this institutional undertow, and ended by contributing to the very issues it is stated to help solve. As a former U.S. official stated of the Biden climate security moment:

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<sup>570</sup> Author interview with U.S. official. August 21, 2023.

It really has been a function of a first term administration getting closer to reelection and the desire to make sure numbers are low because that's seen as critical to electoral success. I do think, though, that within the administration there's a real fascination with understanding the reasons people are leaving right now. CBP [U.S. Customs and Border Protection] is doing an incredible amount of additional interviewing of individuals at the border to understand who told them to go, how did they figure out the route. Saying they're trying to dismantle the smuggling networks is part of the guise of it, but really, everybody's trying to understand the 'why' of people on the move without getting there, and at the same time, there's this doubling down and overreliance on the same thinking that I think has ruled the day since Doris Meissner was INS Commissioner and created Prevention through Deterrence. I don't think there's a real understanding of what a deterrent is and what would stop somebody from moving. That's so many additional degrees of nuance and is actually overlapping with the real reasons people are moving.<sup>571</sup>

As a result, migration deterrence and the economic development discursively claimed through climate resilience have been paired in a fashion reminiscent of the 'missing middle' of disaster response frameworks. These contradictions have ended up being the central organizing principle for the national security establishment's efforts to operationalize so-called climate security in service of their material interests. The failure to bridge short-term relief with long-term resilience in the Eta and Iota response exposes fundamental limitations of the U.S. climate security discourse. The missing middle in disaster response is not merely an oversight but a structural outcome of a policy model that prioritizes migration control over comprehensive resilience-building. This gap will continue to have serious consequences as climate change intensifies displacement pressures in Northern Central America. If climate adaptation remains tied to security objectives, future disaster responses will likely reproduce these failures, leaving vulnerable populations without adequate protection while reinforcing deterrence-driven engagement strategies.

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<sup>571</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. August 11, 2023.

Some policymakers argue that climate adaptation funding is distinct from migration deterrence and is solely aimed at building regional resilience. While it is true that adaptation programs have independent development goals, this thesis shows that funding structures, allocation priorities, and policy frameworks tie these efforts directly to migration control. For instance, the Root Causes Strategy explicitly conditioned aid on migration stabilization optics and metrics, reinforcing a deterrence-first approach under the narrative of humanitarian engagement.

### *Reflections*

This chapter detailed the broader implications and impacts of U.S. climate security discourse through a case study of the U.S. response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020. It highlights how the fusion of climate security narratives with migration deterrence objectives has paradoxically undermined resilience, contrary to official claims. Central to this analysis is the identification of a bureaucratic gap—the ‘missing middle’—between disaster response and development assistance in U.S. foreign policy. This structural gap reflects the consequences of prioritizing short-term deterrence goals over long-term development strategies, revealing a key tension between the rhetoric of addressing root causes and the reality of U.S. engagement in Northern Central America. The chapter argues that the Biden administration’s Root Causes Strategy failed to reconcile the contradictions between deterrence and development, ultimately exacerbating the vulnerabilities it sought to address. These findings underscore the thesis's central argument that climate security discourse has been instrumentalized by U.S. national security officials to advance migration deterrence policies, often at the expense of genuine humanitarian and developmental outcomes. By detailing the unintended consequences of these policies, this chapter reinforces the need for a critical re-evaluation of how climate and migration policies are framed and implemented.

The U.S. response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota also illustrates a fundamental contradiction in climate security discourse: while policymakers frame resilience as a means of stabilizing vulnerable regions, their approach to climate adaptation is narrowly constrained by migration deterrence priorities. This analysis demonstrates how climate resilience, when securitized, fails to deliver sustainable recovery—instead, it reinforces the very instability it claims to prevent. These findings reinforce the thesis’s broader critique: climate security discourse is not simply a rhetorical tool, but a strategic framework that prioritizes geopolitical and border control interests over genuine environmental and humanitarian concerns. The Conclusion explores what the lessons of climate securitization within U.S. engagement with Northern Central America lend for in the years ahead.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Climate Securitization**

*I share the skepticism that any of the private investment is working. The other side of it is the securitization component, our national security apparatus, and the way we see the world in a post-9/11 reality where our borders have shifted so far out and we've securitized layers of borders between here and before someone even gets to Panama. I think the first time people now are registered is in Colombia. I don't think the U.S. national security apparatus will coexist with the idea of somebody coming up to a border without being tracked and pre-registered and having an appointment long term. If that continues to exist at all as an option, right?*

*It's all so reactionary still. We have to wrap our heads around the reality that the number of people on the move is going to quadruple with climate change and we don't have systems that exist for that. In fact, we have systems that are at loggerheads with that and are designed to repel and push everybody back.*

Author interview with former U.S. official. August 11, 2023.

This conclusion first reviews the thesis's motivations, design, findings, and contributions. It then goes on to advocate for regional integration in the Americas as an alternative to securitized migration deterrence. I draw these links by contrasting my case study with climate securitization in other U.S. and global policy. I conclude with a discussion of future research needs and implications of current trends.

### Summary of Research Motivations, Design, and Findings

#### *Motivations*

This study was motivated by the research question: How and why did the Biden administration embrace a discourse of climate security in its engagement with Northern Central America, and with what consequences for political dynamics in the region? By interrogating the constructed nature of climate security discourse and its linkage to U.S. migration deterrence strategies, I aimed to bridge these gaps. I provide nuanced analysis that captures the complex interplay between

climate change, migration, and power in policymaking. My focus on U.S. engagement underlines a grounded exploration of a region acutely affected by both climate impacts and mobility pressures.

### *Research Design*

The thesis uses a qualitative, case-study methodology centered on critical analysis of policy discourse and elite interviews. I examined a range of U.S. and regional perspectives, policy documents, and strategic communications to understand how elites framed climate change as a national security issue in the context of migration. The research design was iterative: I began with identifying key themes in secondary literature, proceeded through field interviews, and culminated in systematic coding and analysis of the data. Five thematic lenses guided the analysis: (1) climate resilience and adaptation, (2) immigration and border control, (3) military and transnational crime, (4) humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR), and (5) trade and economic development. By grouping evidence under these lenses and comparing it to policy outcomes (such as the Biden Administration's Root Causes Strategy and various security and development initiatives), I traced patterns of continuity and contradiction. This design allowed me to probe why U.S. officials deployed climate security rhetoric to advance migration deterrence goals in Northern Central America, and how that rhetoric influenced regional political dynamics.

### *Key Findings*

The thesis's findings highlight a strategic and often counterproductive intertwining of climate and migration agendas in U.S. policy. In brief, the thesis makes the following key arguments:

*Climate Security as a Cover for Migration Deterrence:* U.S. national security officials have increasingly invoked climate change as a ‘threat multiplier’ to justify aggressive efforts to deter migration, including through root causes policies. Climate security discourse was less about addressing environmental risks and more about repackaging longstanding border security goals in apolitical terms. This discourse helped officials present migration crackdowns and aid conditionality as climate action, in some ways obscuring the coercive nature of these policies. In other words, climate securitization became a ‘safe space’ for pushing controversial migration policies under the narrative of technocratic climate intervention.

*Historical Continuities and Power Dynamics:* Far from a novel development, climate-centric framing in Northern Central America builds on historical U.S. security and economic strategies. The analysis showed that after the Cold War and then again after 9/11, the U.S. fused migration control with other agendas, especially counternarcotics and free trade. The recent climate focus is a new layer on this foundation. It reflects enduring structures of power: a fully integrated regional economic system paired with militarized borders, where U.S. and regional elites cooperate to manage labor flows and keep potential migrants in place. Consequently, climate security rhetoric tends to reinforce existing hierarchies—benefiting multinational corporations and security actors—while sidelining root causes of both climate vulnerability and migration.

*Migration Deterrence Trumps Climate Adaptation:* The preeminence of migration deterrence as a U.S. goal has skewed the allocation of resources and institutional priorities, often at the expense of climate adaptation and humanitarian assistance. A striking manifestation of this was highlighted in the ‘missing middle’ of U.S. foreign assistance. My research examined a persistent gap between short-term disaster response and long-term development support in the region. After the

devastating 2020 hurricanes Eta and Iota in Northern Central America, the U.S. delivered immediate relief supplies but provided scant follow-through for recovery and resilience, exacerbated by migration-deterrent policies. This gap exists in part because funds and attention are channeled toward deterring migration in the near term, rather than building adaptive capacity for the future. The result is a cycle of recurring crises: communities remain vulnerable to the next climate shock, and each disaster in turn can spur new waves of displacement.

*Bureaucratic Fragmentation and Policy Incoherence:* The thesis found contradictions within U.S. engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America. Agencies tasked with migration governance and disaster response have overlapping mandates but poor coordination, largely due to securitized policy framing. For instance, the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) is responsible for refugee resettlement but cannot address internal displacement; at the same time, USAID handled disaster relief and root causes, but not cross-border migration management. Such institutional silos meant that even well-intentioned strategies (like the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy, which ostensibly tackled climate adaptation alongside migration drivers) faltered in implementation. The climate-security nexus as framed by Washington produced disjointed outcomes. Humanitarian programs were constrained, development projects remained short-term, and security concerns dominated the agenda.

A potential counterargument to the main claims of this thesis posits that climate adaptation efforts are genuinely humanitarian and not part of a securitized migration agenda. Some policymakers argue that adaptation funding is aimed at strengthening regional economies and reducing climate vulnerability, independent of migration control. However, as this thesis demonstrates, U.S. climate adaptation funding is directly or indirectly tied to migration deterrence goals, shaping how aid is

distributed and conditioning support on containment outcomes. This is evident in the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy, where climate resilience was positioned as a preventative measure against displacement rather than a right to mobility.

In sum, the thesis finds that climate securitization in U.S. policy has served as a performative tool for both Democratic politics and policy. I show how the Biden approach reflects not just a backlash to the first Trump administration but the evolution of a longer historical trajectory grounded in trade liberalization and migration deterrence. The politics of climate adaptation clashed uncomfortably with regional migration realities and U.S. national security goals.

I argue that the language and discourse of climate security should be understood as an intentional, opportunistic alignment of political narratives and policy choices—one that represents a dynamic coalition of interests influencing the Democratic Party. Notably, this version of a root causes strategy strengthened the perception of U.S.-bound migration as a threat, one exacerbated by climate change and other drivers. The political move was an attempt to shift domestic focus away from the U.S.-Mexico border by emphasizing the 'safe space' of a more technical, apolitical, development-oriented agenda for migration deterrence alongside legal pathways and law enforcement—one that pales in comparison to Donald Trump's aggressive, punitive deterrence. Make no mistake: this was an effort to distance Democrats from Trump's border fixation, to appeal to the progressive wing of the party, and to shift attention away from a losing political issue.

This climate security reframing ultimately failed on both its political and policy merits. Politically, Trump and his allies were able to re-center the debate on the border and paint Democrats as the

party of open borders. Policy-wise, the architects of the Biden approach framed their efforts as a softer, more humanitarian expression of U.S. power. In practice, the deterrence focus often exacerbated humanitarian protection concerns. Rebalancing this convergence of interests is imperative for an era being shaped by restrictive immigration policies, economic realignment, the unraveling of the humanitarian and development sectors, and an accelerating climate crisis. Future research could consider whether the actions of the second Trump administration, by dismantling both the political and policy foundations of climate security narratives altogether, in effect produce a de-securitization of climate-migration narratives. These findings prompt the rethinking of prevailing approaches, as discussed in the following sections.

#### Theoretical Contributions to Academic and Policy Literature

Beyond its empirical insights, this thesis advances several theoretical debates at the intersection of securitization theory, critical migration studies, and climate governance scholarship. It contributes new perspectives by critically examining how climate change is discursively constructed as a security threat, and to what effect. The key theoretical contributions are as follows:

First, this research extends securitization theory in the context of climate change and migration. The thesis builds on the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization—the idea that an issue becomes a security threat through performative speech acts (e.g., officials declaring an emergency)—but pushes it further by illuminating the power dynamics and material interests that underpin those speech acts. Whereas traditional securitization theory emphasizes the rhetorical construction of threats, this study affirms that securitization is not a neutral or merely linguistic process. Instead, it explores what David Keen called the 'positive functionality' of securitization for elites. In the

climate-migration context, labeling climate change as a security issue served concrete agendas. Securitization provided bureaucratic cover, justified budget priorities, and legitimized tough border measures that might otherwise have faced resistance. This finding contributes to securitization theory by demonstrating how elite actors actively leverage securitizing discourse to advance pre-existing policy goals, effectively bending the extraordinary ‘emergency’ narrative to serve ordinary political ends. In doing so, the research aligns with and adds evidence to critical security studies that view securitization as a deeply political, interest-laden process rather than a neutral act of problem identification.

In addition, this work furthers critical migration studies and border criminology literature by aligning climate security discourse within linked securitization and migration agendas. The thesis highlights how environmental discourses are integrated into the longstanding securitization of migration. Scholars of migration have documented how states construct irregular migrants as threats (e.g., through criminalization and militarized borders). This thesis demonstrates that climate change is the latest vector through which mobility is being securitized. Biden officials framed climate-affected mobility as an emergent security challenge requiring deterrence and containment. By analyzing policy mechanisms like so-called safe mobility initiatives that ostensibly address climate displacement but function to restrict mobility, the study speaks to a continuum between climate securitization and the criminalization of migration. As a result, I help bridge a gap between migration scholarship and environmental politics, showing that climate rhetoric can reinforce exclusionary migration regimes. The contribution here is twofold. Analytically, I help expand critical migration theory to encompass climate-affected mobility.

Empirically, I challenge policies that treat migrants primarily as security problems even when climate change exacerbates their vulnerability.

This research also extends cautionary perspectives on the merging of climate and security agendas. I draw on insights from political ecology for how power and inequality shape environmental outcomes, illustrating this through the case of U.S.–Northern Central America relations. I join scholars examining how climate policy, when securitized, can be co-opted by geopolitical and economic interests—for example, by channeling climate funds into border security infrastructure or by framing development aid as a tool to keep would-be migrants in place. This finding warns of a securitization trap: when adaptation and resilience efforts are justified mainly by migration control, they risk neglecting community needs and human rights. This research also advances scholarly debates on the global climate regime by emphasizing regional power asymmetries. I show how a powerful state (in this case, the United States) can shape climate adaptation discourse in a neighboring region to align with its own security narrative. Ultimately, the thesis advocates for climate governance approaches that resist securitized narratives and instead uphold humanitarian and justice-oriented principles, aligning with emerging scholarship on human security and climate justice rather than traditional national security frames.<sup>572</sup>

The interdisciplinary synthesis of disparate bodies of knowledge—securitization theory, migration studies, and climate policy—underpin the theoretical contribution of this thesis in reinterpreting

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<sup>572</sup> International Rescue Committee. 2022. As conflict and humanitarian needs soar in the Sahel and beyond, the IRC urges the EU to put safety, food insecurity and rights at the heart of the EU-AU Summit. Press Release. <https://www.rescue.org/eu/press-release/conflict-and-humanitarian-needs-soar-sahel-and-beyond-irc-urges-eu-put-safety-food#:~:text=Last%20year%2C%20levels%20of%20insecurity,dangerous%2C%20not%20less%2C%20for%20civilians>.

the meaning of so-called ‘climate security.’ The thesis argues that climate security discourse in practice is a tool that different actors use for different ends. By empirically mapping how U.S. officials invoked climate security in speeches, strategies, and programs, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the term’s function and discursive construction. I show that beyond the surface-level consensus that climate change is a national security issue, there is a contested space where security professionals, development experts, and humanitarian actors negotiate what that means in practice. This contribution fleshes out the concept of climate securitization with a grounded case study. As a result, climate securitization is understood not as an abstract or inevitable process, but a deliberate strategy to be critiqued and reformed. This is valuable for policy literature by helping distinguish when climate security framing is mobilized to mitigate climate risks versus when it is used instrumentally to pursue tangential policies (like migration crackdowns). By clarifying this instrumentalization, I hope to provide policymakers and advocates with additional critical perspective needed to evaluate securitized climate initiatives on their merits and impacts. This work therefore reframes climate security narratives from being seen as objective to being understood as political choices—which should be weighed against alternative approaches.

In sum, the thesis contributes to a critical and reflexive understanding of national security discourse in the age of climate change. I urge scholars and policymakers to assess the performative power of climate narratives, remaining alert to which interests are served when climate change is securitized. By doing so, I lay theoretical groundwork for developing more equitable and effective responses to climate-affected mobility, as discussed in subsequent sections.

## Regional Integration as an Alternative to Deterrence

One of the central implications of this research is that the prevailing deterrence-oriented approach to human mobility is neither inevitable nor optimal. As the climate crisis accelerates and displacement increases, deeper regional integration and cooperation in the Western Hemisphere offer a more humane and effective alternative to unilateral migration crackdowns. Rather than framing human mobility as a security threat to be stopped, the U.S. could work with its neighbors to more collaboratively manage migration as a shared reality—through development partnerships, legal pathways, and protection frameworks that acknowledge human mobility as a form of adaptation. In a maximalist U.S. deterrence environment such as the Trump era, other states must assume this responsibility to alleviate mobility pressures and related vulnerabilities. This section advocates for such an approach, drawing on emerging regional initiatives that contrast sharply with the U.S.’s deterrence paradigm.

Multiple developments from regional governments and multilateral bodies underscore the viability of an integration-oriented strategy, ideally featuring the United States but not constrained by U.S. participation. For example, in October 2023, Mexico convened the “Palenque Meeting for a Fraternal Neighborhood with Well-Being”—a landmark regional summit where leaders from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean jointly rejected coercive, enforcement-only migration policies.<sup>573</sup> The Palenque Declaration, issued by 10 participating countries (including Mexico, Honduras, Cuba, Venezuela, and others), called for a fundamentally different approach than the

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<sup>573</sup> Mexico News Daily. 2023. Key Takeaways from the Latin American migration summit in Palenque. <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/politics/latin-american-migration-summit-palenque/#:~:text=President%20L%C3%B3pez%20Obrador%2C%20who%20convened,Costa%20Rica%2C%20Belize%20and%20Panama.>

U.S. deterrence perspective to the migration crisis. It emphasized the “...human right to migrate” and urged destination countries (implicitly the U.S. and Canada, but extending to Spain, Brazil, and Chile) to adopt comprehensive policies in line with the region’s reality, rather than unilateral walls and militarized borders.<sup>574</sup> Notably, the declaration explicitly linked migration to development and climate factors: it acknowledged that “...the main structural causes of migration are political, economic, social, and the negative effects of climate change.”<sup>575</sup> This language marked a departure from the securitized U.S. narrative, treating climate-induced displacement as a regional challenge requiring solidarity, not containment. Leaders at Palenque also noted hypocrisy in resource allocation, pointing out that the U.S. spends far more on foreign wars than on helping Latin America address poverty or hazards that drive migration. The Palenque Summit represents an alternative vision: one where countries of origin, transit, and destination coordinate on humane solutions—expanding legal pathways, investing in regional development, respecting migrants’ rights—instead of simply trying to deter movement. The U.S. government was pointedly excluded from this summit (its request to attend as an observer was declined), underlining regional frustration with U.S.-imposed deterrence. The spirit of Palenque suggests that if the U.S. were to engage constructively with Latin American partners (for instance, by supporting the summit’s calls for debt relief, climate adaptation aid, and expanded labor mobility) it could help build a cooperative framework that reduces incentives for irregular migration.

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> Granados Ceja, J.L. 2023. At the Palenque Summit in Mexico, Latin American leaders blamed coercive U.S. policies for the migration crisis. *Truthout*. <https://truthout.org/articles/latin-american-leaders-reject-us-imposed-migration-policies-at-palenque-summit/#:~:text=statement%20www,%E2%80%9D>.

Another important perspective advocating for increased integration is UNHCR’s Regional Framework for Climate Mobility. Multilateral institutions like UNHCR have actively developed protection-oriented frameworks to address climate-related displacement in the Americas, aligned with regional integration principles. UNHCR’s Strategic Framework for Climate Action 2024–2030 identified Central and South American countries (including Honduras and Ecuador) as priority areas where climate impacts and displacement intersect.<sup>576</sup> Rather than a deterrence lens, UNHCR promotes a human rights-based approach: supporting national legislation to protect people displaced by disasters, encouraging inclusion of displaced populations in national climate adaptation plans, and devising legal pathways for those who cross borders due to climate impacts.<sup>577</sup> For example, UNHCR has provided guidance for States to use international refugee and human rights law to admit and protect people displaced across borders by climate-related disasters. A concrete outgrowth of these efforts is the ongoing Cartagena +40 Process, which commemorates the 40th anniversary of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. From 2023–2024, Latin American governments, in collaboration with UNHCR, used the Cartagena +40 consultations to specifically address displacement in the context of disasters and climate change. In June 2024, a high-level regional consultation in Bogotá (co-led by Chile, Colombia, and UNHCR) discussed how to strengthen protection for people displaced by climate-related events, with the aim of incorporating these measures into a new Chile Plan of Action (2024–2034).<sup>578</sup> The anticipated Plan of Action will embed commitments to assist and protect disaster-displaced

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<sup>576</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2024. Climate Action in the Americas. [https://www.acnur.org/ua/mx/sites/default/files/2024-10/Climate\\_Action\\_in\\_the\\_Americas\\_Factsheet\\_October\\_2024.pdf](https://www.acnur.org/ua/mx/sites/default/files/2024-10/Climate_Action_in_the_Americas_Factsheet_October_2024.pdf).

<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

persons across the region, effectively widening the refugee protection regime to encompass climate “refugees” even if that term is not formally used or supported by legal frameworks. Such regional approaches, backed by international law and cooperative action, illustrate that robust alternatives to deterrence have taken shape—ones that treat vulnerable populations not as security threats but as persons in need of protection and orderly mobility opportunities.

In addition, some Latin American countries are pioneering national measures that embody the regional integration approach and could serve as models. Colombia has emerged as a leader by granting humanitarian protections and driving regional conversations around climate-affected mobility. In a historic ruling in 2024, the Colombian Constitutional Court issued decision T-123/24, which recognized that individuals displaced by environmental factors (such as disasters or climate change) have a right to protection and assistance.<sup>579</sup> This ruling effectively extends the notion of forced displacement (traditionally associated with conflict or persecution) to include climate-related causes, setting a legal precedent in Latin America. Concurrently, Colombia has used its chairmanship of regional bodies, like the South American Conference on Migration and the Global Forum on Migration and Development, to push for safe and regular migration pathways in the context of climate change.<sup>580</sup> Under Colombia’s leadership, a regional training (MICIC) was held to help consular officials manage crises impacting migrants, and dialogues were advanced on

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<sup>579</sup> Global Forum on Migration and Displacement. 2024. Regular Migration, Labour Mobility and Human Rights: Pillars of Development and Well-Being of Societies; GFMD 2024-2025 Colombia Chairship. Concept Note. [https://www.gfmd.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1801/files/documents/Colombia2024-2025/GFMD%20Colombia%202024-2025\\_Concept%20Note\\_EN.pdf?v=123](https://www.gfmd.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1801/files/documents/Colombia2024-2025/GFMD%20Colombia%202024-2025_Concept%20Note_EN.pdf?v=123).

<sup>580</sup> Platform on Disaster Displacement. 2024. Colombia’s Commitment to Disaster Displacement in 2024: From Global Policy Development to Regional Leadership. <https://disasterdisplacement.org/news-events/colombia-disaster-displacement-2024/#:~:text=Under%20the%20theme%20of%20%E2%80%9CRegular,context%20of%20climate%20change%20t>o.

labor mobility as a form of adaptation to climate impacts.<sup>581</sup> Colombia’s multi-tiered efforts (legal, policy, and diplomatic) underscore an important point: addressing human mobility through integration and shared responsibility is not just theoretical, it is actionable. By developing humanitarian visas, temporary protection status, or bilateral labor agreements for climate-affected populations, countries in the Americas can distribute the responsibility of hosting migrants and reduce chaotic, irregular movements. The U.S. and other destination countries, rather than investing solely in border security, could support and learn from these initiatives—for example, by funding regional resettlement schemes or endorsing the expansion of temporary protected status (TPS) for nationals of countries hit by climate hazards. These steps would support a regional consensus that migration, when managed cooperatively, can be part of the solution to climate vulnerability rather than a problem to be solved.

The broader Inter-American system is also moving toward a more integrated approach. Building on the legacy of the Cartagena Declaration (which expanded the refugee definition in Latin America back in 1984), the Cartagena +30 process in 2014 and now Cartagena +40 in 2024 have steadily advanced norms in favor of regional protection and burden-sharing. The recent Cartagena +40 thematic consultation on disaster displacement reaffirmed the region’s commitment to address cross-border climate displacement collectively.<sup>582</sup> At the same time, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have recognized climate change as a pressing human rights issue. In 2021, the IACHR issued a resolution declaring climate change a human rights emergency for the hemisphere, urging states

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid.

to adopt urgent measures for affected populations.<sup>583</sup> Moreover, at the request of Chile and Colombia, the Inter-American Court embarked on an Advisory Opinion process on “Climate Emergency and Human Rights,” holding unprecedented public hearings in 2023 and 2024 with wide participation from civil society and experts.<sup>584</sup> This process, the first of its kind by any regional human rights court, is expected to clarify States’ obligations to prevent and address climate-related harm, including with respect to displaced people.<sup>585</sup> Although the Court’s final advisory opinion is pending, its very undertaking signifies an important normative shift: climate-induced displacement is being framed as a shared regional challenge demanding cooperative legal standards, not as a matter of one state’s national security. Should the Inter-American Court articulate principles for protecting climate-displaced persons (for example, affirming that deporting people to climate disaster zones could violate the right to life or dignity), it would further solidify a regional integration approach. The U.S.—which historically has had an uneasy relationship with Inter-American legal mechanisms<sup>586</sup>—would face increasing diplomatic and moral pressure to harmonize its policies with emerging regional norms that prioritize humanitarian protection over deterrence.

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<sup>583</sup> Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. 2022. The IACHR and REDESCA publish Resolution on Climate Emergency and Human Rights in the Americas. [https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media\\_center/preleases/2022/045.asp#:~:text=The%20resolution%20recognizes%20that%20climate,full%20enjoyment%20of%20human%20rights.](https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2022/045.asp#:~:text=The%20resolution%20recognizes%20that%20climate,full%20enjoyment%20of%20human%20rights.)

<sup>584</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2024. Climate Action in the Americas. [https://www.acnur.org/ua/mx/sites/default/files/2024-10/Climate\\_Action\\_in\\_the\\_Americas\\_Factsheet\\_October\\_2024.pdf](https://www.acnur.org/ua/mx/sites/default/files/2024-10/Climate_Action_in_the_Americas_Factsheet_October_2024.pdf).

<sup>585</sup> Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (CEJIL). 2024. Climate Emergency: In a historic process with record participation, the public hearings for the Advisory Opinion before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights concluded. <https://cejil.org/en/press-releases/climate-emergency-in-a-historic-process-with-record-participation-the-public-hearings-for-the-advisory-opinion-before-the-inter-american-court-of-human-rights-concluded/#:~:text=Manaus%2C%20Brazil%2C%20May%2030%2C%202024,impact%20of%20the%20climate%20crisis.>

<sup>586</sup> Goldman, R. 2009. History and Action: the Inter-American Human Rights System and the Role of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Human Rights Quarterly* 31: 856-887.

In advocating for regional integration as an alternative to deterrence, it is important to note that this approach is not naive about the drivers of mobility. Rather, integration directly tackles those drivers through collective action: poverty reduction, disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, and legal migration channels. The 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, which the United States did endorse and convene, nods toward this by calling for shared responsibility across the Americas. However, as this thesis has shown, U.S. implementation of the L.A. Declaration's spirit has been undercut by securitization. The examples above indicate that sustained regional integration requires moving beyond discourse and investing in multilateral solutions. If the United States or other destination countries reorient their postures to support these regional initiatives—for instance, contributing to a regional climate adaptation fund for Northern Central America, or entering migration compacts that allow a degree of labor mobility in exchange for development aid—it could transform a zero-sum border enforcement paradigm into a win-win cooperative regime. This would mean treating Northern Central American countries as partners in managing migration flows, not as staging grounds for U.S. security policy.

Crucially, deeper integration is also a more sustainable answer to the realities of climate change. No wall can be high enough to shut out the cascading impacts of a warming climate in the United States' immediate neighborhood. As regional leaders asserted at Palenque, addressing irregular migration requires addressing its drivers, which include climate-related crop failures, storms, and livelihood collapse. By engaging in regional adaptation planning (e.g., supporting resilient agriculture, insurance mechanisms, and disaster preparedness in Northern Central America) and, critically, decoupling adaptation from deterrence the U.S. could not only mitigate a humanitarian crisis but also reduce irregular migration over time.

In summary, this section stresses that the path beyond climate securitization lies in collective action. Collective action requires a shift from trying to securitize and stop migration toward integrating efforts across borders to manage the factors that drive mobility. The following comparative analysis reinforces this point by showing that deterrence-centric regimes elsewhere have faltered, further suggesting the benefits of a cooperative regional approach.

### Comparative Analysis with Wider U.S. Policy and Global Migration Deterrence Regimes

The patterns and tensions identified in the U.S.–Northern Central America case study since NAFTA resonate with broader global trends. Around the world, wealthy states facing influxes of people—whether due to conflict, economic need, or climate stress—have increasingly favored so-called ‘externalization’ and deterrence strategies. The U.S. approach in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador is part of this wider tapestry of migration management, which often involves shifting burdens to poorer countries, militarizing borders, and securitizing the discourse around migrants. This section compares the findings of this thesis with U.S. migration policies in other regions and with other global deterrence regimes, such as the European Union’s interventions in the Sahel and Mediterranean, and Australia’s policies in the Pacific. The comparison reveals both common logics and instructive differences, highlighting the limits of deterrence as well as potential lessons for more cooperative frameworks.

### *U.S. Security and Migration Policy Beyond the Americas*

While Latin America and the Caribbean have been the primary focus of U.S. efforts to curb migration flows in recent years, the U.S. has also engaged in deterrence-oriented policies elsewhere. During the first Trump administration, the U.S. negotiated or attempted ‘Safe Third Country’ agreements with countries like Guatemala, effectively outsourcing asylum processing,

and considered similar arrangements with countries as distant as Rwanda.<sup>587</sup> Historically, the U.S. pioneered interdiction at sea in the 1980s and 1990s, intercepting Haitian and Cuban refugees on the high seas to prevent their arrival on U.S. shores and holding them in offshore detention at Guantánamo Bay.<sup>588</sup> These practices prefigured the externalization now seen globally: in the Middle East and South Asia, the U.S. has relied on allies to host large refugee populations (e.g., funding camps for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey, or Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh) rather than engaging in resettlement actions.<sup>589</sup> The underlying strategy is familiar: provide aid or apply pressure on other states to contain displacement and avoid domestic political pressure.

My claims about climate securitization add another dimension to this picture. As climate-related instability grows in regions like Africa's Sahel, U.S. national security discourse has occasionally drawn links between climate, conflict, and migration to justify military aid or counterterrorism deployments (analogous to E.U. rhetoric). A U.S. official (quoted on Page 265) cited the desertification of the Sahel and resultant livelihood loss as evidence of a chain leading from climate stress to terrorism and migration toward Europe. Although the official admitted the grounds for direct causation are thin, the invocation of such links reflects a common securitization trope used by Western policymakers broadly, not just in the Americas. This perspective holds that climate

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<sup>587</sup> Narea, N. 2024. How Trump could try to deport immigrants to countries other than their own. *Vox*. December 10, 2024. <https://www.vox.com/politics/390533/trump-third-country-deportation-bahamas-panama-grenada-turks-caicos>.

<sup>588</sup> Erfani, A. and M. Garcia. 2021. Pushing Back Protection: How Offshoring and Externalization Imperil the Right to Asylum. *National Immigrant Justice Center* and *FWD.US*. [https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/default/files/content-type/research-item/documents/2021-08/Offshoring-Asylum-Report\\_final.pdf](https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/default/files/content-type/research-item/documents/2021-08/Offshoring-Asylum-Report_final.pdf).

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*

change in the Global South will unleash waves of migrants toward the Global North. This is echoed in the E.U.’s approach to irregular migration, explored in the following section.

### *European Union: The Sahel and the Mediterranean*

The European Union’s approach to irregular migration from Africa and the Middle East has become a paradigmatic deterrence regime, often compared to the U.S.–Mexico border strategy. Facing large numbers of asylum seekers, especially since the mid-2010s, the E.U. has invested heavily in external border control, working with transit countries to halt migrants long before they reach European soil.<sup>590</sup> In the Sahel region (e.g., Niger, Mali, Sudan) and North Africa (Libya, Tunisia), the E.U. has rolled out initiatives under its Trust Fund for Africa and other programs that combine development aid, migration control, and security assistance.<sup>591</sup> The logic, akin to the U.S. root causes approach but with harder edges, is to deter northward journeys through a mix of incentives and force.<sup>592</sup> This has led to policies such as funding and training the Libyan coastguard to intercept boats, deploying E.U. surveillance and drones over the Mediterranean, and pressuring African governments to crack down on migrant transit routes.<sup>593</sup> Notably, the E.U. often justifies these actions by referencing humanitarian language (saving lives at sea) and regional stability, yet critics argue the result has been an “over-securitized” response that endangers migrants and undermines human rights.<sup>594</sup> For example, an analysis by the International Rescue Committee

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<sup>590</sup> Bøås, M. 2020. EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger? *Third World Quarterly* 42(1): 52–67.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

<sup>592</sup> Encina, C. 2024. Europe, Beyond its Southern Border. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/europe-beyond-its-southern-border#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20EU%20policies%20toward,a%20European%20dimension%20to%20the>.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid.

<sup>594</sup> International Rescue Committee. 2022. As conflict and humanitarian needs soar in the Sahel and beyond, the IRC urges the EU to put safety, food insecurity and rights at the heart of the EU-AU Summit. Press Release.

found that the E.U.’s focus in the Central Sahel has overly focused on military and migration deterrence, with the paradoxical outcome of more violence and displacement in the region, not less.<sup>595</sup> Similarly, despite years of deterrence efforts, the central Mediterranean remains one of the deadliest migration routes—over 1,500 people died or went missing trying to cross in 2021 alone.<sup>596</sup> E.U. policymakers are increasingly recognizing that simply exporting border enforcement (for instance, paying Tunisia to keep migrants from sailing, as in a 2023 deal) is not a sustainable solution.<sup>597</sup> An assessment by the Wilson Center bluntly stated that the E.U. “...must move away from ineffective, deterrence-based support to North Africa, towards collaborative, rights-based strategies” for managing Mediterranean migration.<sup>598</sup> This mirrors the implication of this thesis’s findings: deterrence may address symptoms (migrant flows) in the short term but not causes, and it often fails on its own terms as vulnerable people find alternate paths. The E.U. experience—where even hardline measures have not fully stopped migration but have fueled a lucrative smuggling industry and a humanitarian crisis—serves as a cautionary parallel to U.S. efforts in Central America. It suggests that without robust legal pathways and regional

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<https://www.rescue.org/eu/press-release/conflict-and-humanitarian-needs-soar-sahel-and-beyond-irc-urges-eu-put-safety-food#:~:text=Last%20year%2C%20levels%20of%20insecurity,dangerous%2C%20not%20less%2C%20for%20civilians.>

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Milazzo, E. and M. Gargano. 2023. Meloni and the EU align on the Mediterranean pivot. *Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations*. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/meloni-and-the-eu-align-on-the-mediterranean-pivot/#:~:text=Meloni%20and%20the%20EU%20align,with%20Tunisia%20and%20Meloni%27s.>

<sup>598</sup> Onal, D. 2024. EU Migration Deterrence in North Africa: Countries North and South of the Mediterranean Must Step up Collaborative Solutions. *Wilson Center*. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/eu-migration-deterrence-north-africa-countries-north-and-south-mediterranean-must-step-0#:~:text=Despite%20efforts%20to%20control%20migration%2C,to%20manage%20the%20Mediterranean%20passage.>

development (the integration approach discussed above), deterrence tends to produce a cycle of escalation without resolution.

One difference, however, is that the E.U., especially countries like Germany, has publicly embraced climate change as a factor in migration and called for long-term climate resilience in Africa as part of the solution.<sup>599</sup> In policy papers, the E.U. acknowledges that droughts, desertification, and resource conflicts (exacerbated by climate change) contribute to displacement.<sup>600</sup> However, this acknowledgment has yet to translate into significantly different policies; funding still prioritizes border management over climate adaptation in migrant-origin regions. The U.S. approach in NCA, as this thesis illustrates, similarly acknowledged climate factors rhetorically but subordinated climate action to migration goals. The E.U. and U.S. illustrate a pattern: climate securitization narratives have been layered onto existing deterrence regimes to give them a veneer of forward-looking legitimacy, but on-the-ground practices remain focused on enforcement. The following subsection explores another key point of comparison for this pattern: Australia's migration deterrence regime.

### *Australia: The Pacific and Offshore Deterrence*

For decades, Australia has taken a hardline stance against irregular maritime arrivals, exemplified by policies like Operation Sovereign Borders and offshore processing centers on Nauru and Papua

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<sup>599</sup> Metis Institute for Strategy and Foresight. 2025. National Interdisciplinary Climate Risk Assessment. [https://metis.unibw.de/assets/pdf/National\\_Interdisciplinary\\_Climate\\_Risk\\_Assessment.pdf](https://metis.unibw.de/assets/pdf/National_Interdisciplinary_Climate_Risk_Assessment.pdf).

<sup>600</sup> Onal, D. 2024. EU Migration Deterrence in North Africa: Countries North and South of the Mediterranean Must Step up Collaborative Solutions. *Wilson Center*. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/eu-migration-deterrence-north-africa-countries-north-and-south-mediterranean-must-step-up-collaborative-solutions>.  
[0#:~:text=Despite%20efforts%20to%20control%20migration%2C,to%20manage%20the%20Mediterranean%20pas sage.](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/eu-migration-deterrence-north-africa-countries-north-and-south-mediterranean-must-step-up-collaborative-solutions)

New Guinea.<sup>601</sup> As climate change threatens many Pacific Island nations with sea-level rise and extreme weather, Australia has faced moral and political pressure to offer refuge to Pacific Islanders. However, successive Australian governments, until very recently, resisted framing Pacific Islanders as potential “climate refugees,” fearing it would undermine their strict asylum deterrence posture.<sup>602</sup> Instead, Australia focused on climate aid to Pacific states and repeatedly stated that relocation would be a last resort.<sup>603</sup> As a result, there has been a disconnect: while Pacific leaders have called climate change the single greatest threat to their peoples and have quietly discussed migration as a form of insurance, Australia treated migration separately as a security issue.<sup>604</sup> This is now changing. In 2023, Australia signed an agreement with Tuvalu that, in an unprecedented move, promised an annual quota of 280 Tuvaluan people permission to migrate to Australia as a kind of climate-related arrangement.<sup>605</sup> This “Pacific family” approach is a departure from pure deterrence and is motivated not only by humanitarian concern but also by geopolitical competition with China.<sup>606</sup> Even a country known for hard borders acknowledged that controlled integration of climate-affected populations (in this case via small-scale visas) can be part of foreign policy. Still, Australia’s primary posture remains deterrence for asylum seekers, as

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<sup>601</sup> Erfani, A. and M. Garcia. 2021. Pushing Back Protection: How Offshoring and Externalization Imperil the Right to Asylum. *National Immigrant Justice Center* and *FWD.US*. [https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/default/files/content-type/research-item/documents/2021-08/Offshoring-Asylum-Report\\_final.pdf](https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/default/files/content-type/research-item/documents/2021-08/Offshoring-Asylum-Report_final.pdf).

<sup>602</sup> Ibid.

<sup>603</sup> Glasser, R., Johnstone, C. and A. Kapetas (Eds.) 2022. The geopolitics of climate and security in the Indo-Pacific. *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*. [https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2022-02/Climate%20and%20security%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific\\_0.pdf?VersionId=qP0ZzIQQiSLU1ymakusX2a9NrL2R6Jf\\_](https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2022-02/Climate%20and%20security%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific_0.pdf?VersionId=qP0ZzIQQiSLU1ymakusX2a9NrL2R6Jf_).

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> Needham, K. 2023. Australia signs security, migration pact with Pacific’s Tuvalu. *Reuters*. November 10, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-offer-climate-refuge-all-residents-tuvalu-report-2023-11-10/#:~:text=Australia%20would%20allow%20280%20people,levels%20caused%20by%20climate%20change>.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid.

seen in its continued refusal to resettle refugees from its offshore centers, and its preference for temporary labor schemes that rotate Pacific workers without offering residency.<sup>607</sup>

Australia provides an interesting counterpoint to climate securitization in the U.S. and E.U. Australia has generally not used climate security discourse to justify migration deterrence; on the contrary, for many years Australia's political leadership was openly skeptical of climate change's relevance to security.<sup>608</sup> One former prime minister, Scott Morrison, even brought a lump of coal into Parliament to downplay climate concerns.<sup>609</sup> However, the security logic of deterrence was extremely strong in migration policy. States do securitize migration (treating it as a threat to national interests) without invoking climate at all—which is precisely the case for Trump administration in the U.S. However, as climate impacts intensify, Australia might confront scenarios like the U.S.–Northern Central America case. In anticipation, Australian scholars have recommended proactive creation of climate mobility pathways. An influential report suggested Australia take 3,000 Pacific climate migrants per year, arguing that adaptation alone in small islands may not suffice.<sup>610</sup> These recommendations echo this thesis's call for regional integration; they frame migration as a valid adaptive response that should be managed humanely, not prevented

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<sup>607</sup> Pronk, A. 2024. The price of deterrence: Australia's path to maintaining sovereign borders. *Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael)*. In Search of Control: Australia Country Report. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Clingendael\\_Report\\_In\\_Search\\_of\\_Control\\_Australia.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Clingendael_Report_In_Search_of_Control_Australia.pdf).

<sup>608</sup> Turnbull, T. 2023. Has Australia cleaned up its act on climate? *BBC News Sydney*. September 7, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-65606208>.

<sup>609</sup> Paul, S. 2019. In coal we trust: Australian voters back PM Morrison's faith in fossil fuel. *Reuters*. May 20, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-election-energy/in-coal-we-trust-australian-voters-back-pm-morrison-faith-in-fossil-fuel-idUSKCN1SP06F/>.

<sup>610</sup> McAdam, J. and J. Pryke. 2020. Climate Change, Disasters and Mobility: A Roadmap for Australian Action. *UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law*. Policy Brief 10, October 2020. [https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2020/10/21/Policy\\_brief\\_10\\_Climate\\_Change.pdf](https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2020/10/21/Policy_brief_10_Climate_Change.pdf).

at all costs.<sup>611</sup> To date, Australia’s modest steps (like the Tuvalu visa quota) fall far short of these ideas, but they indicate a potential pivot from an absolutist deterrence model to a more integrated approach under pressure of climate realities and regional diplomacy.

The deterrence paradigm is evident in other so-called migration ‘hotspots’ as well. For example, U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere can be likened to European Union engagement with North Africa and Turkey, and to South Africa with its neighbors as well (which has also securitized immigration from neighboring countries). Each case involves a relatively richer state or bloc trying to keep out migrants from poorer, often unstable countries through a combination of barriers and outsourced responsibility. The U.S. and Canada’s Safe Third Country Agreement (which sends asylum seekers back to apply in the first country crossed, recently expanded to the entire border)<sup>612</sup> is analogous to the E.U.’s Dublin Regulation (asylum must be claimed in the first E.U. country of entry).<sup>613</sup> Both distribute asylum burdens away from the more desired destinations. The U.K.’s plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda was another radical deterrence measure, reflecting the same externalization logic seen in Australia’s offshore processing.<sup>614</sup> These global comparisons reinforce a sobering pattern: the rise of a global migration deterrence regime that prioritizes keeping displaced people at bay rather than addressing why they move or protecting their rights.

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid.

<sup>612</sup> Chishti, M. and J. Gelatt. 2023. Roxham Road Meets a Dead End? U.S.-Canada Safe Third Country Agreement is Revised. *Migration Policy Institute Policy Beat*. April 27, 2023. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/us-canada-safe-third-country-agreement>.

<sup>613</sup> Armstrong, A. 2020. You Shall Not Pass! How the Dublin System Fueled Fortress Europe. *Chicago Journal of International Law* 20(2). Article 13: 332-383.

<sup>614</sup> Gower, M., Butchard, P. and CJ McKinney. 2024. The UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership. *House of Commons Library Research Briefing*. May 29, 2024. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9568/CBP-9568.pdf>.

Climate change is increasingly woven into these narratives, often as a threat multiplier that certain factions can argue justifies even harsher controls.

However, this comparative lens also reveals growing evidence that such deterrence-focused regimes are unsustainable in the long run. Europe’s fortified borders have not quelled instability in the Sahel—in fact, instability has grown despite E.U. military and migration interventions.<sup>615</sup> Australia’s hard stance drew international condemnation and legal challenges, and only small numbers attempt the boat journey now largely because of draconian deterrence, not because mobility drivers in source countries (like Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka) have eased.<sup>616</sup> The U.S.’s own experience beyond NCA, such as in the Haiti crisis, shows that eventually humanitarian imperatives can force a change: after initially turning away Haitian refugees, the U.S. had to mount large relief and temporary parole programs following Haiti’s 2010 earthquake, recognizing that migration management had to include relief and legal avenues.<sup>617</sup>

### *Comparative Reflections*

What the U.S.–Northern Central America case underscores, in harmony with these other global examples, is that blurring climate action with migration control tends to reduce the efficacy of both. The E.U. case illustrates that pouring development assistance into African governments explicitly to stop migration often does not support development or reliably stop migration,

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<sup>615</sup> Fakhry, A. 2023. More than borders: Effects of EU interventions on migration in the Sahel. *Institute for Security Studies West Africa Report 43*. July 2023. <https://issafrika.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WAR-43.pdf>.

<sup>616</sup> Martin, L. and J. McAdam. 2020. Australia “Stopped the Boats.” But what happened to the refugees who reached its shores? *Just Security*. December 16, 2020. <https://www.justsecurity.org/73868/australia-stopped-the-boats-but-what-happened-to-the-refugees-who-reached-its-shores/>.

<sup>617</sup> Wasem, R. 2011. U.S. Immigration Policy on Haitian Migrants. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21349/19>.

especially if governance is poor and communities see no viable futures.<sup>618</sup> Similarly, a conclusion drawn in European policy circles—that a ‘Fortress Europe’ approach is backfiring and that more legal pathways and cooperative development are needed<sup>619</sup>—aligns with the recommendation for the Americas: a hemispheric system of responsibility-sharing is more promising than a unilateral fortress at the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as its regional extensions.

Finally, a global perspective emphasizes an ethical and legal dimension. Deterrence regimes frequently operate in legal gray zones or fully contravene international refugee and human rights obligations. Whether pushbacks in the Mediterranean, indefinite detention on island camps, or expulsions under public health pretexts (as with Title 42 in the U.S. during Covid-19), these tactics draw legal challenges and moral condemnation. In an era where climate change will test international solidarity, clinging to deterrence could further erode the norms of asylum and protection. The alternative, evidenced by regional efforts like Cartagena+40 and the Inter-American Court’s engagement, is a normative shift towards recognizing climate migrants within the framework of shared global responsibility. In this sense, moving beyond climate securitization is not just a regional imperative but part of a necessary global pivot from fear-based migration management to cooperative adaptation and protection. The next sections delve into why decoupling climate policy from migration control is an urgent prerogative, and what the future might hold if current trends continue versus if more comprehensive strategies prevail.

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<sup>618</sup> Fakhry, A. 2023. More than borders: Effects of EU interventions on migration in the Sahel. *Institute for Security Studies West Africa Report 43*. July 2023. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WAR-43.pdf>.

<sup>619</sup> Armstrong, A. 2020. You Shall Not Pass! How the Dublin System Fueled Fortress Europe. *Chicago Journal of International Law* 20(2). Article 13: 332-383.

## Decoupling Climate Adaptation from Migration Control

A recurring theme in this thesis is the problematic coupling of climate adaptation initiatives with migration deterrence objectives. In policy discourse, especially in the U.S., helping vulnerable communities adapt to climate change has been frequently justified on the grounds that it will reduce their incentive to migrate. This conflation of adaptation and migration control may seem pragmatic—addressing root causes to stem migration—but carries dangerous implications. As climate denialism resurges in some political quarters and migration enforcement becomes increasingly militarized, the risk is that climate action itself gets politicized or undermined by its entanglement with migration agendas. A potential counterargument to this decoupling would be that tying climate action to national security agendas would give climate funding more longevity and traction within a climate-denying political environment. Donald Trump’s re-election in 2024 unfortunately rebuffs this argument convincingly. The fossil fuel interests driving political climate denialism have far too much incentive to eliminate threats to their bottom line. This is especially true when the national security and fossil fuel agendas are concretely aligned and often power each other, as Neta Crawford argued.

With this context, this section argues for the urgent need to decouple climate adaptation policies from the imperatives of migration deterrence. In plain terms, climate adaptation should be pursued because it is intrinsically necessary for human security and global well-being, not instrumentally as a tool to keep migrants at home. By disentangling the two, we can better safeguard climate policy from political swings and ensure migration is managed with respect for human rights, even in a warming world.

### *The Securitization Trap*

When climate adaptation funding and programs are tied to migration outcomes, they enter the fraught terrain of immigration politics. This means that support for adaptation can wax or wane according to the domestic mood on migration, rather than climate science. The Trump administration illustrates this starkly. President Trump is a vocal climate change denier— withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Agreement and dismissing climate science—while aggressively advancing an anti-immigration agenda. In practice, this has led to contradictory policies. On one hand, Trump’s government has largely removed climate considerations from national security strategies and cut back on climate-related aid.<sup>620</sup> On the other hand, it has doubled down on migration deterrence through measures like border militarization, travel bans, and the Remain in Mexico policy.<sup>621</sup> Notably, in 2019, the Trump administration froze hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign assistance to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador as punishment for their failure to stop migrants, a move that halted many humanitarian and development projects cold. This included climate resilience and poverty alleviation programs. The freeze, which the independent U.S. Government Accountability Office report criticized for harming 92 out of 114 USAID projects in the region, exemplifies how entangling climate and development assistance with migration control can backfire.<sup>622</sup> When migration goals are not met, the retaliatory impulse is to cut foreign assistance, directly undermining the very root cause initiatives that might help in

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<sup>620</sup> Santarsiero, R. (Ed.) 2025. Disappearing Data: Trump Administration Removing Climate Information from Government Websites. *The George Washington University National Security Archive*. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/climate-change-transparency-project-foia/2025-02-06/disappearing-data-trump>.

<sup>621</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. 2024. Trump on Immigration: Tearing Apart Immigrant Families, Communities, and the Fabric of our Nation. June 6, 2024. <https://www.aclu.org/publications/trump-on-immigration>.

<sup>622</sup> U.S. government Accountability Office. 2021. Northern Central America of Northern Central America: The 2019 Suspension and Reprogramming of U.S. Funding Adversely Affected Assistance Projects. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-104366-highlights.pdf>.

the long run. In essence, tying adaptation to migration control made adaptation itself a hostage to politics. A climate-denying administration has no qualms about sacrificing climate programs because they were never valued for their own sake—only for stopping migration, which was not immediately achieved to its satisfaction.

### *Climate Denialism and Policy Reversals*

The return of climate denial and skepticism in the political sphere (as seen not only with President Trump but with some members of Congress and state leaders in the United States) poses a disastrous outlook if climate action is justified primarily by national security arguments. One reason the national security establishment embraced climate security discourse over the past decade was to build bipartisan support for convincing even skeptics that climate change mattered because it could cause instability or drive migrants to the U.S. border. This research shows that this framing did help sell certain policies to more moderate or left audiences by humanizing deterrence under a climate banner. However, what happens when outright denialists take power? As noted in Chapter 6, career officials might still quietly pursue climate-related projects (in ‘safe spaces’) but they lose top-cover and resources. A President who rejects the premise of climate change will not approve funding or diplomatic initiatives couched in climate terms. If the main rationale for foreign drought assistance was to reduce migration, a denialist leader can simply undercut that rationale with climate denialism. The tacit rules identified in this research—that officials use technical climate language to justify political interventions—can only go so far when budgets and directives are controlled at the top by climate skeptics. As a result, the coupling strategy contains a fatal weakness: it leaves climate adaptation at the mercy of immigration politics. Decoupling is a form of risk management, ensuring that even migration narratives shift

(or in the worst case, climate science is ignored), adaptation efforts continue based on objective needs, scientific assessments, and international commitments.

### *Militarized Migration Enforcement and Climate Action*

In addition, the trend toward militarizing migration enforcement—visible in the U.S. with the deployment of troops and high-tech surveillance at its southern border, and globally through fortified borders—creates an environment antithetical to humanitarian climate responses. When every vulnerable person is first cast as a potential national security threat, it becomes difficult to maintain support for compassionate measures, including those related to climate. For instance, under the Trump administration’s hardline approach, even discussing protection for climate-displaced persons is moot. The focus is on maximum deterrence, epitomized by zero-tolerance family separation policies and asylum transit bans.<sup>623</sup> If officials see climate adaptation aid as simply another means to an end, such as reducing migration, a militarized mindset may eventually question adaptation in favor of increased border hardening. To counter this, climate adaptation must be framed and understood as part of a global public good and moral responsibility, not as a bargaining chip in migration deals. Decoupling does not mean ignoring migration. Instead, it means treating the improvement of living conditions in vulnerable regions as a valuable effort, which in turn can create conditions where mobility is safer and more orderly.

### *The Need for Normative Clarity*

Decoupling also has a normative dimension. The right to seek asylum and the duty to aid those in need should not be contingent on climate politics. When the United States or other countries make climate adaptation funding contingent on migration deterrence, this alignment instrumentalizes

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<sup>623</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. 2024. Trump on Immigration: Tearing Apart Immigrant Families, Communities, and the Fabric of our Nation. June 6, 2024. <https://www.aclu.org/publications/trump-on-immigration>.

human needs. This coupling erodes the moral foundation of both climate action and humanitarian protection. An alternative approach is to uphold distinct but complementary agendas. Robust climate finance and adaptation support can fulfill Paris Agreement goals. In addition, finance should be paired with a fair and humane asylum system to meet obligations under the U.N. Refugee Convention and human rights law. When these agendas intersect (for example, in cases of climate-driven displacement), the response should be guided by humanitarian principles, not by a scarcity mindset of how to keep people away. In Chapter 6, I critique the dynamic of safe spaces—those which allowed officials to pursue deterrence under cover of climate action. Decoupling turns this dynamic on its head. It seeks to create policy spaces where climate action is de-securitized, openly aiming at community resilience and human rights, and where migration management is dealt with through legal and diplomatic channels rather than securitization.

This normative prerogative contrasts with how Trump-era policies exemplify securitization. Trump's travel bans, the border wall project, the Remain in Mexico program (which forced tens of thousands of asylum seekers to wait in dangerous conditions in Mexico), the drastic cut in refugee admissions to near zero, and the attempt to terminate Temporary Protected Status for several countries—all these are manifestations of treating migration as a top security threat. Climate change has no role in Trump's public narrative; indeed, climate science is being systematically excised from policy. Nonetheless, the securitization of migration is proceeding to an extreme. This suggests that securitization of migration has its own momentum independent of climate, but climate securitization can become an added layer that outlasts any single administration. When President Biden took office, he restored climate change to the agenda and proposed a more compassionate approach to migration, but even his policies (like the Root Causes

Strategy) ended up securitized in implementation, as my research found. The broader trend is that U.S. migration policy has been securitized across both political parties, either overtly (in Trump's case) or more subtly, incorporating climate discourse (in Biden's case). Recognizing this bipartisan securitization is key to its undoing. A path forward means acknowledging, for example, that simply electing climate-friendly leaders is not enough if institutional logics still tie aid to enforcement.

What would decoupling look like in policy practice? First, it would involve setting independent metrics for climate adaptation success that are not linked to migration numbers. For instance, measure the success of a drought resilience program by food security outcomes or livelihoods restored, not by whether emigration from that area decreased. Some degree of safe and orderly mobility should be expected (and encouraged) within successful adaptation efforts. Second, decoupling would mean increasing climate finance to vulnerable countries as part of global climate responsibility, irrespective of migration considerations. Wealthy countries could dramatically scale up grants for resilient infrastructure in regions like Northern Central America as part of climate commitments, not conditional on cooperation with immigration enforcement. Third, on the migration side, decoupling entails maintaining and expanding pathways like refugee resettlement, humanitarian visas, and TPS for climate-affected populations on needs-based humanitarian standards, not trading them for border concessions. A proposal floated (though not passed) in Congress in 2021 aimed to create a special refugee category for "climate-displaced persons," an example of treating climate migration as a protection issue rather than a security issue.<sup>624</sup> Finally, decoupling requires rhetorical discipline. Leaders can avoid framing every

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<sup>624</sup> Calma, J. and G. Del Valle. 2024. US immigration policy has a huge blind spot: climate change. *The Verge*. November 3, 2024. <https://www.theverge.com/2024/11/3/24285366/migration-climate-change-biden-election-trump-harris>.

development initiative in foreign countries to stop migration and conversely stop discussing migrant arrivals as a failure of foreign assistance. By keeping these domains analytically separate, policies can be better tailored and more resilient to political shifts.

In conclusion, decoupling is about transparency and focus. Climate adaptation is an urgent priority on its own: communities around the world need support to adapt to today's extremes and tomorrow's uncertainties. Migration management is also an urgent priority, but must center around safe, legal, and orderly movement and the protection of the vulnerable, consistent with U.S. legal obligations and international norms. Blending the two in a securitized way might have offered a convenient short-term narrative, but as this thesis argues, it ultimately shortchanges both agendas. The next and final section of this chapter will explore the evidence base needed to assess the implications of not decoupling: how the future might look if climate displacement continues to be viewed through a security lens, especially if humanitarian institutions are eroded and military actors step in to fill the void.

#### Future Research Gaps and Implications

Looking ahead, the confluence of climate change, mobility, and national security raises questions requiring further research and careful policy foresight. The thesis's findings—particularly the analysis of institutional gaps like the HA/DR 'missing middle'—suggest that unless there is a course correction, the securitization of climate-affected mobility could intensify, with militaries and security agencies playing an even larger role by default. This final section outlines key areas where future research is needed and discusses the potential implications if current trends persist. It extends Chapter 7's analysis of the missing middle concept by considering scenarios for how national security actors might manage (or mismanage) migration in the intensifying climate crisis.

In doing so, I underscore an overarching concern: if humanitarian institutions and norms continue to be eroded, as they have been under Trump’s second administration, the world may face climate-driven crises with only the blunt tools of security forces at hand.

*The ‘Missing Middle’ Revisited and the Erosion of Humanitarian Institutions*

One of the thesis’s final emphases is the existence of a systemic gap between short-term disaster response and long-term development in U.S. foreign assistance—the so-called ‘missing middle.’ Further research is needed to fully understand the consequences of this gap, especially as climate hazards become more intense and frequent. For example, when hurricanes Eta and Iota struck Northern Central America back-to-back in 2020, U.S. immediate relief (through USAID assistance and U.S. military airlifts) saved lives, but the subsequent phase—such as rebuilding homes, restoring agricultural production, and providing mental health and psychosocial support—was severely lacking.<sup>625</sup> Sociologists and development economists could examine how communities coped in the absence of robust medium-term support. Did the lack of recovery funding significantly increase migration a year or two after the hurricanes? Preliminary data suggests yes: thousands of storm survivors eventually headed north when reconstruction stalled. Understanding this timeline better would help understand the full realities of the missing middle. It also speaks to a significant implication: if the missing middle is not addressed, major climate hazards moving forward could become two-stage events. Humanitarian emergencies could intensify mobility complications when relief teams leave without guarantees of longer-term assistance. Closing this gap might involve creating new international mechanisms or funds for disaster recovery (neither

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<sup>625</sup> Mathema, S. and T. Jawetz. 2020. TPS can support stability and recovery for Central American countries hit by recent hurricanes. *Center for American Progress*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/tps-can-aid-recovery-central-american-countries-hit-recent-hurricanes/>.

pure emergency aid nor traditional development loans, but a more comprehensive spectrum of assistance). Research can inform what models work best (e.g., insurance-based approaches or community-led reconstruction programs) and how to insulate them from political whims.

In parallel, the Trump era has resulted in direct attacks on institutions and policies that form the backbone of humanitarian response and refugee protection. Domestically, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has been gutted; internationally, funding to U.N. agencies like UNHCR and the World Health Organization has been cut off; bureaucratically, offices dealing with humanitarian assistance, climate change, and human rights have been systematically attacked and destroyed.<sup>626</sup> Future research should examine the long-term effects of this disruption. For instance, resettlement agencies that closed offices during Trump's first term struggled to scale up quickly when Afghan and Ukrainian emergencies arose under Biden, although they eventually became successful over time.<sup>627</sup> This lag is a form of institutional memory and capacity loss that could be devastating in the context of a sudden climate displacement crisis. Another research emphasis could examine a future scenario where climate impacts hit harder and simultaneously in multiple regions (consider a bad hurricane season in the Americas coupled with a megadrought in South Asia, plus perhaps a conflict exacerbated by resource scarcity), and assess how weakened humanitarian infrastructure could be overwhelmed. If civilian humanitarian institutions cannot respond effectively, governments will almost inevitably turn to militaries as first responders, because militaries have logistics, transport planes, and manpower. Indeed, we already see military

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<sup>626</sup> Al Jazeera. 2025. Rubio announces 83 percent of USAID contracts cancelled under Trump. March 10, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/10/rubio-announces-83-percent-of-usaid-contracts-cancelled-under-trump>.

<sup>627</sup> Chishti, M., Bush-Joseph, K. and M. Greene. 2024. How the Rebuilt U.S. System Resettled the Most Refugees in 30 Years. *Migration Policy Institute*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/rebuilt-us-refugee-resettlement-biden>.

forces frequently tasked with disaster response (the U.S. Army in domestic wildfires and floods, or deployment of aircraft carriers for tsunami relief).<sup>628</sup> While the military's help in disaster response is not new or inherently negative, relying on it as the primary response tool carries risks. Military structures are not designed for the nuanced work of community recovery or protecting vulnerable populations. There is a risk of mission creep where defense agencies shape disaster response in their own image, prioritizing order and control, possibly even viewing displaced persons as security issues to be corralled, relocated, or kept out of certain areas.<sup>629</sup> These increased dynamics deserve further research and independent oversight moving forward.

In addition, Chapter 7 discussed how U.S. Southern Command and other national security actors increasingly frame climate hazards as national security concerns during disaster responses, sometimes to win budget and influence, and sometimes out of demand when civilian agencies lag. If climate adaptation remains coupled with migration control, the U.S. government might increase funding to combatant commands for climate-related activities—for example, training foreign militaries in humanitarian assistance/disaster response operations in lieu of bolstering civilian preparedness. This trend needs close study as well. One emergent research area considers the outcomes of military-led HA/DR versus civilian-led, and the relationship between various actors.<sup>630</sup> Do countries where the military primarily handles disaster logistics recover faster or

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<sup>628</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Acquisition and Sustainment). 2024. Department of Defense 2024-2027 Climate Adaptation Plan. Report Submitted to National Climate Task Force and Federal Chief Sustainability Officer. 5 September 2024.

<sup>629</sup> Holt, V. and G. Taylor. 2009. Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges. *United Nations Security Council Report*. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/PKO%20Protection%20of%20Civilians.pdf>.

<sup>630</sup> See: Mladenova, S. 2024. *When Rambo Meets the Red Cross: Civil-Military Engagement in Fragile States*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

slower? How does it affect local governance and civil-military relations? There is evidence from countries like the Philippines and Pakistan that heavy military involvement in disaster response can sideline civil society and sometimes be accompanied by human rights abuses.<sup>631</sup> On the other hand, in a dire emergency, militaries might be the only ones able to act quickly. Without strong civilian climate adaptation and disaster management institutions, security apparatuses are poised to shape the narrative and response to climate displacement, potentially framing it in terms of stability, insurgency risks, or border protection.

In this vein, the extended climate crisis will also test the international legal framework for mobility. Future legal research on migration studies and border criminology could further explore pathways for protection: can regional agreements like an updated Cartagena Declaration or the emergent regional pact in the South Pacific fill the gap?<sup>632</sup> What are the implications of cases like *Teitiota v. New Zealand* (in which a climate-based asylum claim was not recognized, but the U.N. Human Rights Committee hinted that returning someone to a place uninhabitable by climate change could violate the right to life)?<sup>633</sup> One potential implication of a failure to establish legal pathways is that climate-displaced populations could increasingly fall into irregular mobility and/or immobility. Conversely, if forward-looking policies create humanitarian corridors or special visas (like

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<sup>631</sup> Madiwale, A. and K. Virk. 2011. Civil-military relations in natural disasters: a case study of the 2010 Pakistan floods. *International Review of the Red Cross* 93(884): 1085-1105.

<sup>632</sup> See: International Organization for Migration. 2022. PCCMHS: Enhancing Protection and Empowerment of Migrants and Communities Affected by Climate Change and Disasters in the Pacific Region. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/pccmhs-enhancing-protection-and-empowerment-migrants-and-communities-affected-climate-change-and-disasters-pacific-region>

<sup>633</sup> Buchanan, K. 2015. New Zealand: “Climate Change Refugee” Case Overview. *Library of Congress*. <https://maint.loc.gov/law/help/climate-change-refugee/new-zealand-climate-change-refugee-case.pdf>.

humanitarian parole for disaster victims or extended TPS), these approaches could mitigate humanitarian crises.

This thesis also examined how U.S. climate security discourse in Northern Central America created bureaucratic disaggregation, or agencies and officials working towards contradictory goals and incentive structures. As illustrated, this fragmentation could lead to very incoherent outcomes, with humanitarian responses on one end, and deterrence and deportation on another. Future research might employ disaster scenarios and simulation exercises to identify where policy coherence breaks down, in context-specific situations. This could feature interdisciplinary work, blending climate science projections with migration models and policy analysis.

Finally, another research direction concerns local and regional actors' agency at the receiving end of climate securitization. How will communities and governments in places like Guatemala or Haiti respond in the Trump era, without foreign assistance and when securitization dominates? We might see more initiatives like the Palenque Summit, where regional blocs take matters into their own hands, possibly refusing cooperation with deterrence-focused states. Further study could examine U.S. securitized engagement and local governance. E.g., does training local security forces diminish investments in disaster risk reduction and social services?

The following approaches could support these areas of inquiry by widening the context-specific evidence base for understanding the use of climate security discourse, the role of national security officials and local decision makers, humanitarian capacities and institutions, and the evolving application of U.S. power in service of national security goals within the climate crisis. These approaches included:

*Climate-Migration Modeling:* Integrating climate change projections with migration models to predict hotspots of displacement and timeline, which can inform preemptive adaptation investment. This also can test the narrative that adaptation reduces migration. In some cases, adaptation (like education and connectivity) might enable more migration by giving people resources to pursue opportunities.

*Human Security Paradigms:* Research how adopting a human security approach focusing on individual and community security, rather than state security, might be able to reshape responses. Case studies could include how some countries (like Fiji, or regional plans like the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency) emphasize human security in climate planning, and whether that leads to different outcomes regarding migration.

*Community Adaptation and Relocation:* There is a demonstrated need for further on-the-ground research with communities facing climate threats about their preferences. Following scholars such as Erica Bower, this research can help determine how much adaptation can truly prevent displacement and how much planned migration needs to be part of adaptation strategies. Some Pacific communities, for instance, have mixed feelings about relocation.<sup>634</sup> Such insight is vital to avoid top-down policy assumptions that carry enormous implications for vulnerable communities.

In sum, if securitization continues unchecked, we may see climate-affected mobility treated as a security crisis first and foremost, rather than a humanitarian crisis. This would be a failure of global governance, likely resulting in higher suffering and instability. By decoupling adaptation from enforcement, strengthening humanitarian tools, and embracing cooperative regional strategies,

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<sup>634</sup> See: Bower, E.R., Badamkar, A., Wong-Parodi, G. *et al.* 2023. Enabling pathways for sustainable livelihoods in planned relocation. *Nature Climate Change* 13: 919–926.

human mobility can be managed in a way that reduces harm and conflict. The window for proactive change is still open but is narrowing as climate impacts accelerate.

This thesis suggests a crossroads for future policy. The current trajectory presents a world with more border walls, ad-hoc military disaster responses, and vulnerable people left with no choice but perilous journeys—a world of climate futility and humanitarian tragedy. An alternative, however, is the possibility of climate solidarity: robust adaptation in place, agreed pathways for mobility when needed, and a reframing of security to mean human security and shared security. The dismantling of humanitarian safeguards in recent years is alarming, but these trends illuminate what must be rebuilt and reimagined. Researchers and policymakers can better navigate beyond climate securitization, toward approaches that truly address the intertwined dynamics of human mobility, national security, and climate action in a warming world.

### Final Reflections

This chapter has reviewed the motivations, methods, findings, and contributions of the thesis, and used this discussion to review broader trends for policy and research against a global comparative landscape. Together, these discussions reinforce the thesis's central message: that rethinking U.S. policy and foreign engagement in the face of climate change is not only about adjusting policies in Northern Central America, but about challenging deep-seated securitization logics and renewing a commitment to humanitarian principles. Donald Trump's second term in the White House represents a near-total reversal of any progress that the Biden administration, while far from perfect, attempted to achieve. The complex crises of the climate century demand comprehensive solutions, not reflexive securitization. Beyond climate securitization lies a vision of cooperation and shared resilience—a vision that, while ambitious, is essential for a stable and humane future.

The Biden administration's signature programs in Northern Central America, the Partnership for Central America and Central America Forward, represent a continuation of frontierism logic discussed in Chapter 2 and Appendix II. By leaning on private investment as a deterrent for irregular migration, the administration solidified a cycle in which migration to the United States was at first encouraged to shore up the country's labor supply, whereas now the root causes of U.S.-bound migration are framed as a rationale for further market expansion. This emphasis on market expansion served both to protect the U.S. domestic market as well as create and consolidate new frontiers. Place-based investment in high outbound migration areas of Northern Central America must be coupled with systemic reform in U.S. policy in terms of easing border militarization (which does not act as a deterrent to asylum seekers); comprehensive security, criminal justice, and law enforcement reform needed to break cycles of incarceration, deportation, desperation, and persecution; and genuine investment in state capacity for climate response instead of piecemeal programs that at best incrementally increase local bureaucratic delivery. Instead, the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy helped corporate America exploit new markets through the longstanding regional political institutional order fomented by NAFTA and CAFTA-DR.

In particular, the RCS exhibits very little tangible difference from regional foreign policies of the past, with the main evolution being its discursive commitment to climate action and gender equality. The RCS facilitated private investment to extend the regional free trade regime and fully realize the dream of vertically integrated industries that are cheaper, more politically pliable, and outside of China's orbit. Elites in the United States and NCA alike need to depend on stable reserves of labor in Northern Central America and Mexico to capitalize on the opportunity

provided by nearshoring through reduced costs of conducting business outside of the United States. Irregular migration is a direct threat to those interests, and is worsened by climate change, which meant that the Root Causes Strategy became part of the strategy to protect these interests.

Additionally, these policy approaches facilitated the elite framing of climate-affected mobility as proof of systemic, societal breakdowns in need of resilience. On one hand, the functionality of migration itself, as a key driver of the U.S. economic engine and as a primary form of climate adaptation, is often discounted relative to the national security concerns that are promoted as the response to what elites frame as breakdowns. But as Rachel Schwartz argued in the case of Guatemala, echoing David Keen, underdevelopment can in many ways reflect its own kind of stability, rather than breakdown. Certain elites and sectors of the economy provide healthy returns for a privileged few. By understanding how and why elite national security circles frame migration, rather than accepting the presence of migration as the inherent truth of societal breakdown, we can more accurately understand the elite-driven economic systems—and the political-institutional incentives brokering their continued longevity—which underpin stability. This is not a denial or diminishment of the very real conditions of violence and poverty that exist in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico—not to mention the United States. Considering irregular migration as being largely tied to U.S. border and security policies (which rise and fall as a set), rather than seeing significant variance between countries, brings the logic of root causes framing into question. Why would the United States solve for the root causes of U.S. border policies in Northern Central America? The discursive incongruence of the RCS deserves far more scrutiny for the entirety of its use as a narrative tool for elite officials. Scholars must focus on the root

causes narrative as either intentionally or unintentionally reproducing the acute issues it alleges to alleviate, rather than accepting the narrative's existence as evidence of successful policymaking. Northern Central America illustrates the foundations of climate security discourse in two ways: labor being the region's primary U.S.-bound export, and domestic nearshoring production as a key part of multinational value chains. The exclusion of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Colombia from the RCS prove this. All are countries with sufficient degrees of political autonomy, economic disintegration, and insecurity for the United States to politically claim, with any reasonable degree of legitimacy, to need an avenue towards improving the root causes of underdevelopment. The Northern Central American countries are physically proximate enough to the U.S., and have the socio-economic integration that has resulted from decades of militarism and political intervention, that make them familiar enough to a U.S. domestic political audience. Their combination of relative awareness and projections of backwards, communist, indigenous underdevelopment makes the projection of their labor force as both a national security threat (brown, violent, criminal) and economically disposable (rural, minority, rudimentary, unskilled). Within this projection, stability and national security are natural goals and stasis points to pursue, under the banner of national security for the United States.

Now what does this mean for climate action? Its elite securitization as a threat multiplier will certainly prioritize short term adaptation funding to emphasize stability for U.S. political-economic interests. As Neta Crawford astutely noted, a securitized climate policy heavy on adaptation neglects longer run emissions mitigation efforts, only increasing the challenge of future adaptation efforts as climate change accelerates. The threat multiplier label obscures a deeper reality as well. Northern Central American countries represent a minuscule portion of greenhouse gas emissions

relative to the United States. When thinking about climate change as a threat multiplier and U.S. foreign policy doctrine, there are no so-called 'climate terrorists.' Crawford's *Deep Cycle* and Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* show how important maintaining carbon-intensive domestic production in the U.S. is to its overall political-economic model both at home and in its projections through bilateral and multilateral relations.

Despite the rhetorical platitudes about investing in the root causes of migration and integrating climate action into national security determinations, the fossil fuel-centered militarism that defined the twentieth century continues to define the twenty-first. Oil and gas remain the lifeblood of the economy, financial capital its skeleton, and disposable labor its cells. The fossil fuel industry's control over the political-economic systems upholding these interests has extended to how its strategies of misinformation, through complicating narratives of replacing fossil fuels, have been leveraged by government officials to incorporate the perception of human mobility as a threat to national security. National security justifications have become central to pursue and cement new investment opportunities and commercial markets as a result. These dynamics for the United States evolve as officials define and impose its national security doctrine for climate change along its economic frontier in Mexico and Northern Central America.

As Greg Grandin wrote:

At the end of the day, Latin America's usefulness to Washington resides in a paradox, which, put as crudely as possible, is this: the region limits U.S. ambition, and is the place where U.S. ambition learns to overcome limits. Push, pull, and pushback. This dialectical movement, the simultaneous creation of political morality and drive to escape political morality, was a wellspring of perpetual reinvention and the source of much of the United

States' ideological creativity - including why, for many, imperial denial has been so credible.<sup>635</sup>

In Mexico and Northern Central America, the U.S. national security establishment demonstrated a renewed ideological creativity through the creation and deployment of climate security discourse within broader U.S. engagement in the region. This thesis highlights that while much critical scholarship of climate securitization focuses on the tools used to delay climate action, the inverse holds true as well. Concern about climate change can be weaponized to pursue other material interests, in this case migration deterrence. In addition to the empirical evidence explored in this thesis, my argument is strengthened by the composition and nature of the deterrence policies themselves. There can be root causes policies, for migration, violence, and insecurity, that are not focused on deterrence. While we expect migration deterrence in this political-geographic context, we may not expect climate adaptation to mean deterrence by default. The policy outcomes enacted through the Biden RCS reflect a set of intentional choices, incentive structures, and tacit rules governing elite political behavior manipulating concern about climate change for their own personal and institutional positioning.

Finally, this thesis shows that the climate security community within the U.S. national security establishment must engage in an honest introspection of the historical and institutional contexts determining how climate change will shape subjective applications of national security into the future. This analysis affirms that elite manipulations of the narrative between climate change and national security are as important for any human security outcomes as the climatological impacts

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<sup>635</sup> Grandin, G. 2006. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. Holt: New York. Page 8.

of global warming itself. It is of course a positive development for senior officials to be concerned about climate action. However, if the U.S. government is serious about addressing the root causes of irregular migration that climate change has the potential to exacerbate, it must first accept that its frontierist exceptionalism has a destabilizing influence. This acknowledgement is the first step in beginning to reverse decades of political manipulation, economic exploitation, carceral state-building, and a violent, *doble cara* tearing of the shared socio-cultural fabric that exists between the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. If not, these realities will undercut any genuine efforts towards true climate flourishing. Climate change will merely remain a pawn in the border games that provide a safe space for policymakers to benefit politically from national security language without tackling the institutional bottlenecks blocking systemic reform.

## Appendix I: Additional Notes on Research Design and Methodology

This appendix further outlines my critical analysis approach to problem-driven research. I also highlight how this methodology is a central part of understanding the climate security construct.

### *Problem-Driven Research*

I follow Ian Shapiro’s question- or problem-driven approach within social science, which aims to provide explanations for observable reality. This approach “...begin[s] neither with a method nor with a theory but with an aspect of reality that [I am] trying to understand.”<sup>636</sup>

I question why national security officials use certain language in their policymaking, how this language influences their pursuit of both public and private interests, and how the explanations from my research help inform a theoretical understanding of climate change within political structures. I examine why the U.S. national security establishment’s long-standing emphasis on migration deterrence evolved to incorporate concerns about climate change. I ensure a robust, layered, triangulated argument by using historical analysis, semi-structured elite interviews, and policy tracing to garner historical and policy evidence in support of my arguments.

I follow Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren in considering language, or ‘discursive power,’ as:

...not simply about the world but [serving] to construct it...Discursive practices are defined as a set of tacit rules that regulate what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessings of authority and who must listen, whose social constructions are valid and whose are erroneous and unimportant.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>636</sup> Shapiro, I. and A. Wendt. 2005. The Difference That Realism Makes: Social Science and the Politics of Consent. In *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (pp. 19–50). Princeton University Press. Page 40.

<sup>637</sup> Kincheloe, J.L. and P. McLaren. 2011. Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. 285-386. In: Hayes, K. et al. *Key Work in Critical Pedagogy*. Sense Publishers. Page 291.

I examine the ways national security officials framed climate change and national security, both in the public arena as well as in interpersonal interactions. I then assess how these framings reveal some of these officials' assumptions, perceptions, and material interests. In this way, critical analysis allows me to highlight certain tacit rules of climate security discourse. This is a study of how power is exercised in the pursuit of political goals, understood as a process of "...concurrent struggles among different classes, racial and gender groups, and sectors of capital."<sup>638</sup>

My work does not aspire to the threshold of indirect causality that many scholar-practitioners have used to define the field and practice of climate security, as I discuss in Chapter 2. Instead, my research design allows me to highlight potential explanatory mechanisms for a problem-driven research question. I certainly do not claim that concerns about climate change are all-encompassing within a complex and multidimensional set of thorny policy issues. Nor do I claim that climate security discourse is an all-powerful tool that officials unilaterally make use of to achieve a range of political benefits. Climate change is just one reason, albeit a complicated and important one demanding innovative responses, for a wide range of social, political, economic, and ecological outcomes. My analysis advances a scholarly understanding of the systems of power influencing political behavior for national security officials in the United States by considering one element of why and how these officials have used concern about climate change to pursue certain goals. In this way, I help make sense of a contested set of theoretical and empirical issues that span physical geographies, academic disciplines, and historical timescales.

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<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

I aim for as broad a sample of interviewees as possible within the boundaries of my case study and seek to achieve triangulation for my claims to the best of my ability. I am not claiming a fully representative sample for this broad range of perspectives. Rather, my sample provides a novel, in-depth understanding of certain explanatory mechanisms for this important case study. I also do not assert that this is the only way to understand the relationship between my key areas of focus, but that this is an important lens, particularly from the vantage point of senior national security officials. This is the narrow, yet fundamental contribution of this thesis.

My approach draws from the work of Timothy Mitchell by situating these complex dynamics in a study of a particular time and place that:

...as a whole examines a wider set of issues concerned, to express them too abstractly, with problems of social calculation, agency, abstraction, violence, law, capitalism, and expertise. By writing about these abstract issues in a particular place, I also locate them in particular episodes, projects, conflicts, and transformations. This is a [work] of political theory, but it sets forth a kind of theory that, for reasons that will become clearer, avoids the method of abstraction from the particular that usually characterizes a work of theory. The theory lies in the complexity of the cases. This introduction abstracts from these particulars in ways that are misleading, and perhaps at times opaque. It therefore offers no substitute for what lies in the chapters themselves.<sup>639</sup>

Above all, my methodology centers the role of elites in promoting a climate security discourse that shapes dynamic national security doctrines. My analysis traces the essence of the challenge at hand: As climate change remakes the biophysical world that we live in, political actors governing

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<sup>639</sup> Mitchell, T. 2002. *Rule of experts: Egypt, technopolitics, modernity*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press. Page 8.

our responses simultaneously grapple with reconciling the pressures of the moment set against the realities of the past, projected onto hopes for the future.

In this context, my analysis of climate security discourse sheds light on how national security officials have leveraged concern about climate change to pursue specific policies. As Raymond Apthorpe and Des Gasper wrote:

...discourse is here defined as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena. Discourses frame certain problems; that is to say, they distinguish some aspects of a situation rather than others.<sup>640</sup>

In this research, I am attuned to the priorities, presented both explicitly as well as implicitly, that underlie how U.S. national security officials consider climate change as a political tool. In this way, I center how this discourse is situated in key policies for climate change and national security. I follow Mariana Souto-Manning's approach, in that, "From a critical perspective, discourses are produced within specific contexts and cannot be understood apart from them."<sup>641</sup> In line with political science and security studies scholars such as Jason Ackleson and Ami Carpenter, I apply critical analysis of these policy documents that center the 'lenses,'<sup>642</sup> or assumptions and priorities, that individual actors bring to their awareness of complex issues. I also highlight the context-specific cases where these lenses have been translated into "...material structures and policy

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<sup>640</sup> Apthorpe, R. and D. Gasper. 1996. *Arguing development policy: Frames and discourses*. Florence, Italy: Routledge Ltd. Page 2.

<sup>641</sup> Souto-Manning, M. 2014. Critical narrative analysis: The interplay of critical discourse and narrative analyses. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(2): 159-180. Page 160.

<sup>642</sup> Carpenter, A. 2013. Policy Issues Changing Lenses: Conflict Analysis and Mexico's "Drug War." *Latin American Politics and Society* 55(3): 139-160. Page 144.

manifestations" that "...have and are given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted."<sup>643</sup>

Given the range of assumptions and priorities shaping national security narratives for climate change, and vice versa, I question the use of these concepts themselves supporting this discourse. These include the adaptation and resilience concepts that both produce and are products of climate security discourse in the United States. To bolster security studies literature around climate security discourse, I integrate useful political ecology treatments—centering the environment within complex questions of social, political, and economic systems—of these concepts. Raymond Williams argued that, from a political ecology perspective, these trendy concepts act as ‘keywords’ that are ‘binding’ in their application and ‘indicative’ of ways of thinking.<sup>644</sup>

My critical analysis is a complementary research design.<sup>645</sup> The lenses of national security officials lead them to produce keywords that anchor public policies relative to their embedded assumptions and beliefs. Collectively, national security officials communicate their perspectives through discourses that reflect some of the tacit rules governing their behavior in creating public policy.

This approach allows me to critically interrogate the emergent practice of climate security outside of the narrow terms that its powerful supporters (and beneficiaries) use to frame its popular

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<sup>643</sup> Ackleson, J. 2005. Constructing security on the U.S.–Mexico border. *Political Geography*, 24:165–184. Page 166.

<sup>644</sup> Williams, R. 1977. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Page 15.

<sup>645</sup> Carpenter, A. 2013. Policy Issues Changing Lenses: Conflict Analysis and Mexico’s “Drug War.” *Latin American Politics and Society* 55(3): 139-160.

understanding. Proponents of climate security discourse have overwhelmingly focused on proving causality between climate change and certain elements of national security (logical empiricism) or deducing theory from observable factors in the world (interpretivism). I do not use a logical empiricist approach because those studies narrowly limit inquiry to what they can test against falsifiability and benchmark against generalizable theory.<sup>646</sup> I am interested in additional explanations beyond simple regression analysis, especially interpersonal power dynamics inside government. These qualitative, interpersonal factors are difficult to research using logical empiricism because they typically exist within "...open systems where experimental closure usually is not feasible."<sup>647</sup> In addition, I do not use a strictly interpretivist approach, which would center the opinions of interview respondents as theory. I do not follow a narrow interpretivist approach because a critical, question-driven research design needs to work in the opposite direction, aligning individual perspectives with established social theory.<sup>648</sup> I aim to produce explanatory claims for why and how U.S. national security officials used concern about climate change to their advantage.

Rather than following mainstream empiricist or interpretivist approaches to climate security, my research design takes a critical perspective. I focus on the power structures and strategic interests that shape how national security officials deploy climate security narratives. I adopt a critical theory approach rather than a positivist methodology to shift the focus away from proving direct causal links between climate change and national security. Instead of measuring temperature

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<sup>646</sup> Shapiro, I. and A. Wendt. 2005. The Difference That Realism Makes: Social Science and the Politics of Consent. In *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (pp. 19–50). Princeton University Press.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid, Page 42.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid, Page 39.

increases against migration trends or conflict levels,<sup>649</sup> I analyze how security officials construct and employ climate security narratives. Given the subjective, political nature of national security, I focus on political actions in context-specific situations that, by definition, cannot be replicated and artificially generalized. I use realist critical theory instead of more structural social theory because I do not lead with methodological or theoretical assumptions that bind either my question or my analysis. I focus on describing explanatory mechanisms; in this case, why and how national security officials use moral justification, bureaucratic channels, financial resources, and political cover to pursue their goals.

To assess these explanatory mechanisms in my documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, I examine the assumptions and priorities inherent in the keywords and lenses used by national security officials to produce climate security discourse. I then consider these assumptions and priorities against the material outcomes of resulting policies. Just because this analysis is context-specific does not make it any less of a social science inquiry. My empirical evidence underscores Ian Shapiro's argument that:

Realists do not deny the possibility, even likelihood, of multiple causal mechanisms or the need to construct research designs that will rule out claims about some in order to the heightened confidence about others. Realists also favor identifying empirical regularities as one kind of evidence for the existence of causal mechanisms. But they would remind social scientists working in open systems not to conflate regularities with mechanisms and, in particular, not to take the absence of regularities as decisive evidence against a proposed causal theory. ...they regard the primary task of science to be the description of how causal mechanisms work.

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<sup>649</sup> See: Burke, M., Ferguson, J., Hsiang, S. and E. Miguel. 2024. New Evidence on the Economics of Climate and Conflict. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. NBER Working Paper 33040. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w33040>.

...Realists argue against the logical empiricist belief that without regularities we have nothing. This belief demands a level of epistemic guarantees that would foreclose most social inquiry and ignores the possibilities of using a variety of inferential techniques to adjudicate among competing knowledge claims even when such guarantees are absent.<sup>650</sup>

I use policy analysis and interviews to highlight potential explanatory mechanisms for why and how national security officials use climate security discourse to pursue their goals. I build an explanation for how the lenses of national security officials become specific keywords and policies by using Desmond King and Rogers Smith's framework of political institutional orders. King and Smith defined political institutional orders as "...coalitions of state institutions and other political actors and organizations that seek to secure and exercise governing power in demographically, economically, and ideologically structured contexts that define the range of opportunities open to political actors."<sup>651</sup> My analysis helps organize some tacit rules of climate security discourse. This lens helps understand how resulting policies created a larger political paradigm at the intersection of climate change and national security, through migration deterrence.

In practice, the regional and institutional contexts that U.S. climate security discourse is developed and exercised within are most valuably understood through the elite national security officials driving their creation and expansion. I consider not just these officials' functions within their own institutions, but also their relationships with colleagues in other agencies as well as how they relate to counterparts in foreign governments. These relational dimensions are a central piece of how climate security discourse is produced transnationally as well as asymmetrically. Power

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<sup>650</sup> Shapiro, I. and A. Wendt. 2005. The Difference That Realism Makes: Social Science and the Politics of Consent. In *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (pp. 19–50). Princeton University Press. Page 47.

<sup>651</sup> King, D.S. and R.M. Smith. 2005. Racial Orders in American Political Development. *American Political Science Review* 99(1): 75–92. Page 75.

imbalances between the United States and its neighbors, in addition to Central American governments' working dynamics between one another as well as Mexico, clash with geographic factors and timescales to create the shifting conditions in climate security discourse that are exploited by national security officials.

To determine who these elite officials are, I follow Will Jones et al. in identifying actors by their relevance to decision making and the exercise of power. As such, elites broadly are "...defined by who they are, how they depend upon and relate to one another, and what enables them to determine political outcomes."<sup>652</sup> In Northern Central America, security elites are positioned within institutions forged by decades of civil war and counterinsurgency that were both results of and inputs to U.S. national security doctrine. Rachel Schwartz showed that while many of these elites occupy expected roles—i.e., 'who they are'—such as senior posts in public administration and the armed forces, others are more unexpected, instead settling in key functions of the state that allow for profiteering, such as customs enforcement. Schwartz argued that these national security officials, in concert with each other—"how they depend upon and relate to one another"—benefit from sets of 'undermining rules' that manipulate critical state operations of power for personal gain. The end result—"what enables them to determine political outcomes"—has most often been the production of "...a unified elite that possesses a high concentration of power and resources [and] encounters few countervailing political forces to check its decision-making authority and thus seldom faces accountability."<sup>653</sup> Stephen Walt argued that elites in the United States national

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<sup>652</sup> Jones, W., R. Soares de Oliveira, and H. Verhoeven. 2013. Africa's Illiberal State-builders. *Oxford Center of Refugee Studies*, Working Paper 89. Page 9.

<sup>653</sup> Schwartz, R. 2023. *Undermining the State From Within: The Institutional Legacies of Civil War in Central America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 46.

security establishment may be more dispersed across different sectors of government, the private sector, and civil society, but drive their own interests and positions equally as effectively, albeit in a context with stronger rule of law and transparency mechanisms.<sup>654</sup> I focus my analysis on U.S. national security officials, while recognizing that foreign policy is conducted in concert with elites from other national governments as well as the private sector, and considered their interactions and perspectives as they inform climate security discourse in the United States.

To interrogate the climate security discourse used by U.S. national security officials, I apply lessons from activist scholarship to critically assess my own positionality as a researcher carrying political biases and who is partially embedded in the various circles I examine. I follow a long line of researchers striving to promote knowledge production aimed at influencing socio-political change, believing that "...research and political engagement can be mutually enriching."<sup>655</sup> As Charles Hale and Samuel Martínez argued:

This requires explicit critical reflection on one's own subjectivity as a researcher...not just where you stand, but where you come from; not just how you think about yourself, but how you are viewed and positioned in the social context of your work...and systematic monitoring of how our relationship to research subjects affects both the content and the meaning of the data we collect.<sup>656</sup>

By explicitly acknowledging and relating this positionality to my work, I aim to strengthen my methodological rigor to transparently and critically evaluate my role in advancing "...a shared

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<sup>654</sup> Walt, S. 2018. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>655</sup> Hale, C. Introduction (pp. 1-31) in Hale, C. (Ed.) 2008. *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Page 2.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid*, Page 12.

commitment to basic principles of social justice that is attentive to inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them."<sup>657</sup>

With this duty of care in mind, I bring a political background advocating for immigration reform and climate action to this research. My advocacy, as it relates to activist scholarship, has been at the systemic and institutional level. To begin, I am a white, male, Spanish-speaking, highly educated U.S. citizen. I leverage those pieces of privilege to align my community-level awareness of immigration policy in the United States with policy advocates and government officials in both the United States and Latin America engaged with these issues. This orientation augments my second-hand understanding of the structural determinants of power affecting those communities which experience systemic oppression, harassment, discrimination, and violence. While I am a descendent of German Jews (including my grandmother) who emigrated to the United States to flee the Holocaust, I do not "...claim such evidence-based connections" to personal "...experiences of oppression and to struggles of empowerment."<sup>658</sup> Instead, my positionality has been "...one of active alignment, avoiding the righteous fervor of a convert/traitor while rejecting the privilege-laden option to remain outside the fray."<sup>659</sup>

I have expanded my active alignment through public service in the United States, at various levels of government and scales of impact. At an advanced stage of my doctorate, after I had finished my formal data collection and analysis processes and strictly drawn a firm boundary between the thesis

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid, Page 7.

<sup>658</sup> Ibid, Page 3.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid.

and external engagements, I served as the inaugural Climate Security Fellow at the U.S. Department of Defense's Regional Center for Latin America and the Caribbean. This position allowed me to directly apply some of the lessons I had gained from earlier stages of my research to the policy process and attempt to reconcile the central thread of this thesis: why national security officials developed and used climate security discourse in their engagement with Northern Central America and Mexico, and how this discourse impacted foreign relations between government, private sector, and civil society elites. In this way, I was an (albeit junior and temporary) member of the climate security coalition I assessed in this research, attempting to shape its discourse in the direction of enhanced protections for marginalized communities across the Americas. In a sense, my positionality reflected Hale's call to "...wage a struggle from within, to negotiate and even to wield the modest quotas of institutional power to achieve our goals, while remaining especially vigilant toward the destructive allure of the elitism and hierarchy that surround us."<sup>660</sup> I was honored to build on the work of countless advocates in many corners of these institutions of power, as well as in academia, who have promoted "...a deeper and more sustained analysis of the sociopolitical conditions that frame the research question and the research process."<sup>661</sup>

### *Methods*

My qualitative methodology provides a structured empirical process to explore why officials were able to employ climate security discourse as part of their broader migration deterrence goals in Mexico and Northern Central America, and how that discourse shaped resulting regional political dynamics. My data collection and analysis consists of five principal steps: identifying keywords

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<sup>660</sup> Ibid, Page 18.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid, Page 13.

from secondary literature; conducting interviews; coding and sorting data; grouping data into five themes, or lenses (climate resilience and adaptation, immigration, military and transnational criminal organizations, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, and trade and economic development); and assessing those lenses against policy outcomes (including the Biden Root Causes Strategy); security cooperation; and free trade agreements. I then use the policy frameworks themselves to analyze this grouped data against the primary policy outcomes: where was there continuity for certain positions across different perspectives, job functions, and nationalities? Were there interesting tensions? Why was this discourse employed for certain ends, and what were the resulting political dynamics?

I follow established critical theory research from the scholars Jason Ackleson<sup>662</sup> and Ami Carpenter<sup>663</sup> to identify the keywords and lenses that underpin the contours of power within climate security discourse. To do this, I first analyzed publicly available documents to gain an understanding of the keywords that national security officials used to construct climate security narratives. I then used my policy analysis to create a uniform interview questionnaire aimed at providing a more comprehensive understanding of the lenses that national security officials used when thinking about climate change and national security. The process was iterative and dynamic. I asked interviewees a common set of initial questions and then asked follow-up questions within each interview that corresponded to their specific answers. As is common practice with semi-structured interviews, I maintained the uniform set of initial questions for each interviewee to

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<sup>662</sup> Ackleson, J. 2005. Constructing security on the U.S.–Mexico border. *Political Geography*, 24:165–184.

<sup>663</sup> Carpenter, A. 2013. Policy Issues Changing Lenses: Conflict Analysis and Mexico’s “Drug War.” *Latin American Politics and Society* 55(3): 139-160.

ensure fairness and remove bias from the process, while at the same time honing in on key terms, concepts, and lines of thinking for my analysis.<sup>664</sup> I followed established qualitative social science to determine when I had reached data saturation, namely when interview responses became repetitive, with no major new ideas being introduced,<sup>665</sup> and I had compiled a robust range of core perspectives supporting climate security discourse and policies. To identify interviewees, I relied on a combination of my professional network, snowball sampling, and cold outreach to individuals relevant to the policies I was examining.

The politically sensitive nature of my research question and case study requires an examination of the “deep texture of local circumstances...that have been deliberately evaded by theorists more concerned with simplicity than the diversity of economic life.”<sup>666</sup> In this light, I obtained data through semi-structured interviews, which served to identify both individual actions and agency as well as their embeddedness within institutional cultures and memories in ways that documentary analysis alone cannot provide.<sup>667</sup> Oral histories and interviews carry the power to express true realities of life that are difficult to capture in macro-level surveys or impersonal quantitative analysis on their own, and the use of personal accounts of life can be utilized in a targeted and

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<sup>664</sup> Blakely, R. 2012. Elite Interviews. An introduction to theories and methods. In: Shepherd, L.J., ed. *Critical Approaches to Security*: Routledge, London, 158-168.

<sup>665</sup> Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., and C. Jinks. 2018. Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity* 52(4), 1893–1907.

<sup>666</sup> Clark, G. 1998. Stylized Facts and Close Dialogue: Methodology in Economic Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88(1): 73-87. Page 82.

<sup>667</sup> Blakely, R. 2012. Elite Interviews. An introduction to theories and methods. In: Shepherd, L.J., ed. *Critical Approaches to Security*: Routledge, London, 158-168.

intentional way in order to support, reinforce, and bolster a well-rounded qualitative argument.<sup>668</sup> While elite interviewees are not considered to be especially vulnerable groups due to their backgrounds and status, data from elite sources must include ethical considerations related to the protection of interviewee identity.<sup>669</sup> To this end, I anonymized my interview data, conducting interviews on background—using direct quotations attributed anonymously—while sorting and coding data gleaned in interviews according to relevant research themes.<sup>670</sup> It is in the interests of both researcher and interviewee that, when providing politically sensitive data (including criticisms of sitting government) interviewees must be protected after the fact.<sup>671</sup> Through careful attribution in subsequent published material, as well as with regard to data storage, I take very seriously the duty of ensuring that I do not pass on any information from or about my interviewees "deliberately or inadvertently" where appropriate.<sup>672</sup>

After I finished conducting my interviews and cleaning the data—translating material from Spanish language interviews and making generic edits to interview transcripts to ensure legibility—I sorted and grouped the data. To do this, I coded the responses based on common themes, narratives, policies, and issue areas. I manually coded my interview responses rather than using qualitative analysis software. This approach allowed me to capture nuanced elements of 'discursive

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<sup>668</sup> Gengenbach, H. 1994. Truth-Telling and the Politics of Women's Life History Research in Africa: A Reply to Kirk Hoppe. *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 27(3): 619-27.

<sup>669</sup> Blakely, R. 2012. Elite Interviews. An introduction to theories and methods. In: Shepherd, L.J., ed. *Critical Approaches to Security*: Routledge, London, 158-168.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid.

<sup>671</sup> Weiner, M. 1964. Political Interviewing in Social Research. In R.E. Ward (Ed.) *Studying Politics Abroad*. Boston: Little Brown, pp. 102-33.

<sup>672</sup> Blakely, R. 2012. Elite Interviews. An introduction to theories and methods. In: Shepherd, L.J., ed. *Critical Approaches to Security*: Routledge, London, 158-168. Page 160.

power'—as described by Joe Kincheloe and Peter McClaren—that software might overlook.<sup>673</sup> For this process, I followed the work of Daniel Abrahams in creating coding that aligned core themes of professional role and sector, participants' experience with climate-security connections, and understanding of how this experience informed participants' engagement with related policies.<sup>674</sup> I grouped responses based on government organizations and roles, and then cross-referenced those groupings by specific themes, including climate resilience and adaptation; immigration policy; military and transnational criminal organizations; humanitarian assistance and disaster response; and trade and economic development. I then aligned the thematic groupings with specific policies, including the Root Causes Strategy (and Partnership for Central America); the Safe Mobility Offices program; security cooperation such as the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), Plan Colombia, and the Mérida Initiative; and free trade agreements—NAFTA, CAFTA-DR, and USMCA. I then went back to the policy frameworks themselves to assess these grouped data against the policy outcomes being discussed: where was there continuity for certain positions across different perspectives, job functions, and nationalities? Where were there interesting divergences, and to what effect?

This basis for assessment against specific policies was an iterative process, as well as a subjective one. While I anonymized the interview data for publication (which was made clear to interviewees beforehand to encourage frank conversation of sensitive topics as well as to protect interviewees) I knew who had said what, and how each interviewee's perspective reflected their individual

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<sup>673</sup> Kincheloe, J.L. and P. McLaren. 2011. Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. 285-386. In: Hayes, K. et al. *Key Work in Critical Pedagogy*. Sense Publishers.

<sup>674</sup> Abrahams, D. 2019. From discourse to policy: U.S. policy communities' perceptions of and approaches to climate change and security. *Conflict, Security & Development* 19(4): 323-345.

relationship to the policy outcomes I was assessing. This subjectivity does not make the research any less robust or empirical. In this thesis, I explicitly declare what my own lenses are as a researcher, what my personal background and experience with this content area bring to my understanding of these issues, and why this orientation positions me to relate my interview responses with the policies I deconstruct.<sup>675</sup>

As I detail in Chapter 3, a central part of the support for my arguments are the character of the public-facing policies themselves. My original data provide a complementary empirical basis for this research. With this discussion, there is a policy spectrum spanning humanitarian- and development-focused foreign assistance from a more traditional liberal standpoint to border security and militarism in a more traditionally conservative view. There are potential root causes policies that do not include migration deterrence, and there are potential migration deterrence policies that do not include root causes focuses. My research design allows me to assess some of the explanatory mechanisms for my question- and problem-driven critical approach. I detail why elites used climate security discourse as one tool to pursue certain priorities, and how these tacit rules of power reflect some elements of the institutional order shaping political behavior between the United States, Mexico, and Northern Central America.

These considerations come in parallel to the creation of a regional free trade regime with an eye towards implications for better understanding the fusion of climate change, national security, and migration concerns. I review the design and implementation of the three main Free Trade

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<sup>675</sup> Hale, C. Introduction (pp. 1-31) in Hale, C. (Ed.) 2008. *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Agreements: NAFTA, CAFTA-DR, and USMCA. I assess defense, diplomacy, and intelligence cooperation, including U.S. Department of Defense quadrennial reviews and force posture assessments, U.S. National Security Council and U.S. Intelligence Council Directives and Estimates, U.S. Department of State strategic planning documents, and U.S. National Security Strategies; U.S. Department of Justice and later U.S. Department of Homeland Security initiatives around border security in tandem with their regional partners, especially the Mexican National Institute of Migration (INM by its Spanish acronym); as well as the regional security frameworks the Mérida Initiative, Northern Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), and the Central American Integration System (SICA by its Spanish acronym). Finally, I consider how development assistance has been leveraged for security and climate resilience through programs such as Feed the Future and other U.S. Department of Agriculture foreign aid, the Alliance for Prosperity, humanitarian and disaster mitigation assistance through USAID and FEMA, the Obama administration's U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, and the Biden administration's Root Causes Strategy.

I corroborate policy analyses with original, semi-structured interviews to provide complementary detail into their creation and implementation. I augment reviews of primary and secondary policy documents with 48 original, semi-structured interviews incorporating the perspectives of elites and policymakers to triangulate and substantiate climate security discourse. These interviews include senior- and mid-level U.S. officials spanning the Clinton to Biden administrations and their Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran counterparts, as well as private sector and civil society representatives. Public sector interviewees offered perspectives from the governments of the United States (The White House, State Department, Department of Homeland Security,

Department of Defense, Agency for International Development, and Congress); Mexico (Secretariats of Foreign Affairs, Environment and Natural Resources, and the Mexican National Migration Institute [INM]); Guatemala (Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Environment and Natural Resources, Defense, and Interior); Honduras (Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Interior, Justice, and Decentralization, and Natural Resources and the Environment); and El Salvador (Ministries of Foreign Relations and Environment and Natural Resources).

Potential limitations of this research design include access to elite interviews, the bias of the interviewees, and access to classified government documents. I attempt to control for these limitations to the best of my ability. For access to interviews, I engaged both institutional as well as local contacts through snowball sampling. I follow the principles laid out by Saunders et al. for data saturation, who saw "...saturation as a matter of identifying redundancy in the data," to determine that I had reached a point with interview data where I was ready to begin critical analysis.<sup>676</sup> In terms of bias, especially in the context of state-building where political actors have reputational and personal interests invested in particular visions of development, I sought to triangulate elite, national security official interview responses that I use in my critical theory analysis with other sources of policy planning, especially documentary analysis. I also interviewed local civil society, NGO, and community leaders to glean insights into both direct interactions with U.S., Mexican, and Northern Central American public and private elites as well as perceptions of these actors, as community support and public perception plays a role in creating the political climate in which policy is created. I conducted my interviews with the expectation of anonymity

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<sup>676</sup> Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., and C. Jinks. 2018. Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity* 52(4): 1893–1907. Page 1897.

past nationality, as specific agencies and roles for this narrow context could reveal identifying personal information. The high-level breakdown of the 48 interviewees was the following: 17 U.S., 19 Northern Central America and Mexico (6 Guatemala, 5 Honduras, 4 El Salvador, 4 Mexico), 8 civil society, 4 private sector. My interviewees reflect a robust sample of perspectives cross-referenced against potential alternatives through historical and policy analysis.

## **Appendix II: Economic Frontierism and Border Control**

This appendix explores how the United States' pursuit of economic growth in Mexico and Central America carries implications for climate security narratives. Just as Big Oil played a key role in shaping climate resilience narratives, U.S. policymakers have historically framed economic expansion as a necessary response to regional instability. I use a literature review and interview data to outline how the concept of economic frontierism, rooted in the expansionist logic of U.S. foreign policy, positions economic development as both a geopolitical necessity and a national security strategy. In this framework, economic interventions—often made through free trade agreements and foreign direct investment—are justified as tools for preventing displacement and strengthening regional stability. I then examine the role of immigration within the U.S. government's version of economic frontierism, a critical component of this thesis's case study. Key to this frontierism was the evolution of migration as a political concern: from Cold War priorities of political and economic alignment to a post-NAFTA view as a national security threat. These policies, in prioritizing U.S. economic interests over local development, have often exacerbated the very inequalities and stressors that drive migration. After a review of NAFTA, I discuss how shifting notions of legality stemmed from concerns about immigration within U.S. national security policies related to Mexico and Northern Central America.

While the securitization of climate change has provided U.S. policymakers with a framework to justify interventionist policies in migration and border governance, this discourse does not exist in isolation. It is deeply intertwined with the economic logic that has shaped U.S. engagement with Mexico and Northern Central America since the implementation of NAFTA. The construction of climate change as a national security threat has reinforced longstanding economic strategies aimed

at stabilizing and controlling labor markets, securing supply chains, and maintaining geopolitical influence in the region. This securitized lens does not merely dictate military or border control responses—it also influences how U.S. policymakers conceptualize economic development as a tool for migration deterrence. The concept of economic frontierism, which has historically framed Northern Central America as an extension of the U.S. economic sphere, plays a crucial role in this process. By fusing climate security concerns with investment-led migration deterrence strategies, U.S. officials have repackaged traditional economic policies under the narrative of climate adaptation and resilience. This chapter explores how economic frontierism has shaped the climate security discourse, reinforcing deterrence-first approaches while advancing corporate and geopolitical interests in the region.

### *Overview*

Security in the context of U.S. national interests has long been oriented around protecting market expansionism. Greg Grandin argued that the United States has consistently tied its national security apparatus to the concept of 'frontierism,' in which "...security was commerce, commerce was prosperity, prosperity was power, power nurtured virtue, virtue was freedom, and freedom had to be extended to be secured and secured to be extended."<sup>677</sup> Grandin powerfully illustrated how elites have sustained the U.S. political experiment in times of crisis by expanding the U.S. commercial frontier in order to accommodate competing domestic factions. These internal conflicts, divided along race, class, and urban/rural lines, were resolved through distributing extractive profits taken from the land, inferior peoples and countries, and personal privacy. Crawford's Deep Cycle

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<sup>677</sup> Grandin, G. 2019. *The end of the myth: from the frontier to the border wall in the mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company. Page 65.

augments Grandin's frontierism by documenting the central role fossil fuels play in influencing how U.S. elites perceive the contemporary U.S. frontier. According to these elite views, the national security threshold for the frontier is a constantly expanding territorial boundary that needs to be protected militarily so that elite and corporate economic well-being can flourish within.

It is important to underscore the role the environment plays in how elites have tied U.S. frontierism to North American land and natural resources. The creed of Manifest Destiny following the Louisiana Purchase saw the interplay of state, business, and military power harnessed to extract profit from the land at whatever cost necessary.<sup>678</sup> The early frontier enterprise included systematically persecuting, inflicting bloodshed upon, and subjugating Native American tribes; forcibly annexing most of the present-day U.S. southwest through the Mexican-American War; consolidating extractive economies by monopolizing utilities, telecommunications, and infrastructure systems; and reinforcing economic hegemony through bilateral and multilateral interventions and institutions that continued into the twenty-first century.<sup>679</sup> Complete control over nature as an expression of cultural and racial superiority, and the cementing of that control through white settler migration, were key components of this logic.<sup>680</sup> William Gilpin, one of the most prominent advocates for Manifest Destiny and authority over the western U.S. as a land speculator, aide to Abraham Lincoln, and the first Governor of Colorado Territory during the U.S. Civil War, firmly believed in the theory that 'rain follows the plow.'<sup>681</sup> This theory held that land would render

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<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Limerick, P.N. 1987. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

itself arable through enough settler energy and enthusiasm.<sup>682</sup> In 1858, Gilpin stated that by settling the western United States, "...gold in mass and in position and infinite in quantity will, within the coming three years, reveal itself to the energy of our pioneers."<sup>683</sup> Amid this, though the question of slavery was tearing the country apart through debates over its expansion into western territories (first Missouri, Oregon, and California, and then Kansas-Nebraska), it ultimately took a back seat to the unquestioned need to conquer land in the first place; rather, that was accepted without issue.<sup>684</sup> It was the elite belief in Gilpin's vision of white pioneers' and property owners' "intractable destiny"<sup>685</sup> that fed the perception of the western United States as unrealized profit and prosperity awaiting extraction through mining, oil and gas, and control over the region's water supply (through the aptly named Federal Bureau of Reclamation, facilitated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers). Elite command over natural resources led to the development of vast irrigation systems, which enabled the sprawling ranching, agriculture, military-industrial sites, and urban sprawl that today define the western United States.<sup>686</sup> The relationship between white speculators, powerful apparatuses of the state and the military, and the lands that were to be wrangled into submission demonstrates what elites considered to be the 'national interest' worth controlling.<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>682</sup> Grandin, G. 2019. *The end of the myth: from the frontier to the border wall in the mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company.

<sup>683</sup> Quoted from Karnes, T. L. 2021. *William Gilpin: Western Nationalist*. Austin. Page 244. Original editorial in the *Western Journal of Commerce* [Kansas City, Mo.], November 6, 1858.

<sup>684</sup> Grandin, G. 2019. *The end of the myth: from the frontier to the border wall in the mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company.

<sup>685</sup> Quoted from Karnes, T. L. 2021. *William Gilpin: Western Nationalist*. Austin. Page 136. Original editorial in the *Western Journal of Commerce* [Kansas City, Mo.], November 6, 1858.

<sup>686</sup> Gessner, D. 2015. *All the wild that remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and the American West*. New York: W.W. Norton.

<sup>687</sup> Grandin, G. 2019. *The end of the myth: from the frontier to the border wall in the mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company.

The next section examines the economic and political dynamics of security and frontierism in the context of NAFTA, showing how it constructed migration as a threat to U.S. sovereignty and regional economic integration.

### Economic and Political Basis for NAFTA: The Marshall Plan and Political-Economic Integration

Before NAFTA, national security officials almost exclusively pursued U.S. regional interests through the lens of the Cold War. U.S. Cold War foreign policy was measured against the Marshall Plan, promoting a regime of 'liberal hegemony' expanding alignment towards the U.S. and creating market opportunities for U.S. firms.<sup>688</sup> The Marshall Plan's success in creating a unified Western European bloc with close political-economic integration to the U.S. was seen as the ideal-type for subsequent U.S. foreign assistance programs. In this light, USAID's founding mandate aimed to assist developing countries in achieving 'self-reliance.'<sup>689</sup> In practice, self-reliance meant market alignment and integration, beginning with strategic outreach to Greece and Turkey almost immediately after World War II.<sup>690</sup> U.S. policymakers developed strategic economic policy in the 'third world' through the spatial promotion of political-economic competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, known as the Truman Doctrine.<sup>691</sup> In Latin America, this model was replicated with the Kennedy-era Alliance for Progress (building on regional integration fostered through the Organization of American States [OAS]), which influenced much of Washington's

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<sup>688</sup> Walt, S. 2018. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>689</sup> Norris, J. 2021. *The enduring struggle: The history of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's uneasy transformation of the world*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid.

<sup>691</sup> Farish, M. 2010. *Contours of America's Cold War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

approach to its regional posture for the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>692</sup> While John Norris noted that U.S. foreign assistance during the postwar period was sometimes deployed for humanitarian reasons—such as famine relief in India (1965), Nigeria (Biafra, 1969), and Ethiopia (1984)—supporting friendly (and more importantly, Western-aligned) governments and strategically promoting commercial opportunities for U.S. firms, farmers, and the U.S. consumer market has always been linked to a model of political-economic integration.<sup>693</sup>

The concept of integration is key to understanding how elites leveraged U.S. strategic interests in the name of national security to realize economic gains in Latin America throughout the Cold War. Walt Rostow's modernization theory, which held that all states needed to pass through linear, uniform 'stages of development' in order to reach a 'take-off' towards mass consumption, was one of the most important scholarly tenets of U.S. Cold War foreign policy.<sup>694</sup> Rostow exercised substantial influence in the creation of USAID and in his subsequent role as President Lyndon Johnson's National Security Adviser.<sup>695</sup> While development studies scholars have criticized Rostow's work for being narrow-minded and Anglo- and Euro-centric, Rostow played a central role in envisioning how 'backwards' societies could achieve a version of development that was overwhelmingly focused on advancing developing country markets to mature stages able to

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<sup>692</sup> Norris, J. 2021. *The enduring struggle: The history of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's uneasy transformation of the world*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>694</sup> Farish, M. 2010. *Contours of America's Cold War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>695</sup> Norris, J. 2021. *The enduring struggle: The history of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's uneasy transformation of the world*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

integrate into U.S. and European markets.<sup>696</sup> David Ekbladh argued that modernization was differentiated from the Marshall Plan in the minds of U.S. planners as an applicable recipe for developing country growth only.<sup>697</sup> Modernization theory helped realize a U.S. approach to foreign engagement that applied universal prescriptions for economic growth as they related to their ability to strengthen U.S. strategic interests, and treated U.S. foreign assistance and other programming as purely transactional tools contributing to narrow commercial ends.<sup>698</sup> Modernization theory was a key piece of Henry Kissinger's austere military *realpolitik*, which denigrated genuine development objectives to their contribution towards a stark vision of U.S. power projection.<sup>699</sup> Stephen Wertheim outlined how the U.S. foreign policy elite weaponized their opposition to isolationism during World War II in order to lay the foundations for U.S. strategic interests predicated on expansionist interventionism during the Cold War, especially in the strategic theater of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>700</sup> Wertheim provided a contextual background that ties U.S. interests together into a cohesive narrative about firm support and expansion. Throughout the Cold War, Washington treated its national security in Latin America as a narrowly defined mechanism capable of driving U.S. economic objectives.

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<sup>696</sup> Bull, B. and M. Bøås. 2012. Between Ruptures and Continuity: Modernisation, Dependency and the Evolution of Development Theory. *Forum for Development Studies* 39(3): 319-336.

<sup>697</sup> Ekbladh, D. 2017. Peripheral Vision: US Modernization Efforts and the Periphery. In *Foreign Policy at the Periphery: The Shifting Margins of US International Relations Since World War II*, Bevan Sewell and Maria Ryan, eds. University Press of Kentucky: Lexington.

<sup>698</sup> Grandin, G. 2015. *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*. First ed. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid.

<sup>700</sup> Wertheim, S. 2020. *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

After the Cold War, national security officials used U.S. national security determinations to protect their main interests at stake: elite-driven economic growth, and the corresponding political apparatuses couched in the language of values and democratic ideals designed to facilitate unrestricted capital flows. These political-economic interests were the national security reference point for all other determinations. Accordingly, as late as 1988, the U.S. national security establishment saw environmental issues predominately through a geostrategic lens as it related to the Soviet Union. An internal memo to Secretary of State George Schultz stated:

Environmental degradation is becoming an increasingly serious problem in developing as well as developed countries. The Soviets are stressing the environment as important to their 'new thinking' in foreign policy. Could this be a test area for serious U.S.-Soviet cooperation on an international level, even in the UN? It threatens neither country's vital interests, traditionally defined, and has positive gains for both.<sup>701</sup>

In the early, pre-UNFCCC years before 1992, the discussion of climate change in national security circles (despite a decades-long awareness in scientific and scholarly communities) first focused on climate change as an opportunity for geostrategic competition, and then consolidation for the emerging unipolar moment for the United States. As a former U.S. official stated:

Climate awareness came later, but what we were very aware of at the end of the Cold War was contamination on military bases from industrial activities. We were helping the Russians denuclearize. We were cleaning up bases and conserving natural resources in Latin America and Africa. Big efforts, a lot of ecosystem work and research and good stewardship of natural and cultural resources. We would share best practices for militaries to tread lightly on land; climate change came later.<sup>702</sup>

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<sup>701</sup> U.S. Department of State. 1988. Information Memorandum From the Director of the Policy Planning Staff to Secretary of State Schultz. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v01/d320>.

<sup>702</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official. July 27, 2023.

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in U.S. national security officials' heightened perception of economic competition as a strategic interest for the United States. U.S. elites saw economic opportunity both in the Western Hemisphere and as it related to climate change and environmental concerns. An early indication of this perception was President Clinton's second Presidential Decision Directive, which elevated both the Treasury Secretary and National Economic Council Director to the Principals Committee of the National Security Council, stating: "Economic issues are of increasing concern and are competing with traditional political and military issues for resources and attention."<sup>703</sup> Regionally in the Western Hemisphere, the Clinton administration leveraged its post-Cold War geopolitical primacy and resulting electoral mandate to muscle NAFTA ratification through Congress.<sup>704</sup> China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 made its low-wage textile and manufacturing model the new economic threat to be combatted, which the George W. Bush administration responded to by further consolidating the U.S. regional trade bloc through the implementation of the CAFTA-DR agreement in 2006.<sup>705</sup> Throughout the post-Cold War period, the U.S. sought ample opportunity to expand market access and provide breathing room for U.S. multinational firms and their supply and value chains.

A former Member of Congress described the competing interests at stake when climate action is on the table relative to economic security:

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<sup>703</sup> United States Executive Office of the President. 1994. Presidential Decision Directive II. September 16, 1994. <https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/security-policy-coordination/docview/1679116108/se-2>.

<sup>704</sup> Norris, J. 2021. *The enduring struggle: The history of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's uneasy transformation of the world*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>705</sup> Brown, S. 2004. *Myths of Free Trade: Why American Trade Policy Has Failed*. The New Press.

I don't think we have done a good job of addressing climate change as a threat that is not a military problem. It's not troops moving into a certain place. It is a threat that has been building, as we have known, for decades. In so many ways, to address it has been difficult because of the impact on the economy.

And the link to immigration has always been there but taken a back seat to stronger interests. When I was in Congress, we tried to pass the cap-and-trade bill to put a tax on carbon emissions, which many Western European countries have something similar to. The politics were just too difficult because industry is totally against something like that, and it didn't go anywhere. And then the comprehensive, bipartisan immigration bill in the Bush administration, which was championed by John McCain and Ted Kennedy, with President Bush supporting it, still failed. Even with that kind of bipartisan support, even with a Republican president supporting it, it still couldn't pass.

So, we really have a divided system that is based on, quite frankly, a pay to play system where there's so much money involved at the state and particularly at the national level, where it's very difficult to address these kinds of issues that will have a short-term negative impact on corporate America and the economy.<sup>706</sup>

As a result, U.S. national security officials have designed environmental policy in Mexico and Northern Central America writ large to augment economic considerations far more than any specific environmental concerns. These economic considerations have included anti-Communist positions on land reform during the Cold War, in opposition to democratically elected governments, to support U.S. firms. The case of Guatemala, where the U.S. intervened in the Arbenz government's land redistribution planning on behalf of the United Fruit Company, is an evocative example.<sup>707</sup> The CIA-backed coup of the Arbenz government was described by the U.S.

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<sup>706</sup> Author interview with former Member of Congress. November 18, 2022.

<sup>707</sup> Marshall, J. 2024. The United Fruit Lobby: Revisiting Truman's Guatemala Policy. *Diplomatic History* 48(1): 102–126.

State Department itself as an operation to "...free the hemisphere from the perceived dangers of Soviet-inspired international communism."<sup>708</sup>

Economic considerations have predicated support for U.S. liberal multilateral positions as they apply to environmental issues, such as human rights, press protection, and religious freedom.<sup>709</sup>

While social and environmental safeguard requirements for development finance projects from Washington-based institutions—largely the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and Andean Development Corporation (CAF)—are generally recognized to comprise a serious regulatory regime focused on environmental and social protection, policymakers often frame these environmental policies in comparison to those at peer institutions of other great powers, especially China and Russia.<sup>710</sup> These environmental regulations in Latin America are widely understood to be strong on paper, with implementation and enforcement posing separate challenges.<sup>711</sup> While the U.S. does support regional environmental programming through the OAS and in other multilateral arenas, these are largely uncontroversial policies framed with their domestic benefits in mind. For example, the OAS's energy grid transformation program centers around engagement with U.S. federal research laboratories.<sup>712</sup> Similarly, U.S. support for the

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<sup>708</sup> U.S. State Department. (Accessed 2022). *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Guatemala*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Introduction.

<sup>709</sup> Walt, S. 2018. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>710</sup> Nathanson, M. 2018. How to Respond to Chinese Investment in Latin America. *Foreign Policy*. November 28, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/28/how-to-respond-to-chinese-investment-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>711</sup> Garzón, P. 2016. China – Ecuador Relations: A look at the Coca Codo Sinclair and Sopladora Hydropower Projects. *China-Latin America Sustainable Investments Initiative*, October 2016.

<sup>712</sup> Organization of American States (OAS). (Accessed 2022). Smart Grids. <http://www.oas.org/en/sedi/dsd/energy/metrology/3.%20Smart%20Grids.asp>.

original Paris Agreement especially allowed the country to juxtapose its leadership position against China.<sup>713</sup> As a result, it is fair (and indeed, not novel) to say that the U.S. environmental regime in Mexico and Northern Central America is narrowly focused on safeguarding and promoting economic interests rather than promoting any overriding regional strategy regarding environmental concerns as they relate to conservation and biodiversity, land use, energy sector transformation, and water resources management.

However, the argument that U.S. climate objectives in Northern Central America narrowly focus on U.S. economic interests must still recognize the complexity of this regime. Like the Marshall Plan, U.S. climate policy in Northern Central America has involved significant amounts of technical assistance from public sector entities such as USAID and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in addition to economic promotion. Regional trade agreements (as well as WTO dispute mechanisms) contain provisions for cooperation between the U.S. and NCA governments to enhance environment regulation. For example, while NAFTA has been criticized for flooding the Mexican and NCA markets with subsidized U.S. agricultural products that prompted a race to the bottom in terms of environmental and labor standards (discussed below), portions of NAFTA's successor (the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, led by U.S. Senators Sherrod Brown and Ron Wyden) contain much stronger reciprocity and enforcement clauses for environmental and labor concerns.<sup>714</sup>

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<sup>713</sup> Eckersley, R. 2020. Rethinking Leadership: Understanding the Roles of the US and China in the Negotiation of the Paris Agreement. *European Journal of International Relations* 26(4): 1178–1202.

<sup>714</sup> Mauldin, W. and N. Andrews. 2019. House Passes North American Trade Pact With Bipartisan Support. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/usmca-clears-threshold-to-pass-in-the-house-with-bipartisan-support-11576790200>.

To say that U.S. economic concerns do not focus on the environment is to mistake means for ends. Climate objectives certainly contribute to the promotion of U.S. interests in its regional frontierism, but they are not the foundational bedrock of its foreign assistance and broader engagement. U.S. national security perceptions primarily focus on economic considerations, and climate policies serve as tools to promote both these objectives and the resulting outcomes.

While NAFTA was framed as an economic agreement, its implications extended beyond trade to migration governance. By facilitating corporate expansion and cross-border labor flows, NAFTA paradoxically contributed to the conditions that U.S. policymakers would later define as security threats. Rather than recognizing migration as an expected byproduct of economic restructuring, U.S. officials framed it as a national security issue, justifying enhanced border controls and deterrence strategies. This shift marked the beginning of a policy trajectory where economic and security logics became increasingly intertwined, culminating in the present-day fusion of climate adaptation and migration deterrence.

As a result, the evolution of U.S. economic frontierism has been deeply intertwined with immigration policy, as policymakers have long sought to regulate migration through a combination of economic incentives and security measures. Over time, this approach has led to the securitization of immigration, where officials view migration through a national security lens rather than as a labor or humanitarian issue. This securitization has intensified with the rise of climate security discourse, as officials argue that environmental degradation will drive mass displacement and pose new security threats to the United States. The following section examines

how economic frontierism has reinforced the militarization of U.S. immigration policy, shifting focus from protection and integration to restriction and deterrence.

### Immigration and the Frontier

Immigration has always been a central and warped component of the U.S. national security vision regarding the frontier and American exceptionalism<sup>715</sup> more broadly. This historical intersection underpins constructions of U.S. national security in Mexico and Northern Central America: cheap, disposable labor is a key element of an expanding economic frontier. Leah Boustan and Ran Abramitzky illustrated how immigration (as well as slavery) has always been the main source of labor for the U.S. economic machine, and created the self-perpetuating soft power branding associated with the perception that the United States offered economic opportunity.<sup>716</sup> Boustan and Abramitzky's influential dataset emphasized how reliant the entire U.S. economy has been on immigration throughout its history, and how the targeted racial and geographic immigration quotas of the 1920s created national borders and a frontier that was selective, subjective, and arbitrary in its application.<sup>717</sup> A critical example is the Bracero Program, which, beginning in 1942 to ease domestic labor shortages resulting from World War Two, brought 4.6 million Mexican contract farm workers to the United States.<sup>718</sup> The Braceros powered the U.S. throughout World War II and its aftermath, until the program's termination in conjunction with the Johnson administration's

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<sup>715</sup> I employ the term 'American exceptionalism' in line with its common use while emphasizing the decoupling of the term 'American' from solely referring to the United States rather than all the Americas.

<sup>716</sup> Boustan, L. and R. Abramitzky. 2022. *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid.

<sup>718</sup> Ngai, M. 2004. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

lead-up to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA) that replaced the quota system with an emphasis on family reunification and formal employment.<sup>719</sup> Braceros were a key component of the U.S. labor market within the broader period from Reconstruction to the U.S. Civil Rights era. Mae Ngai argued the transformation of the United States from the end of the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement was marked with corporate elite interests striving to replace slavery with an 'agricultural proletariat' predicated around maintaining an oversupply of low-wage, unorganized labor both to repress wage growth and increase industrial production.<sup>720</sup> While the labor politics of Braceros and the Civil Rights era are complex and outside the direct scope of this thesis, a main reason for ending the Bracero program was grounded in the disproved logic, promoted at the time by the eugenicist head of a U.S. Labor Department commission, that Bracero workers repressed wages for American-born workers.<sup>721</sup> Boustan and Abramitzky's emphasis on immigrant success in the United States is an important perspective in separating the politics from the evidence. However, this scholarly review highlights the reality that the popular narrative of the United States as a harmonious melting pot omits structural forces stressed by Grandin, Patty Limerick, Ngai, and others. Rather, the U.S. republic has long defined its national security threshold and frontier, in all its physical, economic, and ideological iterations, as being wholly concerned with serving elite, white, economic interests.

U.S. immigration policy is an expansive topic that I do not comprehensively address in this thesis. I focus on how the ways in which elites viewed U.S.-bound migration as a national security threat

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<sup>719</sup> Ibid.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid.

<sup>721</sup> Clemens, M. A., Lewis, E. G., and H. M. Postel. 2018. Immigration Restrictions as Active Labor Market Policy: Evidence from the Mexican *Bracero* Exclusion. *The American Economic Review* 108(6): 1468–1487.

to regional economic systems, augmenting how frontierism helped define boundaries of legality as a result. Contemporary political dynamics around the legality of migration in many ways began with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the National Origin System quotas from the 1920s and terminated the Bracero Program, creating hundreds of thousands of newly undocumented Braceros who were living in the United States.<sup>722</sup> Following passage of the INA, elites perceived 'illegal' immigration as a predominantly economic issue of supply and demand, and national security officials focused on the challenges presented by issues of family reunification.<sup>723</sup>

Two decades later, the Reagan administration legalized millions of undocumented immigrants while also ushering in sweeping increases in incarceration through law-and-order politics.<sup>724</sup> The primary impact of Reagan's landmark 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was to criminalize 'knowingly' employing undocumented workers, and create employer work authorization verification (although loosely), in exchange for providing amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants who had resided in the United States before 1982.<sup>725</sup> As the result of Reagan's anti-communist Cold War approach to the Western Hemisphere, in contrast, refugees fleeing violent conflict and persecution in Central American countries (which the United States

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<sup>722</sup> Macías-Rojas, Patrisia. 2018. Immigration and the War on Crime: Law and Order Politics and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(1): 1-25.

<sup>723</sup> Ibid.

<sup>724</sup> Wong, T. 2017. *The politics of immigration: Partisanship, demographic change, and American national identity*. New York.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid.

had heavily intervened in) were turned away and/or deported in a strategy of deterrence.<sup>726</sup> Reagan's migration deterrence occurred even though the United States had codified international humanitarian principles protecting refugees into domestic law through the Refugee Act of 1980.<sup>727</sup> While IRCA was understood to be a grand bargain of sorts, employer-based deterrence for amnesty, its actual impact was, as Peter Andreas wrote, "...to reinforce and expand already well-established cross-border migration networks."<sup>728</sup> Previous immigrants who had returned to Mexico rushed to claim their new legalized status; those newly legalized in the U.S. provided networks for further unauthorized immigration; and the haphazard employer sanctions produced more fraudulent documents than actual deterrence.<sup>729</sup>

The remainder of the Reagan administration promoted a harmful vision of immigrants as criminals. Outside of IRCA, Reagan's governance resulted in an unprecedented rise in the domestic carceral state alongside pursuing so-called Washington Consensus economic policies of privatization and deregulation across the Western Hemisphere that reduced state capacity, privatized industry and public services, and placed an emphasis on individual responsibility and morality.<sup>730</sup> Reagan's National Security Directive 221, focused on drug trafficking, identified 'insurgent groups' and 'terrorist cells' as a 'threat to U.S. national security' living just across the border from what the

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<sup>726</sup> Dunn, T. J. 1995. *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992: Low Intensity Doctrine Comes Home*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>728</sup> Andreas, P. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Third ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Page 86.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>730</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

President called hard-working Americans. President Reagan claimed this threat required a militarized response at all costs.<sup>731</sup> His vice president George H.W. Bush promoted racist, law-and-order fearmongering that played a large role in winning the presidency in 1988.<sup>732</sup>

Within the criminalization push, Presidents Reagan, H.W. Bush, and then Clinton constructed a simplified version of the massively complex issue of immigration suitable for public consumption. These simple constructs—that immigration was allegedly bad, dangerous, illegal, and threatened the economic security of U.S. workers and communities—drove criminalization and trade policies that were strengthened with a slew of landmark pieces of legislation in the United States in the 1990s.<sup>733</sup> Most of this legislation was implemented by the Clinton administration alongside the rise of the Newt Gingrich-led Republican Party's Contract with America.<sup>734</sup> The Immigration Act of 1990 created the H-1B visa program for temporary workers and other specialized temporary workers, Temporary Protected Status for asylum seekers that could be selectively applied by the federal government, and a movement toward merging criminal justice and immigration enforcement through an 'aggravated felony' category of crimes that facilitated deporting noncitizens.<sup>735</sup> The Welfare Reform Act of 1994 significantly restricted and means-tested access

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<sup>731</sup> Corchado, A. 2013. *Midnight in Mexico*. New York: Penguin Books. Page 45.

<sup>732</sup> Anderson, D. C. and C. Enberg. 1995. Crime and the Politics of Hysteria: How the Willie Horton Story Changed American Justice. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 11(4): 298–300.

<sup>733</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>735</sup> "S.358 - 101st Congress (1989-1990): Immigration Act of 1990." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 29 November 1990, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358>.

to public benefits.<sup>736</sup> The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, or Crime Bill, of 1994 (co-sponsored by then-Senator Joe Biden), broadened the scope of criminality to include minor offenses and drastically fueled incarceration as well as the profitability of the privatized corrections industry.<sup>737</sup> The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA) reduced legal rights afforded to accused 'terrorists' in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombings.<sup>738</sup>

Most significant to the artificial, political simplification of immigration was the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA). IIRIRA explicitly criminalized unauthorized immigration.<sup>739</sup> In particular, IIRIRA extended the War on Crime to the immigration system. The law dramatically expanded the basis for and fast-tracked deportation and mandatory detention, while curtailing constitutional rights to due process.<sup>740</sup> In addition, IIRIRA further blended what Patrisia Macías-Rojas called a 'crimmigration' apparatus by integrating the criminal justice, law enforcement, and immigration systems until they were nearly indistinguishable.<sup>741</sup> National security officials leveraged this powerful system to pursue

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<sup>736</sup> "S.2134 - 103rd Congress (1993-1994): Welfare Reform Act of 1994." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 19 May 1994, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/senate-bill/2134>.

<sup>737</sup> "H.R.3355 - 103rd Congress (1993-1994): Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 13 September 1994, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/3355/text>.

<sup>738</sup> Kerwin, D. 2018. From IIRIRA to Trump: Connecting the Dots to the Current U.S. Immigration Policy Crisis. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(3): 192–204.

<sup>739</sup> Ibid.

<sup>740</sup> Ibid.

<sup>741</sup> Macías-Rojas, P. 2018. Immigration and the War on Crime: Law and Order Politics and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6(1): 1–25.

immigrants with IIRIRA programs such as its infamous 287(g) clause, which allowed the federal government to deputize local law enforcement agencies when enforcing immigration law.<sup>742</sup>

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the George W. Bush administration built upon this legal legacy by creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003. This reorganization, the largest in the U.S. government's security apparatus in a half-century, effectively moved immigration functions out of the Justice Department's (DoJ) remit and imbued them with the ethos of national security: DoJ's INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) was split into DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).<sup>743</sup> DHS also assumed control of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as natural hazards fit within the logic of national security protection.<sup>744</sup> Following 9/11, national security officials fused crime and criminalization with counterterrorism as the overriding approach to immigration enforcement in the United States.

For this discussion, it is notable how national security officials have imbued key pieces of the domestic immigration debate with frontierist logic that has been proven false yet persists even in elites sympathetic to the plight of immigrants seeking greater opportunity in the United States. These immigration myths carry significant implications for understanding broader U.S. national security determinations. One is the long-held popular perception, fueled by elite rhetoric, that

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<sup>742</sup> Ibid.

<sup>743</sup> Golash-Boza, T. M. 2015. *Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>744</sup> Waugh, W.L. 2003. Terrorism, Homeland Security and the National Emergency Management Network. *Public Organization Review* 3: 373–385.

immigrants reduce, or 'take,' jobs from U.S.-born workers.<sup>745</sup> Such concerns often conflate cultural and racial nationalism with economic realities that are long-standing and significantly challenging (if not verging on impossible) to untangle.<sup>746</sup> Boustan and Abramitzky found that contrary to the narrative that immigrants take the jobs of U.S.-born workers, increased migration to the United States both creates additional jobs for U.S.-born workers through entrepreneurship and by providing services to existing U.S. employers.<sup>747</sup> In particular, Boustan and Abramitzky found that immigrants often found their own companies or expand existing ones, forging new roles by focusing on services in sectors and occupations U.S.-born workers are not as willing to work in or that are subject to minimum wage concerns for W-2 employees.<sup>748</sup> Indeed, Michael Clemens and Ethan Lewis surveyed U.S. firms participating in the H-2B visa lottery (which allows U.S. employers to sponsor temporary, non-agricultural workers) and found that participation in the program 'significantly' increased firm productivity and did not lead to a decrease in U.S.-born employment.<sup>749</sup> In most cases, the firms surveyed by Clemens and Lewis actually reported increases in employment of U.S.-born workers.<sup>750</sup>

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<sup>745</sup> Boustan, L. and R. Abramitzky. 2022. *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>746</sup> Ngai, M. 2004. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

<sup>747</sup> Boustan, L. and R. Abramitzky. 2022. *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>748</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>749</sup> Clemens, M. and E. Lewis. 2022. *The Effect of Low-Skill Immigration Restrictions on U.S. Firms and Workers: Evidence from a Randomized Lottery*. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper 30589.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite these facts, however, many misperceptions endure within the complex political narratives around U.S. immigration reform, which have direct spillover effects on national security debates. Members of Congress representing districts with higher concentrations of high-wage workers are more likely to support increasing low-wage immigration, and vice versa.<sup>751</sup> However, Democrats representing districts with higher proportions of organized labor are less likely to support reduced restrictions, while Republicans representing districts with higher amounts of company formation are.<sup>752</sup> In addition, the 'contact theory,' which considers whether increased immigrant concentration leads to immigration being seen as a societal benefit or a threat, is the subject of highly debated empirical literature. Kyle Walker found that in addition to the ideological and political orientation described above, contact has mixed effects depending on the scale of perception: while areas with higher immigration concentration see immigration as a local problem, areas with lower immigration concentration consider immigration a threat at the national level.<sup>753</sup> However, immigration facts contrast with complicated domestic politics. As Jonathan Blitzer wrote:

A viable immigration bill was a kind of legislative Rubik's Cube. Organized labor approved of employer sanctions but bristled at expanded legal immigration. Mexican American advocacy groups, which supported legalization of the undocumented, opposed employer sanctions for fear of discrimination against Hispanic workers. For every law-and-order type championing increased enforcement, there was another congressman whose most powerful constituents depended on cheap, undocumented labor.<sup>754</sup>

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<sup>751</sup> Facchini, G. and M. F. Steinhardt. 2011. What drives U.S. immigration policy? Evidence from congressional roll call votes. *Journal of Public Economics* 95(7): 734-743.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid.

<sup>753</sup> Walker, K. 2014. The Role of Geographic Context in the Local Politics of U.S. Immigration, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40(7): 1040-1059.

<sup>754</sup> Blitzer, J. 2024. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis*. New York: Penguin Press. Page 109.

The following section outlines how these national security-oriented migration policies aligned with the regional free trade regime—and to what effect, especially for the regional labor market.

### NAFTA: A Brief Review

*USAID is never enough because you have to teach somebody to fish, not just give them the fish.*

Author interview with former U.S. official. July 27, 2023.

Three decades later, NAFTA and globalization in Mexico and Northern Central America display mixed results. Manufacturing and textiles (especially Mexican and Central American *maquiladoras*)<sup>755</sup> saw a race to the bottom in order to compete against low-cost Chinese goods flooding world markets.<sup>756</sup> Mexican agriculture, meanwhile experienced a large shift in employment from small family farms to industrial agro-exporters as the result of heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural products saturating the Mexican domestic market.<sup>757</sup> A study of the impact of NAFTA on eight of the most important agricultural goods affected—corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, cotton, beef, pork, and poultry—found that from 1997-2005, Mexican farmers lost \$12.8 billion in value, while the total value of U.S. agricultural exports to Mexico increased

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<sup>755</sup> Gruben (2001; 2) defined *maquiladoras* as "...a plant [that] imports inputs [in-bound] from the United States, processes them in some way, and then ships them back to the United States – perhaps for more processing. The maquiladora program itself permits the inputs and the machinery used to process them to enter Mexico without payment of import tariffs. On the return to the United States, the shipper pays only such U.S. import duties as are applicable to the value added by manufacture in Mexico."

<sup>756</sup> Weisbrot, M., Merling, L., Mello, V., Lefebvre, S., and J. Sammut. 2018. Did NAFTA Help Mexico? An Update After 23 Years. *Mexican Law Review* 11(1) Ciudad de México jul./dic.

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*

280%.<sup>758</sup> Millions of small-scale Mexican farmers growing the country's most important staple crop—corn—suffered the most, accounting for nearly half of the total Mexican losses.

These losses:

...eliminated any positive income from the sales of corn in the marketplace. It illustrates one of the most important reasons for the widely observed 'retreat to subsistence' among Mexican smallholders: When it no longer pays to sell your corn, better to use it just to feed your family.<sup>759</sup>

The overall effect of NAFTA on the agriculture sector has largely been to shift more capital-intensive U.S. grain and meat products to Latin America, while promoting Mexican exports of labor-intensive fruits and vegetables to the U.S.<sup>760</sup> The NAFTA shift in agriculture is a clear example of declining terms of trade for Mexico.<sup>761</sup> Meanwhile, President Clinton's claim that NAFTA would 'erase the *maquiladora* line' (listed in full on p. 363) by spreading capital and development throughout Mexico can be considered resoundingly incorrect.<sup>762</sup> A frequently-cited 2001 analysis from the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas found that while the causal relationship between NAFTA itself and the *maquiladora* industry is unclear, the first five years of NAFTA saw

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<sup>758</sup> Wise, T. 2009. Agricultural Dumping Under NAFTA: Estimating the Costs of U.S. Agricultural Policies to Mexican Producers. *Wilson Center*, Global Development and Environment Institute. Working Paper Number 09-08. Pages 1-38.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid*, Page 33.

<sup>760</sup> Gantz, D.A. 2019. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement: Textiles, Apparel, and Agriculture (October 23, 2019). *Mexico Center*, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Arizona Legal Studies Discussion Paper No. 19-22, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3475043>.

<sup>761</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>762</sup> Clinton, W.J. 1993. Remarks on NAFTA to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://advocatetamoy.com/2021/04/27/president-clintons-remarks-on-nafta-to-the-u-s-chamber-of-commerce-01-11-1993/>.

*maquiladora* employment grew 86 percent compared with 47 percent growth over the previous five years.<sup>763</sup> The Dallas Fed's analysis noted that *maquiladora* growth was in large part likely due to increased industrial demand in the U.S. and increasing U.S. wages relative to Asian markets.<sup>764</sup> Northern Central America has seen rapid *maquiladora* growth since NAFTA as well, comprising a substantial portion of non-agricultural employment, which hovers around a third of total employment.<sup>765</sup> In 2023, increased nearshoring and 'friendshoring,' in order to consolidate essential supply chains from fears of overexposure to the Asian market following Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, resulted in an ever-growing *maquiladora* presence on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>766</sup> In all, NAFTA has fueled growth of the U.S. economic frontier without the broad regional dispersion promised by President Clinton.

The impacts of these economic evolutions on regional labor markets, which engage the national security establishment through the impact of migration, are difficult to clearly unpack. Data from the Migration Policy Institute show that Mexican migration to the U.S. increased from the implementation of NAFTA to 2010 but has declined since.<sup>767</sup> In parallel, migration from Northern

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<sup>763</sup> Gruben, W.C. 2001. Did NAFTA Really Cause Mexico's High Maquiladora Growth? *Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas*, Center for Latin American Economics, Working Paper CLAE 0301. 1-34.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Vargas-Hernández, J. G., and V. Núñez-López. 2011. Impact of Northern Central America Maquiladoras in Economic Growth and Employment. *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 2(1): 255-263.

<sup>766</sup> Grant, P. 2023. Border-Town Warehouses Are Booming as More Manufacturing Moves to Mexico; Real-estate investors add properties in cities like Tijuana, Mexico, and Laredo and El Paso, Texas. *Wall Street Journal*, published February 7, 2023. [https://www.wsj.com/articles/border-town-warehouses-are-booming-as-more-manufacturing-moves-to-mexico-11675732698?mod=hp\\_listc\\_pos1](https://www.wsj.com/articles/border-town-warehouses-are-booming-as-more-manufacturing-moves-to-mexico-11675732698?mod=hp_listc_pos1).

<sup>767</sup> Migration Policy Institute (MPI) (accessed 2022) tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2019 American Community Surveys (ACS); 1970, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census data were accessed from Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010); data for 1850 to 1990, excluding 1940 and 1950, were from Campbell J. Gibson and Emily

Central America has steadily increased along a relatively stable slope since 1980, with no noticeable medium-term impact from NAFTA.<sup>768</sup> Figure 10 shows analysis from the Bipartisan Policy Center on total apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border between 2014-2023; the most important markers of spikes were the first Trump administration's family separation and 'Remain in Mexico' policies (officially Zero Tolerance and Migration Protection Protocols, respectively) as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and adjoining Title 42 restrictions.

### Southern Border Policies and Apprehensions

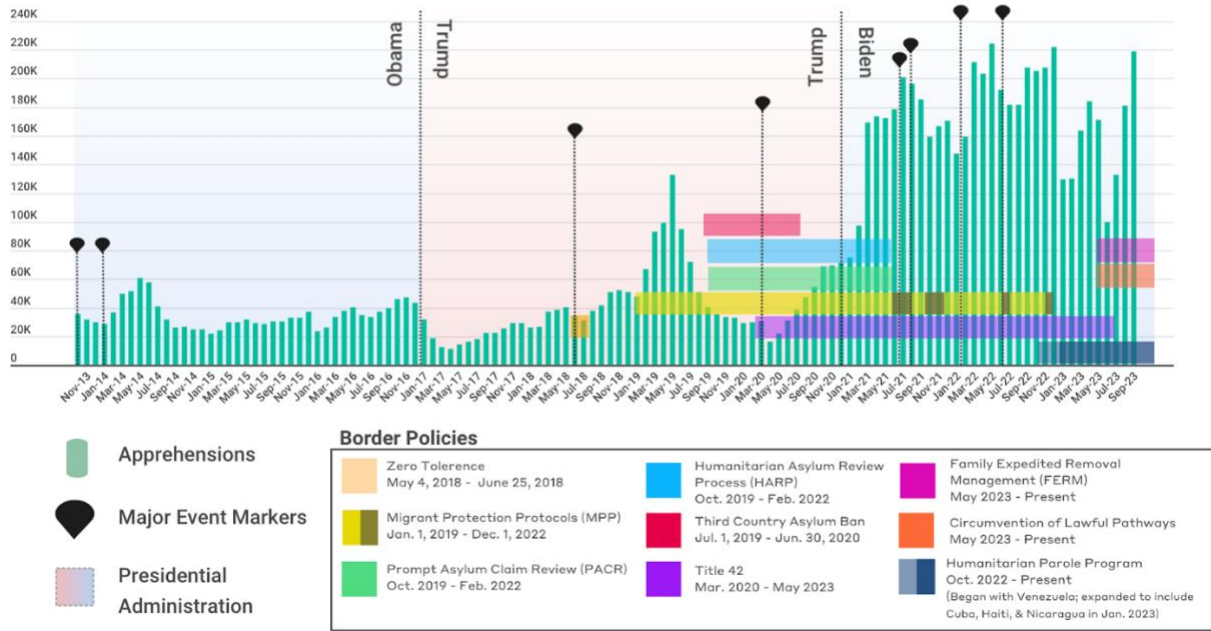


Figure 1: Southern Border Policies and Apprehensions. Source: Vasquez Mejia, E. and T. Cardinal Brown, illustrations by A. Varisco. 2023. Changing Border Policies and Apprehensions: What's the Relationship? *Bipartisan Policy Center*. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/changing-border-policies-and-apprehensions-whats-the-relationship/>.

Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-1990" (Working Paper No. 29, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, February 1999).

<sup>768</sup> Ibid.

Household surveys from Northern Central American countries found that while economic concerns serve as the primary motivator for U.S.-bound migrants, they are set against a complex backdrop of push factors that include violence, insecurity, and natural disasters.<sup>769</sup> High turnover from Northern Central American *maquiladoras*, a result of low wages and adverse working conditions, has also contributed to the desire to migrate to the United States.<sup>770</sup> President Clinton cleanly distilled the national security establishment's hope for NAFTA when stating: "[Mexico gets] development capital, not to invest to export back to the American market but to build up Mexico. That's what they get."<sup>771</sup> The evidence, however, shows the impacts are mixed.

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<sup>769</sup> Ruiz Soto, A.G., Rossella Bottone, J., Williams, S., Louie, A. and Y. Wang. 2021. Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration. Rome, Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: World Food Programme, Migration Policy Institute, and Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>770</sup> Goldín, L. R. 2011. Labor Turnover Among Maquiladora Workers of Highland Guatemala: Resistance and Semiproletarianization in Global Capitalism. *Latin American Research Review* 46(3): 133-156.

<sup>771</sup> Clinton, W.J. 1993. Remarks on NAFTA to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://advocatetamoy.com/2021/04/27/president-clintons-remarks-on-nafta-to-the-u-s-chamber-of-commerce-01-11-1993/>.

## Appendix III: Sample Participant Information Form

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: CUREC APPROVAL -- SOGE C1A 23 56

1. *What is the purpose of this research?*

As climate change becomes an increasingly dominant cross-cutting driver of outcomes – across the security, political, and economic spheres – the U.S.-bound migration corridor is a key case study through which to understand how elites and various interests influence its policy architecture. The intertwined realities of security and economic logics that are combined and exported through elite and interest group politics have enormous effects on governments and firms along the migration corridor, as well as the migrants themselves, who contend with continually shifting volatility and risk. I am collecting original, primary interview data of public, private, and civil society actors, and conduct archival analysis of policy planning documents, in order to consider how elite perceptions and interest group politics of migration can augment our understanding of how security in the context of climate change is developed in practice.

This study hopes to answer the following questions:

*Topline Research Question*

How does the political economy of U.S.-bound migration shape definitions of climate security?

*Secondary Research Questions (Dissertation Chapters)*

How do elites and interest groups perceive the root causes of U.S.-bound migration?

How do elite and interest group perceptions of U.S.-bound migration determine policy responses?

What does the political economy of U.S.-bound migration say about how climate security is defined, by whom, and to what effect?

2. *Why have I been invited to take part?*

You have been invited because I believe you have a unique perspective on the topics of climate security and migration, as well as the relationship between the two.

3. *Do I have to take part?*

No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether or not to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may withdraw yourself from the study at any time, without giving a reason, by advising the researchers of this decision.

4. *What will happen to me if I take part in the research?*

This initial interview will last 30-60 minutes. I may contact you for follow up interviews afterwards.

If you are still happy to take part, you will then be asked to sign a consent form. If you agree, I will audio-record the interview for my own note-taking purposes. This interview data will be held with the utmost importance placed on privacy and security.

5. *Are there any potential risks in taking part?*

I believe the only potential risks to participating in this research are reputational and/or effects on political positioning. If desired, I can anonymize your contribution entirely in order to minimize these risks.

6. *Are there any benefits in taking part?*

The benefits to taking part are to contribute to a greater understanding around the issues of climate security and migration. If you allow me to attribute your contribution to your name and/or professional title, your contribution may be recognized as such in published materials.

7. *What happens to the data provided?*<sup>772</sup>

The information you provide as part of the study is the **research data**. Any research data from which you can be identified (e.g., your name, date of birth, audio recording), is known as **personal data**. It does not include data where the identity has been removed (anonymous data).

We will minimise our use of personal data in the study as much as possible.

The **research data** will be stored confidentially using the University of Oxford server and OneDrive.

If possible, I hope to have your permission to quote you directly in research publications. If you would not like to be named personally, I can remove your name and instead provide your professional title, and/or an anonymized version of your professional title (e.g., “Senior Advisor to the U.S. Secretary of State” or “Senior Obama Administration Official”). If you would like, I can fully anonymize your contribution, although this may lend less weight to your input in any published research.

Only I and my academic supervisors will have access to the research data.

I would like your permission to use direct quotes.

All research data and records will be stored for at least three years after publication or public release of the work of the research. We may retain and store your personal data for an additional period of time as necessary for the purposes of the study, and for further research.

Your personal data may be transferred to, and stored at, a destination outside the European Economic Area. We will make sure that identifiable data is removed whenever possible and that

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<sup>772</sup> Please refer to [CUREC's Best Practice Guidance on Data Collection and Management](#) (BPG 09)

any data transfer is done securely and with a similar level of data protection as required under UK law.

I would like your permission to use anonymised data in future studies, and to share data with other researchers (e.g., in online databases). All personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before information is shared with other researchers or results are made public.

**8. *Will the research be published?***

The University of Oxford is committed to the dissemination of its research for the benefit of society and the economy and, in support of this commitment, has established an online archive of research materials. This archive includes digital copies of student theses successfully submitted as part of a University of Oxford postgraduate degree programme. Holding the archive online gives easy access for researchers to the full text of freely available theses, thereby increasing the likely impact and use of that research.

The research will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be openly accessible.

**9. *Who is organising and funding the research?***

I am conducting this research as a DPhil student at the University of Oxford, in the Smith School of Enterprise and Environment. I have received scholarship funding from Rotary International and from the Smith School of Enterprise and Environment to support this research.

**10. *Who has reviewed this study?***

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

**11. *Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?***

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to me or my supervisor, Cameron Hepburn, who will do his best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:

Chair, **Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee**; Email: [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk); Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

**12. *Data Protection***

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study.

The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.

Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/>.

### ***13. Further Information and Contact Details***

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Max Nathanson  
Smith School of Enterprise and Environment  
South Parks Road  
Oxford, OX1 3QY  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)1865 614963  
[max.nathanson@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:max.nathanson@ouce.ox.ac.uk)

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