

**Migratory Flows from Asia and Africa to the U.S.-Mexico Border:
Analysis of Recent Dynamics (2021-2024)****Flujos migratorios de Asia y África en la frontera México-Estados
Unidos: análisis de la dinámica reciente (2021-2024)**

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ABSTRACT

This article contextualizes the rise of migratory flows from Asia and Africa to the Tijuana-San Diego border between 2021 and 2024. The study uses a mixed design with a quantitative core: it systematizes and compares administrative records from Mexico's INM/UPMRIP and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (USCBP), and it interprets them through specialized scholarship and policy documents. Findings show a rapid shift in flow composition: Mexico reported Asian apprehensions rising from 1 786 in 2021 to 45 877 in 2023 and African apprehensions from 2 066 to 59 498; in the United States, extra-regional detentions increased alongside the expansion of the "Other" category. The evidence points to new routes and growing pressure on reception and control capacities. The article concludes that border governance requires effective binational coordination and finer statistical disaggregation. A key limitation lies in official statistics, which may undercount irregular migration and embed classification biases.

Keywords: 1. migration; 2. immigration, 3. migration policy, 4. social inclusion, 5. border.

RESUMEN

El artículo contextualiza el aumento de los flujos migratorios provenientes de Asia y África hacia la frontera Tijuana-San Diego entre 2021 y 2024. El estudio emplea un diseño mixto de predominio cuantitativo: sistematiza y compara registros administrativos del INM/UPMRIP y del USCBP, y los interpreta con apoyo de literatura especializada y documentos de política pública. Los resultados muestran un cambio acelerado en la composición de las movilidades: México registró aseguramientos de Asia de 1 786 en 2021 a 45 877 en 2023, y de África de 2 066 a 59 498; en Estados Unidos crecieron las detenciones de nacionalidades extrarregionales y la categoría "otros". La evidencia sugiere nuevas rutas y mayores presiones sobre capacidades de recepción y control. El artículo concluye que la gestión fronteriza requiere coordinación binacional y mejor desagregación estadística. Como limitación, los datos oficiales subestiman la migración irregular y reflejan sesgos de clasificación.

Palabras clave: 1. migración, 2. inmigración, 3. política migratoria, 4. inclusión social, 5. frontera.

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INTRODUCTION

Under the administration of Joe Biden, U.S. migration policy shifted toward a more humanitarian, rights-based approach. This change contributed to the perception of the United States as a more accessible destination for migrants facing conditions of vulnerability. Although reforms were introduced during this period, the securitized management of migration along the transit route through Mexico has persisted, allowing organized crime to further consolidate its presence within this sphere. These policy approaches have coincided with the growing mobility from African and Asian countries, placing greater pressure on border infrastructure and the U.S. immigration system. Migrants from Asia and Africa have begun to use Mexico as a transit route to the United States, which has added new challenges of managing these flows efficiently and humanely.

The interaction between migrants from countries such as China, Senegal, Guinea, India, Uzbekistan, Burkina Faso, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Mauritania, and Somalia reinforces the growing globalization of migration flows and the expansion of both legal and illegal support networks. The evolution of these networks in response to changes in migration policies highlights the need for adaptation of migration governance strategies to effectively manage rising human mobility and its implications for security and human rights.

This article explores migration flows from Asia and Africa, focusing particularly on the Tijuana-San Diego border, and situates these movements within the broader context of origin conditions, policies shaping migrants' trajectories, and governance challenges in the region. Drawing on data from Mexico Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM, National Migration Institute) and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (USCBP), the study provides a comprehensive examination of how migration policies, transnational networks, and human trafficking dynamics intersect in this key region.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the dynamics and context of migratory flows along the Mexico-United States border, with particular emphasis on the Tijuana-San Diego region. The study combines quantitative analysis with qualitative assessments in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of migration patterns and their implications. The quantitative component of this research draws on primary statistical data sources provided by USCBP and INM. These datasets contain detailed records on the number of apprehensions, migrants' nationalities, and trends in migratory flows between 2021 and 2024. Additionally, through descriptive statistics and trend analysis, patterns of human mobility are identified, indicating a significant rise in migrants originating from Asia and Africa. These methods enable the analysis of the evolution of migration along the Mexico-United States border from a quantitative perspective.

As a complement to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative evaluation is also conducted through the review of policy documents, government reports, and academic literature. These sources provide contextual information on the socioeconomic and political conditions that drive migration from Africa and Asia. In addition, testimonies from migrants, policymakers, and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) are incorporated in order to understand the impact of migration policies on migrants' lived experiences. These qualitative data make it possible to situate the quantitative findings within a broader socio-political context.

Data collection involved access to official reports from USCBP and the INM, as well as the review of secondary sources such as academic articles, books, and news reports. This longitudinal analysis, covering the period from January 2021 to June 2024, examines migration trends during the Biden administration; combining multiple datasets enables a comprehensive analysis that connects quantitative trends with qualitative insights.

*Migratory Flows from Asia and Africa in Mexico:
An Analysis of Transformations and Perspectives*

Migration from Asia and Africa has expanded rapidly in recent years. INM records show a sharp increase in the number of Asian migrants processed in Mexico, rising from 1 786 in 2021 to 45 877 in 2023. A similar trend is observed among African migrants, whose numbers grew from 2 066 to 59 498 during the same period (UPMRIP, 2021b, 2022b, 2023b). This growth poses significant challenges for both Mexican and U.S. migration policies, as authorities are increasingly confronted with migration flows originating from regions not traditionally associated with this border corridor (Gil-Everaert et al., 2023).

Migrants from Africa and Asia—particularly from countries such as China, India, Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, and Uzbekistan—navigate an especially complex migration context. The absence of clear integration policies, together with the presence of organized criminal networks, has become a key factor shaping their migration trajectories (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2024). Irregular migration networks capitalize on migrants' need to transit through Mexico by offering unauthorized routes that expose them to extreme vulnerability, including human trafficking and labor exploitation (Cheng, 2008). These dynamics demonstrate the need for more coordinated humanitarian responses from governments to ensure the protection of migrants' human rights.

For African migrants, INM records indicate that 2 066 individuals were processed in 2021, rising to 6 572 in 2022 and reaching 59 498 in 2023. A similar upward trend is observed among Asian migrants, whose numbers increased from 1 786 in 2021 to 10 372 in 2022 and 45 877 in 2023 (UPMRIP, 2021b, 2022b, 2023b). These emerging mobility patterns along the Mexico-United States border reflect a highly complex migratory dynamic, shaped by social, economic, and cultural implications, as well as by heightened vulnerabilities linked to violence arising from irregular transit between the two countries. This phenomenon has become one of the most significant developments in contemporary global migration (Gil-Everaert, 2023; Arango, 2023).

Northern Mexican border cities, particularly Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, and Piedras Negras, have experienced sustained humanitarian strain over the last three years of the Biden administration. The large number of migrants processed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (USCBP, n.d.) has placed growing demands on shelter, food provision, and healthcare services, while also deepening migrant vulnerability to violence, social exclusion, and human trafficking,

among other consequences (Campos-Delgado, 2020; De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2022; Garrett & Sementelli, 2022; Ash, 2023).

Other studies argue that the rise in the number of migrants detained on both sides of the border is driven by U.S. efforts to curb irregular entry, as well as by the pressure exerted on Mexico to support these enforcement measures within its own territory (Massey, 2020; Vega, 2021; Solano & Massey, 2022; Ramos Valencia et al., 2023). At the beginning of his first presidential term in 2018, Donald Trump asserted that Mexico was not doing enough to halt the transit of migrants using its territory as a corridor for irregular entry into the United States, even though that year marked the lowest levels of USCBP detentions since 2000. As a result, he argued that this situation required priority attention (Eremin, 2021; Rojas-Wiesner, 2022).

The politicization of migration by the United States government has made it increasingly difficult for migrants to move through Mexico without support structures. In response, Mexican authorities, including the INM, the National Guard, and the Armed Forces, have deployed extensive efforts to contain migrant mobility.⁴ This has, in turn, opened up new opportunities for organized criminal groups, which have expanded their involvement in human trafficking and increased their involvement in facilitating migrant crossings through Mexico.⁵ These activities extend beyond Central American and Caribbean migrants to include large numbers of South American nationals, particularly Venezuelans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Brazilians, and Peruvians, especially since 2022. More recently, they have also come to involve migrants from African and Asian countries (Cheng, 2008; Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2024).

As a consequence of the new migration context, an increase has been observed in the range of nationalities attempting to cross into the United States through the land border of Mexico. Previously, USCBP statistics reported apprehensions primarily of migrants from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. More recent data, however, include individuals originating from a much broader set of countries, such as China, India, Venezuela, Colombia, Haiti, Cuba, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Nicaragua, Canada, Myanmar, and the Philippines, as well as migrants whose nationality was recorded under the category “other” (Johns et al., 2023; USCBP, n.d.).

Although USCBP has expanded and updated its statistical reporting, these efforts have not kept pace with the scale and complexity of current migration flows. Data published by Mexico’s National Migration Institute reveal a sharp rise in migration from Asia and Africa that remains only partially captured in U.S. records (Campos-Delgado, 2021; Warren, 2021; Fernández, 2023). Should this

⁴ The National Migration Institute has established multiple so-called “humanitarian rescue” checkpoints along strategic routes, largely in response to U.S. demands for enhanced migration control. This strategy has resulted in a marked increase in the number of migrants processed since 2019. The Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH, National Human Rights Commission) has addressed this situation by urging the INM to reassess its operational practices (Recommendation 54/2024).

⁵ During the seminar “Seguridad y Desarrollo en las Fronteras de México,” organized by El Colef and CIDE on June 26, 2024, INM delegate David Pérez Tejada highlighted the involvement of organized crime in human trafficking and the diversification of criminal activities in Baja California (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte [El Colef], 2024, 01:11).

pattern persist at rates comparable to those observed between 2021 and 2023, migration from these regions will require focused scholarly and policy attention. Addressing this scenario will demand the development of migration governance frameworks and humanitarian responses capable of responding to increasingly diverse and transnational mobility patterns (Kainz & Betts, 2021; Massey, 2022). This trend cannot be fully understood without accounting for the expanding role of domestic and transnational organized crime, which has capitalized on the transit of migrants from multiple world regions as a profitable activity (Solano & Massey, 2022; Gil-Everaert et al., 2023).

A comprehensive understanding of border dynamics requires considering both the number of migrant apprehensions recorded in Mexico and the figures reported by U.S. authorities. The latter, however, are based on “encounters,” a metric that may count the same individual multiple times when repeated crossing attempts result in successive detentions by U.S. authorities (USCBP, n.d.). Despite these limitations, apprehension and detention flows constitute one of the few available quantitative indicators for assessing the significance of migratory transit and for identifying the national origins of individuals attempting to enter the United States (Banerjee & Smith, 2024). The data presented in Table 1 illustrate both the scale and the growing diversity of migration flows moving across the Mexico-U.S. border.

Table 1. Detentions by the National Migration Institute (INM), by Region, 2021-2023

<i>Region</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
Central America	249 749	209 491	246 371
Caribbean	26 632	52 203	80 861
South America	27 058	159 511	345 941
Asia	1 786	10 372	45 877
Africa	2 066	6 672	59 498
Other	2 401	3 160	3 628
<i>Total</i>	<i>309 692</i>	<i>441 409</i>	<i>782 176</i>

Source: Own elaboration based on records and statistics from the Unit for Migration Policy, Registry and Identity of Persons (UPMRIP, 2021a, 2022a, 2023a).

Table 1 shows that apprehensions of Central American nationals remained relatively steady throughout the period under review. The limited variation in the number of individuals classified as “rescued” suggests that existing migration control measures have not substantially altered mobility patterns or reduced onward movement toward the United States. A comparable trend is observed among Caribbean migrants, particularly those from Cuba and Haiti, as well as the Dominican Republic, who have long relied on Mexico as a transit country and continue to be intercepted at multiple locations across Mexican territory during their northbound journeys.

Migrants originating from South America have constituted an increasingly significant share of overall migratory flows over the past three years, a trend that is particularly striking given its rapid pace (Naranjo et al., 2023). This group includes a substantial number of Haitians who later acquired

Brazilian, Peruvian, or Ecuadorian nationality, alongside a growing and distinct flow of Colombian, Venezuelan, and Ecuadorian migrants with no direct connection to Haiti (Días et al., 2020; Johns et al., 2023). If similar patterns of accelerated growth were to emerge and consolidate among African and Asian migrant populations, as discussed above, the region could soon be facing a qualitatively new migratory scenario. Such a shift would warrant closer analytical attention and would inevitably require a rethinking of the multicultural and humanitarian governance of the Mexico-United States border (Massey, 2022; Balaguera et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2023).

Table 2 provides a detailed account of both the volume and evolution of apprehensions by country for the most relevant Central American and Caribbean nationalities. In the case of Central America, migratory patterns largely mirror those observed over previous years, with one notable exception. Nicaraguan nationals, who had traditionally migrated primarily toward Costa Rica, are now increasingly transiting through Mexico as part of their journey to the United States. In the Caribbean context, migration trends among Cuban and Haitian nationals follow well-established patterns. However, a marked increase is observed in the category labeled “other” nationalities. This group includes migrants from the Dominican Republic, whose apprehensions rose from 5 220 in 2022 to 7 951 in 2023, as well as Jamaican nationals, with figures increasing from 737 in 2022 to 745 in 2023.

Table 2. Detentions by the National Migration Institute, by Region: Central America and the Caribbean, 2021–2023

<i>Region</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
Central America	249 749	209 491	246 371
El Salvador	24 605	26 534	24 308
Guatemala	81 199	69 249	81 535
Honduras	128 054	71 859	119 402
Nicaragua	15 481	40 937	19 667
Others	410	912	1 459
Caribbean	26 632	52 203	80 861
Cuba	7 059	41 771	27 003
Haiti	19 210	4 503	45 091
Others	363	5 929	8 767

Source: Own elaboration based on records and statistics from the UPMRIP (2021a, 2022a, 2023a).

Table 3 shows a substantial increase in Venezuelan, Colombian, and Ecuadorian nationals, who have emerged as key actors in the migratory process that began to consolidate in 2022. In the case of Colombian nationals, this trend is further corroborated by USCBP detention records, presented later in Table 6, where 2022 stands out as a turning point (Mejía-Ochoa, 2018). The fact that these migrants are apprehended both in southern and northern Mexico, particularly in the states of Coahuila and Sonora, suggests the presence of more or less defined migratory routes that vary by nationality. These routes appear to be shaped by attempts to enter the United States through

California, Arizona, or Texas, border states characterized by higher levels of enforcement (Solano & Massey, 2022).

Table 3. Detentions by the National Migration Institute, by Region: South America, 2021–2023

<i>Region</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
South America	27 058	159 511	345 941
Brazil	16 932	3 682	15 122
Colombia	1 262	28 096	26 581
Ecuador	1 384	22 098	70 790
Peru	237	139	6 531
Venezuela	4 360	96 197	222 994
Others	2 883	9 299	3 923

Source: Own elaboration based on records and statistics from the UPMRIP (2021a, 2022a, 2023a).

The emergence of Asian migration has become particularly significant in recent years. Chinese and Indian migrants, in particular, have increased their presence, spreading across the states of Sonora and Baja California as part of their efforts to reach the United States, primarily through Arizona and California, respectively. At the time, the INM delegate in Baja California, David Pérez Tejada, noted that Chinese migrants, much like Haitians and Colombians, have established networks within the state and, in many cases, arrive with the intention of settling there:

These individuals do arrive with the intention of settling in Baja California. There is a significant presence of Colombians, Haitians, Chinese nationals, and some Venezuelans. They are drawn to the state, and large communities are already taking shape. There is now a small “Little Haiti”, as well as established Chinese communities. The case of the Chinese population in Mexicali is illustrative, as they tend to attract fellow nationals. (El Colef, 2024, 01:16)

Since the attacks on the Twin Towers in September 2001, concerns have persisted in the United States regarding the potential use of the Mexican border as a transit route for individuals who could pose risks to U.S. national security (Masferrer et al., 2023; Banerjee & Smith, 2024). The expansion of organized criminal activity along migrant transit routes has heightened apprehensions that, within regular migration flows, individuals may also originate from societies where certain Islamist terrorist groups are deeply rooted (Egutidze, 2022). Despite warnings issued by the U.S. government (Miranda Aburto, 2024), USCBP statistics do not yet disaggregate detentions by nationality for several countries considered sensitive from a national security perspective. It is therefore likely that nationals from these countries are included in the “other” category (USCBP, n.d.), which has expanded considerably in recent years (Masferrer et al., 2023).

The inclusion of migrants originating from countries perceived as potentially “high-risk,” due to the influence exerted by Islamist terrorist groups within those societies, under the broad “other” category in official statistics highlights the need for more detailed and systematic analysis of the available data. In this regard, as shown in Table 4, the INM has registered a substantial number of Afghan nationals, individuals from several post-Soviet republics in the Middle East, as well as migrants from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Bangladesh. When these figures are considered alongside those who may have entered the United States without being detected by either the INM or USCBP, it becomes evident that pressures along the U.S.-Mexico border could intensify. Such dynamics may, in turn, be politically instrumentalized within the United States, particularly in ways that contribute to the consolidation of Republican electoral support (Gil-Everaert et al., 2023; Solano & Massey, 2022).

Table 4. Detentions by the National Migration Institute, by Region: Asia, 2021–2023

<i>Region</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
Asia	1 786	10 372	45 877
Afghanistan	19	1 017	2 661
Bangladesh	782	1 399	1 590
China	50	1 225	14 057
India	294	2 971	12 410
Iraq	19	16	123
Iran	16	45	229
Kazakhstan	24	224	714
Kyrgyzstan	3	318	2 100
Lebanon	2	20	74
Nepal	177	663	1 326
Pakistan	54	137	405
Syria	27	61	165
Tajikistan	14	130	910
Turkey	36	130	1 113
Uzbekistan	119	670	6 098
Vietnam	2	26	505
Others	148	1 320	1 397

Source: Own elaboration based on records and statistics from the UPMRIP (2021a, 2022a, 2023a).

Table 5 presents the number of African migrants apprehended by the INM. Organized criminal networks have increasingly facilitated the movement of nationals from countries that have traditionally migrated toward various European destinations, including Senegal, Guinea, Congo, Ghana, and Mauritania, redirecting these flows through Mexican territory toward the United States.

At the same time, the use of these routes by migrants from Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt has raised concerns among U.S. national security authorities (Rojas-Wiesner, 2022).

Table 5. Detentions by the National Migration Institute, by Region: Africa, 2021–2023

<i>Region</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
Africa	2 066	6 672	59 498
Angola	218	1 276	4 109
Burkina Faso	66	191	876
Cameroon	84	678	1 666
Chad	1	6	801
Congo	203	472	1 277
Egypt	12	34	1 262
Eritrea	98	391	662
Ethiopia	11	118	1 328
Ghana	381	681	2 078
Guinea	146	261	12 065
Libya	4	16	27
Morocco	4	30	276
Mauritania	50	255	8 638
Senegal	409	954	19 845
Somalia	42	535	1 336
Others	261	442	2 229

Source: Own elaboration based on records and statistics from the UPMRIP (2021a, 2022a, 2023a).

The INM delegate in Baja California pointed out that the presence of nationals from many of these countries was particularly striking, a situation he attributes to the growing role played by organized crime in shaping these migration routes:

What stands out most to me is trying to understand how a minor, an adolescent, can arrive from countries such as Bangladesh, Ivory Coast, Guinea, or Mauritania. How many countries, how many screening mechanisms, how many borders, how many authorities must they have encountered, and yet they managed to reach Tijuana without being detected, without being stopped, without being questioned by anyone? (El Colef, 2024, 01:10)

Table 6 presents data on detentions carried out by U.S. authorities along the southern land border of the United States. Until 2023, USCBP statistics primarily reflected the presence of Mexican nationals, who continue to constitute the largest group of migrants detained by U.S. authorities, as well as Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran nationals. Although the databases also included a

“other” category, prior to 2021 more than 90% of all individuals detained by U.S. authorities originated from these countries (Rojas-Wiesner, 2022).

*Table 6. Detentions by the USCBP
by Country, 2021–2024*

<i>Country</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>	<i>2024</i>
Mexico	655 594	808 339	717 333	504 703
El Salvador	98 690	97 030	61 518	41 686
Guatemala	319 324	213 023	213 686	110 843
Honduras	283 035	231 565	220 085	171 260
Nicaragua	50 109	163 376	99 496	32 084
Cuba	38 674	220 908	142 362	109 788
Haiti	47 255	53 910	76 130	67 732
Brazil	56 881	53 467	27 687	21 947
Colombia	6 202	125 178	159 536	102 185
Ecuador	96 150	24 060	116 229	104 683
Peru	3 197	50 662	78 719	34 184
Venezuela	48 678	187 716	266 071	187 993
China	450	2 376	24 314	31 309
India	2 588	18 308	41 770	18 395
Turkey	1 409	15 445	15 542	8 163
Others	26 400	113 581	215 191	144 296
<i>Total</i>	<i>1 734 636</i>	<i>2 378 944</i>	<i>2 475 669</i>	<i>1 691 251</i>

Source: Own elaboration based on records and statistics from the UPMRIP (2021a, 2022a, 2023a).

As illustrated in Table 6, migration patterns along the southern U.S. border have shifted markedly in a short period of time. Venezuelan, Haitian, Cuban, Colombian, Nicaraguan, and Ecuadorian nationals are now approaching, and in some cases exceeding, the number of detentions recorded for migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) (USCBP, n.d.; Banerjee & Smith, 2024). This development indicates that the hardline enforcement approaches adopted by successive United States administrations have produced effects contrary to those originally intended. At the same time, the role of Mexico in migrant containment efforts is evident and has not been seriously disputed by United States authorities. As noted earlier, transit through Mexican territory has become virtually impossible without the support of organized networks and structures capable of circumventing Mexican security forces (Rojas-Wiesner, 2022).

To capture the dynamics of migration involving Chinese, Indian, and Turkish nationals, detention figures recorded in Mexico must be read alongside those reported by United States authorities along the southern border, as this combined approach provides a more comprehensive view of these flows. As indicated in Table 6, the number of Chinese nationals has risen sharply, increasing from 450 in

2021 to 24 314 in 2023, and reaching 31 309 in 2024. A comparable trend is observed among migrants from India, although the pace of growth appears to have slowed in 2024. Detentions rose from 2 588 in 2021 to 18 308 in 2022, peaked at 41 770 in 2023, and then declined to 18 395 in 2024. Turkish nationals have also gained relevance within these flows, with detentions rising from 1 409 in 2021 to more than 15 000 in both 2022 and 2023, followed by a decline to 8 163 in 2024.

During an initial phase spanning 2019 to 2021, USCBP data reflected the efforts of United States authorities to contain established migration flows. In the more recent period, however, these data point to the growing involvement of organized criminal groups in migrant transit, encompassing not only migrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America, but also individuals from the Caribbean, South America, Asia, and Africa. Nationals from these regions had not previously relied on this route with comparable intensity.

Within this context, the rise in detentions of Chinese, Indian, and Turkish nationals between 2021 and 2023, together with the pronounced growth of the “other” category, broadens the interpretation of available data. When these figures are contrasted with the nationalities of individuals apprehended by the INM, it becomes evident that migration dynamics along the United States-Mexico border have undergone a significant transformation. Policies implemented by the United States government have contributed to the emergence of a new and increasingly complex migratory configuration that will require closer examination in the coming years. At present, however, it is clear that, beyond the overall increase in human mobility observed during the first half of the Biden administration (USCBP, n.d.), a new area of opportunity has also taken shape for organized criminal groups.

It is increasingly difficult to envision a future in which migration processes along the United States-Mexico border are not understood through a transformed reality, marked by the growing arrival of individuals from diverse regions of the world seeking entry into the United States. This multicultural migration may foster forms of cultural exchange and, potentially, contribute to economic and community life. At the same time, it raises challenges and responsibilities related to national security. In this context, an approach that is both balanced and humanitarian becomes essential, one that integrates social inclusion with effective security measures in order to enhance potential benefits while reducing the risks associated with irregular migration (Masferrer et al., 2023; Banerjee & Smith, 2024).

Asian and African Migration at the Tijuana-San Diego Border: A Complex Analysis

The border between Tijuana, Baja California, and San Diego, California, constitutes a strategic migration crossing point between Mexico and the United States, where a steady increase in irregular migration flows has been observed. In 2023, a total of 255 343 apprehensions were recorded in this region (USCBP, n.d.), making it the second most significant crossing area in terms of enforcement actions, surpassed only by Tucson, Arizona. This development reflects not only a rise in irregular migration, but also a growing diversification in migrants’ regions of origin, including areas as distant

as Asia and Africa, underscoring the effects of globalization as well as the socioeconomic and political conditions prevailing in countries of origin.

The analysis of human mobility from Asia and Africa to the United States through the Tijuana-San Diego border reveals increasingly complex migration patterns. Data from the USCBP and the INM point to a substantial rise in the apprehension of migrants from these regions, suggesting that economic hardship, armed conflict, and political instability are key factors shaping migration decisions. In this context, migrants are exposed to high-risk journeys and frequently depend on human smuggling networks, indicating the need for a more in-depth analysis of the underlying causes and the conditions that enable and sustain these movements (USCBP, n.d.).

The complexity of irregular migration from countries such as China, India, Senegal, Guinea, and several other African and Asian nations toward the United States via Mexico highlights both the diversification of contemporary migration flows and the constraints of existing border control mechanisms. The sustained rise in apprehensions reflects not only a growing number of people on the move, but also the increasing adaptability and sophistication of human smuggling networks that facilitate these movements. These networks have become central actors in the management of mobility, with direct implications for state security and for any effort to advance a humanitarian approach to migration governance (USCBP, n.d.).

In this setting, the Tijuana-San Diego border has emerged as a particularly valuable site for observing these transformations. Data from the Mexican National Migration Institute (INM) (UPMRIP, 2021a, 2022a, 2023a) show a marked increase in the number of apprehended individuals from a wide range of nationalities, confirming the growing complexity of migration flows in this region. Figures reported by both the Mexican National Migration Institute (UPMRIP, 2021b, 2022b, 2023b) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (USCBP, n.d.) indicate that current migration policies face significant challenges in responding to an increasingly diverse and dynamic migration context.

Policies implemented by the United States, Mexico, and other countries along migrant transit routes have historically prioritized border enforcement and internal security. Recent developments, however, call for a broader approach that incorporates multilevel coordination mechanisms among national governments, local authorities, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as more robust frameworks for international cooperation (Gil-Everaert et al., 2023). Only through such coordination will it be possible to manage migration flows in a more orderly manner while remaining consistent with international human rights commitments.

As previously noted, the administration of President Joe Biden has acknowledged the growing number of individuals from China, India, and several African countries who are crossing the Mexico-United States border irregularly (USCBP, n.d.). This trend has become a central issue on the bilateral agenda due to its implications for border management, resource allocation, and governance. Concerns on both sides extend beyond national security considerations to include the need to manage increasing pressures on reception systems, processing capacities, and eventual integration mechanisms.

The sustained arrival of migrants from Asia and Africa places increasing strain on the institutional capacities available for shelter, health care, protection, and legal assistance in northern Mexican border cities (Campos-Delgado, 2020; De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2022; Garrett & Sementelli, 2022; Ash, 2023). The combination of high-risk journeys—including crossings through the Darién Gap and irregular transit across Mexican territory—the entrenched presence of migrant smuggling networks, and restrictive legal frameworks governing asylum and border control collectively heightens these populations' exposure to multiple forms of violence and exploitation (Solano & Massey, 2022; Gil-Everaert et al., 2023; UPMRIP, 2021a, 2022a, 2023a; USCBP, n.d.). In this context, the governments of Mexico and the United States, in coordination with non-governmental organizations and international agencies, have sought to develop policies that simultaneously address enforcement demands and rights-based obligations. Nevertheless, the specialized literature agrees that these efforts have yet to constitute a fully coherent or sufficient framework capable of preventing the escalation of a large-scale humanitarian crisis in the border region (Kainz & Betts, 2021; Banerjee & Smith, 2024).

Addressing the marked increase in irregular crossings along the Mexico-United States border requires a clear understanding of the underlying drivers of contemporary migration. The governments of both countries, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, have focused their efforts on examining the multiple factors that compel these populations to migrate, with the aim of designing migration policies that not only manage population movements but also avert the emergence of a humanitarian crisis resulting from the growing volume of irregular crossings.

The factors driving the increase in migration flows toward the Tijuana-San Diego border are multiple and interrelated, particularly within the broader context of globalization and recurrent political and social crises (Cheng, 2008; Johns et al., 2023). This perspective underscores the need for migration policies that engage with the structural conditions and contextual pressures that compel people to migrate, without requiring an exhaustive enumeration of individual motivations. Rather, the focus is placed on the dynamics shaping migration at the border and on the governance frameworks developed in response to these processes.

The administration of President Joe Biden adopted a more humanitarian and human-rights-oriented approach, marking a clear departure from previous administrations. This shift was reflected in a series of policies aimed at improving migrants' conditions and expanding safe and lawful pathways for entry into the United States. These measures included the repeal of controversial policies implemented during the Trump administration, such as the "zero tolerance" policy and the Asylum Cooperative Agreements, which had exposed migrants to hazardous conditions (Verea, 2022). In addition, President Biden emphasized family reunification and expanded parole programs, allowing more than one million migrants—including individuals from countries facing acute crises such as Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—to enter the country on a temporary basis. At the same time, initiatives such as the Safe Mobility Offices sought to promote regulated and safer forms of migration by offering humanitarian alternatives for people fleeing extreme circumstances in their countries of origin (Sigmon, 2024).

Overall, this approach has likely also contributed to a significant increase in migratory flows originating from Africa and Asia. Although measures have been implemented to manage this situation, the absence of effective coordination between Mexico and the United States, together with mounting pressure on detention and processing systems, has intensified existing tensions. Within this context, migration governance faces substantial challenges, particularly along the Tijuana-San Diego border, where migrants continue to rely on high-risk strategies to advance northward, contributing to rising apprehension figures. These dynamics underscore the urgent need for a more coordinated migration policy capable of addressing security concerns while simultaneously ensuring the protection of migrants' human rights.

The policies implemented during the Biden administration include several key measures (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2024), most notably the repeal of initiatives adopted during the first administration of Donald Trump. Among these was the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP, also known as “Quédate en México”), which required asylum seekers to remain in Mexican territory while their claims were processed in the United States. The termination of this program reshaped migrants' expectations and, for many, suggested greater opportunities to enter the United States.

Another policy with a significant impact has been the expansion of the use of the parole regime, which allows migrants to enter the United States on a temporary basis for humanitarian reasons or on grounds of public interest (Sigmon, 2024). Initially applied to Afghan and Ukrainian nationals, this mechanism was later extended to individuals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In addition, the Biden administration established the Safe Mobility Offices, intended to facilitate access to legal migration pathways and to reduce reliance on irregular crossings. Nevertheless, these initiatives, despite their humanitarian orientation, may have contributed to increased migratory mobility by fostering the perception that entry into the United States has become more attainable under the current administration, thereby reinforcing migration flows from Africa and Asia.

The absence of a coordinated and effective migration policy between Mexico and the United States has contributed to a sustained increase in the number of migrants detained while attempting to cross the Tijuana-San Diego border and other border areas through irregular means, thereby intensifying tensions and challenges in migration governance (Solano & Massey, 2022). A comprehensive understanding of migration dynamics along the Tijuana-San Diego border therefore requires attention not only to quantitative indicators of detentions and apprehensions, but also to the qualitative factors that drive these movements. Migration from regions in Africa and Asia toward this border reflects a complex set of motivations, including the pursuit of economic opportunities, the search for safety, and responses to shifting migration policies.

From this perspective, the following section focuses specifically on the migration of Chinese nationals in Tijuana, offering a closer examination of the observed migration patterns and their connection to broader socioeconomic and political transformations in migrants' countries of origin. This analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping migration in this region, while highlighting both the potential social contributions and the challenges that must be addressed through effective and humane governance.

*Migration Dynamics Along the Tijuana-San Diego Border:
Chinese Migrants in Tijuana*

The Mexico-United States Border, and the city of Tijuana, Baja California, in particular, has become a key setting for understanding contemporary international migration dynamics. Chinese migration to this region brings together a range of challenges and opportunities that illustrate the complexity of cross-border interactions in a globalized world (Cheng, 2008). This process is both complex and multifaceted, having evolved over several decades under the influence of global and local factors alike (Xiong et al., 2024). The following section offers a synthesis of recent academic literature on the impacts of this migration, examining the extent to which these dynamics align with or depart from the principles of humanitarian governance—such as humanity, impartiality, and respect for human rights (Kainz & Betts, 2021; Massey, 2022).

As one of the main transit and destination points for migrants along the Mexico-United States border, the city of Tijuana has been deeply shaped by increasingly restrictive immigration policies, as well as by a broader context of violence and vulnerability that characterizes this border region (Solano & Massey, 2022). It is important to note that the humanitarian crisis has intensified during the administration of President Biden (Gil-Everaert et al., 2023), as reflected in the rising number of migrant detentions and the growing pressure on basic services, including shelter, food provision, and health care (Galhardi, 2022; Garrett & Sementelli, 2023; Rocha Romero et al., 2023).

Restrictive immigration policies have pushed migrants, including families and unaccompanied minors, toward increasingly hazardous options, compelling many to rely on organized criminal groups to cross the border. This reliance significantly heightens their exposure to human trafficking networks and to serious risks throughout the journey (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2020; Slack & Martínez, 2020; Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2023). Violence associated with drug trafficking and organized crime along the border further exacerbates insecurity for these populations, particularly for vulnerable groups such as Chinese migrants, who tend to remain less visible within broader migration debates and policy discourses (Sanchez, 2020; Vega, 2021; Hsin & Aptekar, 2021; Solano & Massey, 2022).

Across different historical periods, Chinese migrants have encountered numerous challenges, including structural violence and discrimination (Cheng, 2008). At the same time, they have established strong transnational networks, engaged in rich cultural practices, and developed interracial ties that have contributed to the emergence of hybrid identities. This broader context underscores the need to move beyond the limitations of state-centered analytical approaches and to adopt frameworks that take transpacific dynamics seriously (Bellino & Gluckman, 2024; Banerjee & Smith, 2024).

During the 1970s, Tijuana began to experience its first significant arrivals of Chinese migrants, driven primarily by economic motives and family reunification (Cheng, 2008). Although the community was initially small, migrants gradually established small-scale businesses that contributed to the local economy, while simultaneously confronting substantial obstacles to social integration and broader acceptance (Manzano et al., 2022). In the following decade, the Chinese

community became more consolidated, with the creation of associations that supported newcomers in adapting to local conditions and navigating legal and cultural challenges. Nevertheless, the absence of inclusive public policies, together with persistent linguistic and cultural barriers, defined this period, revealing a gap between practice and what is now conceptualized as humanitarian governance, particularly with regard to principles of impartiality and equity (Martínez Rivera & Dussel Peters, 2016).

The 1990s brought increased visibility for the Chinese community in Tijuana, particularly through notable growth in the restaurant and commercial sectors. This period, however, was also shaped by moments of crisis, including episodes of xenophobia and racism that challenged core principles of humanity and respect for human rights. Local responses to these situations were often limited, underscoring the need for stronger coordination and more consistent implementation of humanitarian governance frameworks (Manzano et al., 2022). It was not until the first decade of the twenty-first century that the Chinese community began to achieve deeper integration into the social and economic fabric of Tijuana, as cooperation between Chinese and Mexican organizations improved. Even so, persistent forms of discrimination and unequal access to services and legal protections continued to constrain this process, revealing ongoing shortcomings in the effective application of humanitarian governance (Cheng, 2008).

The second decade of the twenty-first century witnessed meaningful advances in the participation of the Chinese community in the social and economic life of Tijuana, driven by integration initiatives and growing recognition of its local contributions. Nevertheless, the persistence of human trafficking practices and labor exploitation indicates that these gains have not automatically translated into effective rights protection or reduced vulnerability (Cheng, 2008; Manzano et al., 2022). In the more recent period—shaped by the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and by tighter migration controls along the Mexico-United States border—new waves of Chinese migrants have arrived under conditions of heightened risk exposure. Rather than relying on broad invocations of “humanitarian assistance,” this situation points to the need to reorient existing governance mechanisms toward the prevention of exploitation, effective labor protections, and meaningful access to complaint and redress mechanisms for this population.

According to data provided by Enrique Lucero Vázquez, director of the Municipal Directorate of Migrant Services of the City of Tijuana, during the fiscal year 2022-2023, 8 964 Chinese migrants entered Baja California with the intention of crossing into California (Noctis, 2024; Forbes Staff, 2024; Agencias, 2024). This marked increase reflects a broader escalation in migration patterns, which have shifted away from traditional legal pathways toward far more dangerous alternatives (Hsin & Aptekar, 2021). Many migrants now travel through Ecuador and attempt the perilous crossing of the Darién Gap, a route that highlights both the precarious conditions they face in China and their willingness to take extreme risks in order to reach their destination (Xiong et al., 2024).

The migration phenomenon has generated a wide range of responses, including political concerns in the United States, where figures such as the lieutenant governor of Texas have voiced their concern about national security (Kim & Park, 2022). These reactions are often shaped by xenophobia and stigmatization, particularly toward Chinese migrants, who are frequently portrayed as a potential threat (Li et al., 2021). In addition, the high cost of transit—reaching up to 41 000 USD per person—illustrates the extreme exploitation carried out by human smuggling networks (Lam et al., 2021).

The current situation poses serious challenges for humanitarian governance, which is meant to protect migrants with fairness, respect, and a focus on human dignity. The flow of Chinese migrants into Tijuana reflects the challenges of applying these principles in a fast-changing and often hostile context. Although progress has been made in integrating migrants and recognizing their rights, ongoing obstacles show that a more coordinated and consistent approach is needed. Such an approach must tackle the root causes of migration and ensure truly fair and humane integration. Studies emphasize the need to strengthen migration policies that uphold the rights of all migrants, no matter their background or legal status (Manzano et al., 2022).

The labor integration of Chinese immigrants in Baja California is a fascinating and complex area of study, reflecting the interplay between migration, employment opportunities, and the influence of ethnic social networks. These networks play a crucial role in helping immigrants find work, providing not only job opportunities but also a sense of belonging and community support. However, significant challenges remain, including language and cultural barriers, as well as distrust and feelings of vulnerability among migrants (Martínez Rivera & Dussel Peters, 2016).

Chinese migration to Tijuana demonstrates the urgent need for a coordinated and humanitarian response that addresses the root causes of migration and the vulnerabilities migrants face along their journey (Xiong et al., 2024). Governments in Mexico and the United States, along with international organizations and other actors involved in migration management, should consider developing policies that not only manage migratory flows but also ensure the protection and respect of all migrants' rights, regardless of their legal status. Multinational cooperation and an approach that balances security with compassion are essential to tackling this humanitarian challenge from a global and coordinated perspective (Cheng, 2008).

CLOSING REMARKS

This analysis demonstrates the growing significance of international and multicultural migration along the Mexico-United States border. Available data point to a marked rise in human mobility originating in Asia and Africa, a trend that has introduced new layers of complexity and additional challenges for migration governance in both countries. The administration of President Joe Biden has adopted a more humanitarian and rights-based approach to migration policy, which may have contributed to an increase in the number of migrants attempting to cross the border in search of improved opportunities and living conditions.

This increase is also linked to the long term effects of restrictive policies that remain in place as a legacy of the Trump and Lopez Obrador administrations, policies that make it nearly impossible to cross Mexico without access to support networks. As a result, the involvement of organized crime in the movement of people has become more entrenched, prompting criminal groups to expand their range of services to other regions of the world. This expansion appears to have met with a positive response, as evidenced by the rise in irregular migration flows.

In order to justify and clarify what is meant by humanitarian policies, it is necessary to break down the concept within the context of the migration measures implemented by the administration of President Joe Biden. For the purposes of this article, humanitarian policies are understood as those that seek to prioritize the human rights of migrants by safeguarding their dignity and wellbeing, while facilitating legal and safe pathways for migration. These policies include measures such as family reunification, greater flexibility in visa issuance, and the creation of new humanitarian parole programs. Such initiatives have enabled the temporary entry of vulnerable nationals from countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti, Cuba, and Venezuela, with the aim of providing protection from armed conflict as well as political or economic crises (USCBP, n.d.).

According to several analyses (Johns et al., 2023), the reforms implemented by the Biden administration have been characterized as humanitarian due to their emphasis on expanding access to asylum and ensuring respect for the rights of migrants. This approach stands in contrast to the more restrictive measures adopted by previous administrations, such as the implementation of Title 42 during the Trump administration, which limited access to asylum on public health grounds during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An analysis of statistical data provided by the United States Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) and the National Migration Institute (INM) reveals a significant increase in migratory diversity. The presence of migrants from at least 45 different nationalities points to a new reality at the border, where human mobility has intensified in recent years. This trend underscores the need for a balanced approach that combines social inclusion with effective security measures. Coordinated migration policies that respect human rights are essential to addressing the underlying causes of migration and preventing future humanitarian crises. Such an approach must include international cooperation and the implementation of strategies that respond to both security concerns and social inclusion needs.

This study contributes to a better understanding of emerging migration trends along the Mexico-U.S. border, with particular attention to the Tijuana-San Diego corridor, drawing attention to the growing presence of migrants from Asia and Africa. It provides critical evidence on nationalities and the scale of apprehensions and detentions, which is essential for designing more informed and context-sensitive public policies. In addition, the analysis identifies the main challenges and opportunities associated with multicultural migration, offering an initial framework for the development of more comprehensive governance strategies. Further research is needed to deepen this framework, particularly through an examination of the humanitarian policies implemented by the Biden administration and their impact on the region.

The study also offers a detailed perspective on migratory flows along the Mexico-United States border, providing data and analysis that help illuminate the current complexities and challenges of international migration. It emphasizes the importance of developing coordinated migration policies that strike a balance between security concerns and the protection of migrants. The findings are relevant for researchers, policymakers, and organizations working in the fields of migration and human rights, and, taken collectively, outline a course of action for addressing the challenges of human mobility in the twenty-first century more effectively.

Translation: Evelyne Rosales.

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