The 'America First' Policy and Illegal Immigrants: A Review of the Impact on Bilateral Cooperation between the United States and Mexico in 2025

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
America First; Illegal Immigrants; Bilateral Cooperation; United States; Mexico	This research aims to analyze the impact of the 'America First' policy, particularly with regard to illegal immigrants, on bilateral cooperation between the United States (US) and Mexico in 2025. The 'America First' policy that focuses on border security and immigration enforcement is expected to put pressure on US-Mexico relations, especially in the areas of trade, security, and border management. Through a qualitative case study approach, this research will examine how changes in US immigration policy affect the dynamics of cooperation in various sectors, including the economic impact of immigration restrictions, the security implications associated with increased activity at the border, and Mexico's response to the policy. The Mexican government is not solely responsible for the illegal movement of its citizens into the United States. The results of the study are expected to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the US-Mexico bilateral relationship amid the 'America First' policy, as well as provide recommendations to maintain stability and sustainability of cooperation in the future.

Introduction

According to The American Heritage (2023), an immigrant is an individual who leaves their home country to live permanently in another country. Meanwhile, according to the Oxford dictionary, immigrant is defined as the act of entering a country other than one's home country with the intention of staying permanently. Immigrants in the United States often get a negative view because they abuse their *privilege* to go to a country that has a higher life guarantee than their home country.

Each country has its own policy or legal basis for handling immigrants, which can indirectly affect the country's national security. Immigrants can follow the rules in a country to be able to occupy a country for example applying for a temporary residence permit and still carrying out the rules that apply to foreigners in the country (Taufik & Pratiwi, 2021).

The massive presence of illegal immigrants year after year has led to many mitigations by the government to maintain the welfare of local communities and maintain regional political stability. The impact of the presence affects the stability of various factors other than regional politics, starting from the social, economic and security factors of a country, especially the United States. Many immigrants enter the country illegally, from entering through the country's official immigration gates to staying without permission to work.

The bad stigma has spread after there was evidence that many immigrants who entered the United States illegally, such as many Latin Americans, are illegal immigrants. According to an article in the Los Angeles Times, about 60% of illegal immigrants do not have a high school diploma and are not fluent in English. There are an estimated 11 million people residing in California without legal authorization. About 63% of immigrants in the United States, especially Los Angeles, are illegal, mostly from Mexico, Central America, the Philippines, Korea and China.

Apart from the large number of immigrants from Central America entering the United States, the 9/11 incident that destroyed the World Trade Organization building with indications of religious terrorism brought a new stigma that views citizens from countries with strong religious backgrounds such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen as a national security threat to the anti-Islamic rhetoric (Rodriguez, 2022).

As a country that emphasizes freedom, the United States has increased its vigilance on what comes into the country. The lure of the "American Dream" of gaining prestige, money and a life partner in the United States has led to a massive movement of migrants to America. Because of the high lifestyle and the process of entering the United States, there are more and more illegal ways to enter, one of which is by paying human smugglers to help cross the border. There are many people who use entry smuggling as a business, such as coyotajes who work at the border of the United States and Mexico, snakeheads who smuggle from China (Rahmadhani et al., 2023).

Mexico is a country located at the southernmost tip of North America bordering the United States and is the third largest country in Latin America after Brazil and Argentina. As one of the main trading partners for the United States with 81% of Mexico's total exports going to the United States, this trade relationship plays a key role in the economic stability of both regions (Duchesne, 2022; Idris & Togatorop, 2023). However, Mexico is also one of the largest countries with people illegally entering the United States.

Because of this, it is interesting to discuss how the continuation of the 'America First' policy with a focus on preventing illegal immigrants can affect future bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico. Furthermore, to answer the question how does the 'America First' policy impact the bilateral relationship between the United States and Mexico on the issue of illegal immigrants? To see how to sustain and analyze the impact of *status quo* cooperation while providing insight to the general public about the potential development of illegal immigrants in the United States in line with what was stated by the President-elect in the United States, Donald J. Trump. Furthermore, this research uses Constructivism Theory which focuses on the identities, norms and perceptions of Mexico's views on this policy and how illegal immigrants affect bilateral relations between the two countries (Kenyon Alumni Magazine, n.d.; Sugiati, 2022).

In Usman, Moenir and Nanda's (2020) research entitled Securitization of Immigrant Issues during the Donald Trump Administration, it was found that the United States Government securitized the issue of immigrants as a form of a more assertive effort in overcoming the problem of immigrants who are considered to pose a threat to the security of the state and society of the United States. This research also mentions Mexico a lot about illegal immigrants but does not explain in detail how Mexican citizens can massively enter the United States.

Akbar's (2021) research with the title Cooperation between the United States and Mexico in Handling the Migration Crisis at the Border in 2018-2020 explains that in his first period in office president Donald Trump made this policy and set the lowest refugee quota in history and reduced the issuance of immigrant visas and automatically reduced the number of people entering the United States but did not explain how the position of illegal immigrants at that time.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a comprehensive analysis of the latest developments in U.S.-Mexico relations under the revived America First policy in 2025. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined the impact of immigration policies from a unilateral U.S. perspective, this research incorporates Mexico's diplomatic stance, economic adjustments, and countermeasures in response to mass deportations and border fortifications. By utilizing a qualitative case study approach, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how immigration policies shape not only border security but also trade relations, regional stability, and economic interdependence between the two countries.

Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach that aims to explore and understand the meaning of human experience, social interaction and a phenomenon. This research will use the literature study method and look at the phenomenon of the 'America First' policy in dealing with illegal immigrant cases in the United States and analyze how the bilateral cooperation relationship between the United States and Mexico. In addition, it uses secondary data from various sources such as scientific articles, electronic articles, books and other documents.

For data analysis, this research applies content analysis to systematically examine policy documents, speeches, and media reports to identify patterns and trends in U.S. and Mexican responses. Additionally, thematic analysis is used to categorize recurring themes in the discourse surrounding illegal immigration, trade relations, and security concerns. The combination of these analytical methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of how immigration policies influence diplomatic and economic interactions between the two countries.

Results and Discussion

The "America First" policy is the approach adopted by President Donald J. Trump during his administration in 2017-2021 while focusing on the national interests of the United States. It prioritizes the national interests of trade, national security, immigration and foreign relations. The policy has several key principles that follow its development, namely: (Saputra, 2022)
 a.   Economic Protectionism

This principle focuses on protecting domestic industries from creating jobs for Americans by reducing outsourcing and imposing high tariffs on imports while withdrawing from trade networks such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and providing incentives for companies to invest domestically.

b. National Security and Military

This principle focuses on strengthening the military budget and also prioritizes policies that increase domestic security such as immigration restrictions and the construction of a border wall with Mexico.

c. Immigration Restrictions

This principle is adopted from policies against illegal immigration such as tightening the asylum process, imposing travel bans for certain countries and accelerating the deportation of illegal immigrants.

d. Withdrawal and Multilateral Agreements

As with economic protectionism, the United States has withdrawn from many agreements such as the Paris Agreement, UNESCO, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

After the inauguration on January 20, 2025, the elected president of the United States Donald J. Trump immediately issued a statement that was widely distributed through the website www.whitehouse.gov , a statement entitled "President Trump's America First Priority" with four sub-discussions and discussion one entitled 'Make America Safe Again' containing several points, including: (The White House, 2025a)

1. President Trump will take bold action to secure our borders and protect American Communities.
2. This includes ending Biden's catch-and-release policies, reinstating Remain in Mexico, building the wall, ending asylum for illegal border crossers, cracking down on criminal sanctuaries, and enhancing vetting and screening of aliens.
3. President Trump's deportation operation will address the record border crossings of criminal aliens under the previous administration.
4. The President is suspending refugee resettlement, after communities were forced to house large and unsustainable populations of migrants.
5. The Armed Forces, including the National Guard will engage in border security, which is national security, and will be deployed to the border to assist existing law enforcement personnel.
6. President Trump will begin the process of designating cartels, including the dangerous Tren de Aragua, as foreign terrorist organizations and use the Alien Enemies Act to remove them.
7. The Department of Justice will seek the death penalty as the appropriate punishment for heinous crimes against humanity, including those who kill law enforcement officers and illegal migrants who maim and murder Americans.

In point number 3 and 4, President Trump directly tells immigrants in the United States that he will conduct mass deportations of illegal immigrants. Through the same website and the same date January 20, 2025, Trump issued an Executive Order entitled "Protecting the American People

Against Invasion" in part 1 of the order stating that over the past 4 years illegal immigration in the United States threatens national security and public safety (The White House, 2025b). Section 2 of the order confirms the policy of the United States on the implementation of immigration laws to achieve total and efficient enforcement. Section 3 contains the withdrawal of executive orders 13993 dated January 20, 2021. 14010 dated February 2, 2021, 14011 dated February 2, 2021. By looking at these orders, it can be seen that Donald Trump's focus in his second term is to reduce the number of illegal immigrants entering the United States (Malhotra & Babu, 2022).

Table 1. Origin data of undocumented illegal immigrants living in the United States

Country of origin	Total in 2022 ▼	% change since 2012
🇲🇽 Mexico	4,810,000	−28%
🇬🇹 Guatemala	750,000	34%
🇸🇻 El Salvador	710,000	3%
🇭🇳 Honduras	560,000	56%
🇵🇭 The Philippines	350,000	13%
🇻🇪 Venezuela	320,000	433%
🇨🇴 Colombia	240,000	85%
🇧🇷 Brazil	230,000	77%
🇮🇳 India	220,000	−15%

Table: DHS / EL PAÍS

(Source: el pais, (2025))

The table above shows that Mexico still holds the data on illegal immigrants in the United States from the many Mexican citizens who enter the United States illegally looking for a better quality of life in America and the lack of jobs in Mexico is the reason for the large number of immigrants who enter illegally. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum showed her disapproval of this America First policy. The Mexican president continued to accept the return of immigrants deported from the United States on January 27, 2025, about 4,094 people were accepted on that date (Jazeera, 2025).

Mass deportations in 2025 have created tensions between the United States and Mexico because most illegal immigrants come from Mexico, while there is still cooperation but with limited areas. Trump is building a wall from Mexico along the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean to block illegal immigrants from entering the United States and wants Mexico to pay for its construction, the Mexican government of course refuses to finance this wall.

The impact of this policy on bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico is divided into two points:
a. Economic Sector

When Trump took office in 2025, he raised tariffs on imports from Mexico and increased tensions between the US and Mexico by 25% and the higher tariffs led to a decrease in trade volume between the two countries. This policy also led to structural changes in the economic relationship between the US and Mexico.

b. Security Sector

This policy leads to strengthening the region and security, especially at the US-Mexico border. Trump emphasized the importance of building a border wall to prevent illegal immigrants from entering America.

Conclusion

This 'America First' policy has an impact on bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico which tend to be burdensome from America because most of the illegal immigrants who enter from Mexico and the Mexican government that does not take the slightest responsibility for the economic and security losses suffered by the United States cause their bilateral relations to be a little tense and make Mexico unable to comment much on the mass repatriation of Mexican citizens and experience another crisis in the country because there are still few jobs and the quality of life is far from good.

Every individual who wants to enter a country for the purpose of staying or working temporarily should apply for an official permit to avoid the policies of the United States and avoid deportation that may threaten the country of origin as experienced by Mexico.

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