Trump's Negotiations With Mexico Delivered a Big Win

President Donald Trump is claiming a big win with Mexico after the country agreed to send 6,000 troops to block migrants from crossing through. In return, Trump dropped his tariff threat. Ana Quintana of The Heritage Foundation joins us to analyze what happened. Read the interview, posted below, or listen on the podcast:

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Kate Trinko: In an interview Monday, President Donald Trump made it clear that he thinks he just pulled off a major win through his negotiations with Mexico. Here's what he told CNBC.

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Donald Trump: But I just want to say to the United States Chamber of Commerce, if we didn't have tariffs, we wouldn't have made a deal with Mexico. We got everything we wanted and we're going to be a great partner to Mexico now because now they respect us.

They didn't even respect us. They couldn't believe how stupid we were with what's going on, where somebody comes in from Mexico and just walks right into our country and we're powerless to do anything, whereas they have very strong immigration laws.

They don't have to take anybody. They can say, "Out, you get." So we're going to be essentially using, to a large extent, the very powerful immigration laws of Mexico.

And Mexico wants to do a good job. They're moving 6,000 soldiers to their southern border. Do you think they agreed to do that before? And they're paying them.

They're moving 6,000 soldiers to their southern border. That means that people from Guatemala, the people from Honduras and El Salvador, in theory, if they do it right, they're not going to be able to get through.

Nobody's going to be able to get through. And then they're also going to protect our southern border.

Trinko: Joining us to discuss the president's negotiations is Ana Quintana. She's the senior policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation who focuses on Latin America and the Western Hemisphere.

Ana, what do you think? Is Trump right that this was a major win for him?

Ana Quintana: I think this new deal with Mexico is a huge deal. It's a pretty big win.

I think it's significant what the Mexicans have agreed to do. Time will tell if they actually fulfill their obligations and they actually have the capacity to do so.

But they actually now have a timeline by which they need to deliver. They have measurable outcomes they need to achieve. So yeah, this is big.

Trinko: And for our listeners who haven't been following this as closely, what exactly did Mexico agree to?

Quintana: Mexico has agreed to strengthen their southern border, their border specifically with Guatemala. It's about a 600-mile-long border. They've agreed to deploy 6,000 National Guard troops.

This National Guard is a new unit that was created by the current president back in February. And the National Guard is a fusion of army, navy, and federal law enforcement. So it's a mixed bag of Mexican security officials.

They will now be strengthening their southern border to act as a deterrent against Central Americans crossing the border.

Mexico has also agreed to deepen collaboration with the United States on countering trafficking networks inside of Mexico, specifically the trafficking networks and drug cartels that are involved with the moving of migrants and human smuggling and human trafficking.

I think that's an incredibly important point because that allows the U.S. to increase oversight, increase presence within Mexico and within Mexican government institutions to specifically look at which cartels are doing this dirty work and how better to map this threat not just in Mexico but also inside the United States and in Central America.

A few weeks ago, also, there was an agreement to send a few hundred CBP officials to Guatemala. So that's another significant uptick in presence.

What else has been agreed upon? Let me see because there was just so much that was done in this new agreement.

Also, the U.S. and Mexico have agreed that if the numbers do not significantly decline within the next 90 days, both countries will meet again to revisit this agreement and see what can be fixed.

But more broadly than that, I think you now see the Mexican government looking at the issue of illegal immigration from Central America as a national security challenge. Before, they would view it as a humanitarian issue.

I think the shift in paradigm, the shift in perspective will now enable and strengthen Mexico's resolve to really deal with this.

Daniel Davis: So a week ago the Mexico's foreign minister was in D.C. saying, "We're not going to obey your commands. We're not going to fold."

Basically, they complied after it was clear that Trump was going to drop these tariffs.

What do you think made them do that? It kind of makes them look weak, but clearly, they thought it was worth it for them.

Quintana: I don't necessarily think that [Marcelo] Ebrard, that the foreign minister said that. …

With the U.S. media with the way that things are being translated—I think what Ebrard was saying was that the tariffs were being put on the table and that they wanted to come to negotiate in peace. And this is Mexican typical diplomatic speak, right?

If you look at this from a Google translate perspective, which is what The New York Times and others have been doing, you're going to misinterpret, you're going to lose a lot of meaning rather.

So Ebrard and other Cabinet-level officials from Mexico spent all of last week inside of the United States negotiating. It was a high-level summit.

But I don't necessarily think that it makes the Mexicans look weak. I think is that it finally gets Mexico to highlight a few inconsistencies and hypocrisy within their own policy.

Central American migration through Mexico, even though it ends up in the United States, Mexico by not deterring it is facilitating it and they're creating problems for the United States. So if they actually want to be a partner to America, they need to stop it.

Trinko: And do you think the threat of tariffs is what drove this agreement to come into place?

Quintana: I'm not a fan of using tariffs. ... The use of tariffs, the use of an economic penalty for a noneconomic issue, particularly with a country like Mexico that is a partner country, it's unwise long term. But I think something pretty significant was achieved.

And I got to give the president credit on the fact that he was able to pull this off because, frankly, I don't see many other tools in the U.S.' toolkit that really could have achieved this.

Davis: The New York Times reported over the weekend:

> *The deal to avert tariffs that President Trump announced with great fanfare on Friday night consists largely of actions that Mexico had already promised to take in prior discussions with United States over the past several months, according to officials from both countries who are familiar with the negotiations.*

President Trump took issue with that and he tweeted:

> *When will the Failing New York Times admit that their front page story on the New Mexico deal at the Border is a FRAUD and nothing more than a badly reported 'hit job' on me, since that has been going on since the first day I announced for the presidency!*

So, Ana, is The New York Times correct that Mexico had already committed to do this and that Trump is just claiming victory?

Quintana: No. ... One point that I forgot to bring up was the expansion of the "Remain in Mexico" policy where Mexico will agree to hold more Central Americans that are applying for asylum in the United States.

So there are small elements of previous agreements that are now a component of this new agreement.

But again, this goes back to The New York Times not having people on their staff that speak Spanish because within that article there are many factual errors. I read the article and I was like, "Oh, my God, this is completely wrong."

You just watched the foreign minister's press conference directly after the agreement was announced and you see that there are massive, massive childlike problems here. There's just blatant lies.

And so no. I think this is a significant escalation, this is an exponential increase in cooperation between both countries and Mexico's willingness to do more.

Trinko: So Mexico, they came out on Monday, they're planning to evaluate whether this worked. You mentioned 90 days, they also said 45 days. Do you think this new agreement will actually deter people from coming to the border? What do you think?

Quintana: Yes. … If you are part of a trafficking network, it's your job to bring people across the border illegally from Mexico to Guatemala, right?

This border is 500 miles, almost 600 miles of jungle. There's barely any military or government presence there. There's barely any presence there from the Guatemalan side and now you hear there's going to be 6,000 new troops there at the border making sure people don't cross.

That's a deterrent factor, right?

If you now know that the Mexican government and the U.S. are increasing collaboration and mapping out these trafficking networks and undercutting their illicit financing mechanisms and undercutting so many of the other kind of factors and conditions that allow these people to thrive. Yeah, this is going to do a lot.

Are we going to see an immediate decline? I think it's going to take some time. I don't necessarily think 45 days is a sufficient window. I think 90 days is better because it gives you about three months to really see things being actionable and put into place.

But yeah, I think this is going to lead in the right direction.

Davis: And how do you think this will affect the U.S.-Mexico relationship in the longer term? Obviously, we want to see them as an ally. They're our neighbor. And if you have to deal with the country being on your border forever you want to have good relations.

Obviously, this kind of drastic measure, the negotiation style, you don't want it to be normative long term because that could be destructive.

So how do you see this fitting into a longer term relationship with Mexico?

Quintana: That's a really good question. I think I agree with you to some degree that yes, you don't necessarily want to make this commonplace. You don't necessarily want it to be that bilateral relations are governed by threat of whatever to achieve X goal. I think now is a good opportunity.

And I think this also is not the defining factor of the bilateral relationship, nor is it the defining factor of the bilateral relationship throughout the Trump administration.

Throughout these past two years there've actually been a lot of positive diplomatic engagement. A lot of positive economic engagement as well.

The fact that USMCA was finally agreed upon, the Mexican Congress is about to pass it next week. That's what they've declared to do.

I think there's a lot of positives that are happening behind the scenes, which, thankfully, allow for, at times, some tough love to be implemented.

I just do hope that let's say if the 90-day period does come up and there are some shortfalls on the Mexican side, that it's not going to be for a lack of willingness from the Mexicans.

And I hope that there is a bit more of understanding from the U.S. government because we can't just keep on being a hammer at this. Because you're right, we share a 2,000-mile-long border. We are partners, we're trade allies. There's just such a deep relationship there.

Trinko: You recently went to El Salvador, which, of course, is one of the countries where migrants are coming from and coming to the U.S.-Mexico

border.

Besides the fact that you heard a gunfight outside your hotel, which you detailed to us right before we recorded, did you get any insights into the migrant crisis from your time in El Salvador?

Quintana: Yeah. It wasn't so much a gunfight because the gunfire was only going one direction. But who knows what happened there, but whatever. …

It's really difficult to explain just how economically, how poor the economic conditions in that country are and just how dire the circumstances are.

I was talking to one person and we were talking about the issue of just clean water and how there are so many villages throughout El Salvador where people are literally drinking water where fertilizer and other companies and other waste treatment facilities are literally dumping that water into wells. And that's the water that people are drinking.

And now, there're new generations of villages of people with awful kidney issues. … These are people. And then there's no medical care.

There are children who have died on the way to hospitals because there's simply no bridges to join two cities or to connect two cities together.

And there are no chances at better improving yourself economically because the opportunities simply are not there. And that's not even factoring in the violence and the insecurity crisis.

… The situation is quite dire and I think there's a new possibility now in El Salvador for the conditions to actually improve.

Their new president was recently elected. I mean you guys, Daniel, you were able to interview him recently and I think he gave his perspective on what he wants to do in the country to help relieve the migration crisis. To help improve the economic conditions and security conditions in the country.

One of the first areas that he's tackling is really government corruption. He, so far, I think, is saving the country about $5 million a year in firing employees who were just employees because they were relatives of the previous administration.

There are awful amounts of nepotism going on in that country. … I think it's really hard to even describe how bad the situation is.

Trinko: Well, thank you so much for joining us, Ana. Definitely some sad food for thought with the description of the wells in El Salvador. I didn't realize it was that bad. Thank you for joining us and sharing.

Quintana: No, thanks for having me.