

U.S. officials say border policy won't be focus of talks with Mexico at three-way summit, despite lingering issues

Senior administration officials say U.S. border policy will not be a primary focus of talks with Mexico on Thursday when President Biden hosts his Mexican and Canadian counterparts in the North American Leaders' Summit.

The Biden administration has recently relied on Mexican authorities to reduce the number of migrants reaching the U.S. southern border and is finalizing plans to reinstate a Trump-era policy that requires asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico.

But one senior U.S. official said during a background call with reporters on Wednesday that, "There's not a real focus, this time around, on our borders."

Instead, administration officials said the talks with Mexico's delegation, which includes President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, will center on regional cooperation to address the "unprecedented displacement" of migrants in the Western Hemisphere.

The delegations will discuss efforts to mitigate poverty, violence and other "root causes" of migration that prompt migrants to leave their homelands, U.S. officials said. The talks, the officials added, will also focus on proposals to expand work visas, refugee spots and other legal immigration pathways for would-be migrants, including victims of trafficking.

An administration official said Thursday's summit will be an opportunity to "lock arms with Canada and Mexico" which, along with the U.S., are "three of the top destination countries for migrants and asylum speakers" in the Americas.

This is the first time since 2016 that the leaders of North America's three largest economies, dubbed the "Three Amigos," have convened in a summit.

Administration officials told reporters this year's meetings will also concentrate on economic cooperation; the COVID-19 pandemic (the U.S. has donated almost

11 million vaccine doses to Mexico alone); and efforts to address the climate crisis.

Mr. Biden's sweeping legislative agenda and proposals for electric vehicle production in the U.S. have also been among those putting his policies at odds with his North American counterparts, especially López Obrador — his new energy initiative relies on state-owned companies and their higher utilization of coal.

Ebrard, the Mexican foreign minister, acknowledged there could be policy disagreements among the three countries.

"Our perspective is that we are going to have positive results," he told reporters Wednesday. "We have an optimistic vision of this meeting. It does not mean that an issue cannot arise where there are different positions, but it does mean that it will be a positive environment."

While the trilateral discussions will be likely more expansive, the bilateral meetings between Mr. Biden and his cohorts could be where issues like immigration will be hashed out, according to a senior White House official.

López Obrador is also slated to meet with Vice President Kamala Harris, who was tasked earlier this year with overseeing U.S. efforts to address the factors that fuel migration from Central America.

Even though U.S. officials said border policy will take a backseat during Thursday's sessions, recent developments have highlighted Mexico's powerful role in the U.S. addressing unauthorized migration to the southern border.

One administration official said the ongoing negotiations over the court-mandated revival of the Remain-in-Mexico program will not be "the subject" of Thursday's summit.

But on Monday, Blas Nuñez-Neto, the top Homeland Security official overseeing border policy, said the U.S. was "close to finalizing" the negotiations over the policy, which the Trump administration used to require 70,000 migrants to wait in Mexico for their hearings on their requests for asylum in the U.S.

"We anticipate that the remaining issues will be resolved shortly and that reimplementation will begin within the coming weeks," Nuñez-Neto said in a

court declaration.

Mexico has also recently ramped up efforts to reduce the number of migrants heading to the U.S.

Apprehensions by Mexican immigration officials increased sharply in August and September, a trend that ran parallel with a steady decrease in migrant interdictions along the U.S. border, government data from both countries show.

Mexico recently agreed to U.S. requests to impose stricter visa requirements for Ecuadorians, who were apprehended in record numbers along the southern border this summer. In October, U.S. border officials reported a sharp decline in apprehensions of migrants from Ecuador.

Mexico's government has also accepted the return of hundreds of thousands of Mexican and Central American migrants expelled by U.S. border officials under the coronavirus-era Title 42 policy, which the Biden administration has retained.

Asked about Mexico's immigration enforcement efforts, a senior Biden administration official reiterated that Thursday's talks will focus on addressing root causes of migration from Central America and southern Mexico.

"We know that with Mexico and with all governments in the region, we have to find ways that we can collaborate on migration management, on enforcing our immigration laws," the official said Wednesday. "But as I mentioned, it's not actually one of the themes or focuses of tomorrow."

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