

The future of UN migration policy after the 2024 US elections

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Teaser

The outcome of the election is critical for global migration governance and the UN's ability to protect migrants. The US plays a key role through its financial support and influence on others countries' migration policies. In the event of a Democratic victory, transatlantic policymakers should focus on strengthening EU-US relations through concrete policy coordination and working with UNHCR and IOM to reform aspects of migration. In the case of a Republican victory, they should focus on strengthening EU regional cooperation on migration, while ensuring stronger cooperation with the UN and creating contingency funds to support UNHCR and IOM.

Introduction

This policy brief addresses the need to increase humanitarian assistance, end harmful practices and ensure adequate funding and resources to protect migrants. For the purpose of this policy brief, “migrants” includes refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, economic migrants and those displaced by climate change. This brief explores how transatlantic policymakers can enhance the UN’s ability to protect these populations dependant on the outcome of the 2024 US presidential election.

The UN’s effectiveness in protecting migrants has historically been influenced by US politics given its status as the largest financial contributor. The outcome of the upcoming elections could lead to significantly different approaches to the UN’s work.

The challenges facing the UN and migration stem from the erosion of multilateral cooperation (International Crisis Group 2024). In the US, migration has emerged as a key electoral theme, with citizens consistently ranking it as a top concern. With migration policy central to the election, the US-UN relationship could shift depending on its outcome. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), heavily reliant on voluntary funding, faces financial challenges due to unprecedented displacement, increasing its dependence on fundraising campaigns.

Transatlantic policymakers must collaborate to ensure that the UN can continue to protect people of concern within the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), regardless of the election’s outcome. These actors include US and EU government institutions, migration agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and the European Union Agency for Asylum, think tanks such as the Migration Policy Institute, and NGOs.

Past and current policy approaches and post-election scenarios

The Trump administration consistently undermined multilateralism and international human rights institutions, withdrawing from key forums such as the UN Human Rights

Council and pulling out of negotiations on the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact for Refugees.

While overall contributions to the UN remained stable, the Trump administration sought to cut voluntary funding for several UN programmes, significantly affecting bodies such as the UNHCR (CFR.org Editors 2024). Trump's tenure was also marked by hard-line immigration policies at home, including accelerated deportations, investment in the construction of a border wall, travel bans targeting Muslims and family separation policies aimed at deterring asylum seekers (Verea and Tigau 2022).

In contrast, the Biden administration reversed many of Trump's immigration policies and protected long-term undocumented migrants by granting them temporary residence and shielding them from deportation (Angelos 2024; Ward and Schultheis 2024). However, by the end of 2023 with border crossings on the rise (Le Monde, 2024), Biden introduced policies that restricted the right to seek asylum (UNHCR 2024). The shift raised concerns over violations of Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees the right to seek asylum (United Nations 1948).

On the international front, Biden reaffirmed the US's commitment to multilateralism, supporting the GCM and re-joining the UN Human Rights Council (Pletka and Schaeffer 2022; US Department of State 2021). As vice president, Harris was tasked with addressing the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America. However, her message during a visit to Guatemala in June 2021 urging migrants not to cross into the US reflected a dual approach. The Biden-Harris administration oscillated between protective measures for migrants and policies aimed at deterring migration (Blitzer 2024).

Looking ahead, if Harris wins the US election, she is expected to pursue a multilateral policy that supports funding for the UN. While this may include a focus on cooperation, it could also coincide with stricter border controls and restrictions on asylum claims. Her previous role as vice president and her involvement with the UN Commission on the Status of Women indicate a likely continuation of Biden's engagement with the UN (Goldberg 2024).

Conversely, a Trump victory could lead to an isolationist "America First" approach with less support for the UN. His proposals on migration include a significant deportation operation and the possible end of birthright citizenship (Narea 2024). Should Trump take office, a critical consideration for the UN would be the possibility of the US withdrawing from the organisation, a notion supported by previous Republican initiatives (Rosand 2017).

While the US is a key player in shaping global migration policy, it is also important to consider the UN's approach to migration. UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly address migration-related matters through a human rights lens. Sessions of the Human Rights Council have discussed the human rights implications of migrant pushbacks, the vulnerability of migrant women and children and broader themes of migration.

As this evolving landscape within the UN unfolds, future US policy on migration will not only affect domestic and global outcomes but could also reshape multilateral

cooperation, depending on whether the US continues to engage in or withdraw from these global dialogues.

Policy recommendations

If Harris wins the 2024 US elections, transatlantic policymakers should prioritise two main areas: 1) enhancing the EU-US transatlantic relationship through concrete policy coordination, such as sharing best practices, and 2) collaborating with UNHCR and IOM to reform migration systems on both sides of the Atlantic by securing more resources and humanitarian support.

First, transatlantic relations, particularly in migration policy, should be reinforced by improving coordination among established bodies. For example, in June 2021, the US and EU leaders issued a joint statement launching the US-EU Platform on Migration and Asylum (White House 2021, European Parliament 2022). The platform is intended to facilitate biannual meetings to exchange perspectives on migration and asylum policies. Years after its creation, the platform has failed to produce meaningful results. The initiative must deliver tangible results, such as the establishment of common operational guidelines that respect international refugee, human rights and humanitarian law, through increased political commitment and transparent reporting on its outcomes.

Sharing best practices or, even more critically, sharing lessons learned from unsuccessful policies should be a key focus. For example, especially since 2010, both the EU and the US have framed migration as a security threat (Rivera 2024). They have externalised their migration challenges to neighbouring countries (Mexico and Central America for the US and Turkey and North Africa for the EU) and implemented measures to prevent migrants from entering their territories (Rivera 2024). In contrast, at the UN level, discussions on migration tend to focus more on humanitarian aspects and international cooperation, avoiding the security lens that often dominates regional and national debates, particularly in the Global North.

Migration intersects with a range of complex factors, including different economic realities, climate change, disasters and persecution, all of which give rise to different types of migration flows, each with its own set of challenges. Policies must therefore address underlying structural inequalities, including neo-colonial dynamics, which often shape migration patterns and exacerbate tensions between regions. A key component of this enhanced transatlantic partnership is the development of cooperative migration policies between the Global North and South. However, this must differ from the agreement between the US and Mexico, where the number of people crossing the border fell sharply in late 2023, largely due to Mexico's efforts to detain migrants before they reach the US (Blitzer 2024).

Second, transatlantic policymakers should work with UNHCR and IOM to expand migration systems in both the US and the EU, especially by funding humanitarian solutions. But this also includes reforming some policies, such as ending the detention of migrants, especially children, and moving away from mass deportations in favour of more humane regularisation policies.

To support these reforms, increased funding for UNHCR and IOM is essential. Both organisations have extensive global operations and regularly launch fundraising campaigns for specific projects, targeting governments, corporations and individual donors. The aim is to ensure that attention is not monopolised by high-profile humanitarian crises while protracted displacement situations are neglected.

If Trump wins the upcoming elections, transatlantic policymakers should focus on two key areas: 1) reinforcing EU regional cooperation on migration while expanding collaboration with the UN and Global South countries through UN-led initiatives; and 2) developing alternative funding mechanisms to ensure that UNHCR and IOM can continue their work even with reduced US contributions.

Given the high likelihood that international tensions could disrupt US-UN relations and based on the actions of Trump's first administration and his campaign promises (Gowan 2017), transatlantic policymakers must prepare for limits to multilateral cooperation. This may require a shift in strategy with a greater focus placed on expanding regional alliances within the EU and increasing cooperation with Global South countries in coordination with the UN.

Policymakers must also initiate discussions on the creation of a contingency and rapid response fund within the EU specifically designed to support UNHCR and IOM in the event of reduced US contributions. This proposal could be led by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs in coordination with the Directorate-General for Budget to ensure that the necessary financial structures are in place. The European Parliament's Committee on Budgets and the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) could also play a key role in taking this agenda forward.

For example, UNHCR has called for a significant increase in EU funding as part of the discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027 (Rivera 2024). However, some EU Member States have shown reluctance, expressing interest in a more modest increase in the MFF than that proposed by the European Commission (Rivera 2024). This underlines the continuing struggle to secure greater financial commitment to ensure that UNHCR and IOM can effectively address both immediate and long-term migration challenges.

Given these financial constraints, a more feasible solution may be to integrate migration and humanitarian emergencies into the existing European Civil Protection Mechanism (ECPM). Although the ECPM is typically used for environmental emergencies, extending this mechanism to provide financial support to UN bodies such as UNHCR and IOM would allow for a coordinated and effective response to migration and humanitarian crises should US funding be reduced.

Looking beyond the 2024 elections, both the EU and the US need to take concrete steps to create a stable and resilient migration framework that can withstand political changes. To achieve financial independence for UN bodies such as UNHCR and IOM, EU Member States should diversify funding sources, for example by establishing partnerships with the private sector. In addition, cooperation with countries of the Global South should focus on equitable and sustainable partnerships that strengthen

local capacities in migratory management. These actions will ensure that a more adaptable and effective migration system is in place to meet future challenges.

Note: The respective author is responsible for the content of the article. The contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung and the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg.

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