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Lessons Learned from the Biden Administration's Initial Efforts on Climate Migration

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Overview

In the first months of former president Joe Biden's term, the U.S. government began to turn its attention to the issue of climate-related migration.¹ Biden's administration was already in the process of [reviewing all U.S. immigration policy](#) and rebuilding climate capabilities following their [reduction by the first Donald Trump administration](#). Other countries and multilateral institutions were also beginning to examine the nexus between climate and conflict. In 2020, one year prior, the European Union (EU) had begun [evaluating](#) how climate change can affect migration patterns and had included that analysis in conflict assessments to inform EU external action.

This article primarily focuses on the Biden administration's work completed in 2021 and 2022. That work includes the development and release of the [Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration](#) and initial implementation efforts, including an initial prioritization of the areas recommended in the report for further consideration. This article outlines

lessons from those efforts for potential use by foreign governments, U.S. state and local governments, and future U.S. administrations pursuing related initiatives.

This review was informed by an October 2025 convening of former U.S. government officials who were directly involved with the drafting of the report and initial implementation efforts. Participants included former officials from the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State; the U.S. Agency for International Development; the Office of the Director of National Intelligence; and the White House National Security Council (NSC).² Quotes from officials involved in the production of the report are drawn from this meeting, attended by the author.

Why Climate Migration?

In late 2020 and early 2021, the Biden transition team drafted executive orders (EOs)³ that laid out the priorities for the first year of the administration and served as a foundation for the remainder of the term.

On January 27, 2021, Biden signed EO 14008, “[Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad](#),” which placed climate change at the center of U.S. foreign policy and national security and laid out a comprehensive blueprint for a whole-of-government approach to both domestic and international action. However, this EO contained no reference to the issue of climate-related migration. As noted by one former State Department official, “This was not something that was on our radar screen on the climate side, either during the transition or in the early days leading to the release of Order 14008.”

The following week, on February 4, 2021, Biden signed EO 14013, “[Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration](#).” While primarily focused on restoring the United States as a global leader in refugee resettlement through focused improvements to the U.S. Refugee Assistance Program, this EO acknowledged the potential impacts of climate change on migration trends and called for a report to look at all aspects of the issue, with an emphasis on implications for U.S. national security.

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EO 14013 marked the first explicit attention to climate migration from U.S. policymakers, though the issue had become increasingly important in international forums,⁴ in Europe, and with refugee and migration nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The NGOs that had been championing work on climate migration—such as [Refugees International](#) and the [International Refugee Assistance Project](#)—saw Biden’s climate change and immigration policy priorities as an opportunity to push the new U.S. administration to act.

Challenges Facing the Biden Administration

Climate Migration Was a New Issue Without a Clear Administration Position

Climate migration did not feature prominently, if at all, in the 2020 Democratic primary or general election campaigns. As a result, the incoming administration did not have clear policy objectives or outcomes on climate migration to communicate to agencies at the outset of this process. This was further complicated by the fact that climate migration touches interests across government; no single agency had (or should have) sole jurisdiction over the issue, meaning it would require significant interagency coordination.

The agencies involved in developing the Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration—the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State; the U.S. Agency for International Development; and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence—started from very different positions on the issue. Additionally, these same agencies did not always understand how or why the issue was relevant to them; some officials were unconvinced that climate migration should be prioritized relative to competing policy priorities. As an example, the Department of Homeland Security was focused on using existing immigration pathways, rather than pursuing new pathways at a time when immigration issues were so politically fraught.

Further complicating the matter, offices within a single agency that were responsible for different facets of the issue (such as climate or international migration) approached the issue each using their own expertise in refugee resettlement, adaptation in countries experiencing the impacts of climate change, or leveraging multilateral institutions. As a result, the State Department entered the process of developing the report without direction on which aspects of the issue should be prioritized.

Finally, several outside stakeholder groups with clear perspectives on what the United States could and should be doing on this issue, including the NGOs referenced earlier, were integral to getting climate migration into the administration’s year-one agenda. These same stakeholder organizations closely tracked the report’s development, recommendations, and subsequent implementation.

Climate Programs Were Inadequately Staffed

From 2017 to 2020, the U.S. government under Trump [withdrew](#) from global climate action forums and drastically reduced (or in some cases eliminated) [domestic](#) and [international](#) climate programs. Many of the career staff with climate-related expertise either were reassigned to other programs or chose to leave federal service. During that same period, U.S. immigration and foreign assistance policies focused on restricting entry at the southern border and instituting measures to stem the flow of immigrants into the country.

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When the Biden administration came into office with an aggressive domestic and international climate agenda, agencies were not adequately staffed at the career level to cover all the administration’s priorities. With the long timeline associated with filling Senate-confirmed political appointee positions, some issues were not prioritized early in Biden’s term, since no political leadership was in place to provide clear direction. As noted by a former State Department official, “This report was not a priority and was sidelined until political leadership was on board, but by that point the report was already out. In retrospect, prioritization by leadership would have helped.”

Concurrently, the Biden administration focused on reversing many of the immigration policies of the previous administration, such as halting construction of the border wall, ending the travel ban, the operational wind-down of the Remain in Mexico program, and instituting a 100-day deportation pause. This dramatic shift in policy, coupled with COVID-19–related migration pressures in the Western Hemisphere and delays in [lifting COVID-19–era border restrictions](#), resulted in a [record number](#) of migrants crossing into the United States via the southern border in 2023. From the perspective of a former DHS official, it was challenging to “give consideration for big pie-in-the-sky ideas when DHS was trying to deal with issues like family separation and travel bans. We may have shot ourselves in the foot by giving it [climate migration] that space in the beginning.”

Overcoming Challenges

To address the challenges outlined above, the administration issued EO 14013 to initiate the federal government’s work on climate migration and tasked the NSC with leading those efforts. Releasing EO 14013 within the first month of the administration provided a strategic signal to agency collaborators as well as the broader stakeholder community that the climate and migration nexus was a priority area of interest for the administration. As the lead body, the NSC was able to leverage both its convening power and its neutrality to ensure that all agencies with equities were at the table, allow space for various priorities and often competing viewpoints across departments to be aired, and make certain that no single perspective was prioritized over another. The NSC-led process also brought together interagency staff who had not previously worked together, creating a basis for future collaboration.

Drafting the Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration

EO 14013 allotted 180 days from February 4 for the report to be submitted to the president. Given the limited time, the NSC quickly convened the first Climate Migration Sub-Interagency Policy Committee (Sub-IPC) meeting with representatives from the agencies identified in the EO.⁵ At this meeting, the NSC laid out the structure, process, and timeline for drafting the report.

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Four interagency working groups reflecting the discussion topics outlined in the EO were established to draft assigned sections, each with a volunteer lead or co-leads from agencies with equities approved by NSC staff:

1. Geopolitical implications;
2. U.S. foreign assistance;
3. Protection and resettlement of affected individuals; and
4. Multilateral engagements.

Meetings were held weekly, alternating between the Climate Migration Sub-IPC and the working groups. Additionally, NSC staff met regularly with the working group leads to maintain alignment as the drafting process progressed and to work through questions.

Each working group was responsible for drafting the outline and content for its section, with the NSC staff holding final authority throughout the process. Additionally, page limits for each section were provided once outlines were approved to guide the level of detail and amount of content included in the report.

Each of the working groups drew information and data from various sources, including official government documents and databases, peer-reviewed journals and papers, multilateral organizations, and print magazines and newspapers. In addition to consulting written sources, working groups held consultations with external stakeholders.

The pace of work to develop the climate migration report was relentless from the day the process started. At the same time, multiple other international climate and immigration workstreams were placing demands on the same individuals and teams that were contributing to the report's development.

Overview of the Report

The report first lays out why the emerging issue of climate migration matters, especially to international and national security interests, and that it is an issue still at the nascent stages of being understood. The report notes that “while conflict is a well-understood driver of displacement, empirical studies examining the climate-migration-conflict nexus have failed to produce consistent evidence for a causal connection linking migration to subsequent conflict.” Additionally, the report points out that there are potential geopolitical implications inherent to transitioning to a low-carbon economy that may create new, easily overlooked vulnerabilities that could also affect migration patterns, revealing another side to climate migration.

Building on that initial framing, the report outlines how the United States uses foreign assistance to reduce the risk of forced migration and displacement; support climate adaptation; and support migrants, displaced people, and their host communities. This is followed by a detailed look at the use of existing legal instruments to protect individuals displaced across borders by the impacts of climate change (though limited in scope) and how the United States could endeavor to maximize their application, as appropriate, to such individuals. Finally, the report analyzed the role of key multilateral engagement initiatives, mechanisms, events, and stakeholders to identify opportunities for U.S. engagement.

The report concluded with a single recommendation to establish a standing interagency policy process on climate change and migration to further consider the following:

- Potential actions by the U.S. government,
- Improved analytics,
- Programming and investments, and
- Legislative recommendations.

The primary focus in all four areas was what the United States could do to improve its existing assistance programs and immigration instruments and identify new programs and instruments. There was very limited analysis of opportunities to leverage multilateral channels and collaboration with other countries and institutions.

Given the short time frame for drafting and the other challenges noted earlier, specifically the lack of a clear administration vision on this issue and the lag on seating political appointees in the agencies until the report was ready for final review before going to the president, it made sense that the report's single recommendation was establishing a standing policy process to further

address climate migration policy options. However, the options identified for further policy action were overly ambitious in light of the political realities of the moment and the other competing priorities. The report did open the door for individual agency action, including the launch of the State Department's [2023 climate mobility strategy](#), and laid the groundwork for continued interagency coordination outside of the NSC process.

Dissemination

The report was released as part of a package with two other seminal climate security documents: the [National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change](#) and the [Department of Defense Climate Risk Analysis](#). In advance of their release, there were calls with validators and an embargoed call with members of the media, and on the day of the release there was a White House press release. As the first U.S. government look at how climate change impacts migration, the report was overshadowed by the broader climate security narrative of the release.

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Civil society's overall reaction to the report was mixed. There was general agreement that while the report did not contain much new information, the NSC-led process and the release under the banner of the White House were significant. Nevertheless, observers were disappointed that the report did not include specific next steps and pathways to move forward. Other stakeholders, including international organizations, used the report's release as an invitation to engage and partner with the U.S. government on this issue. One example is the United States supporting climate-related efforts as part of the [Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund](#).

In hindsight, the White House and the NSC could have done more to support the report's dissemination. The report itself was not overly long, but it was not suitably packaged for wide circulation and use. A shorter executive summary or fact sheet would have been useful for agency meetings with international counterparts and could have supported the report's broader uptake with nongovernmental and Congressional stakeholders.

Because of the focus on finishing the report within the 180-day time period, limited attention was given to the post-release publication process. Defining that process—including a communications strategy for the release and ongoing engagement post release—in advance would have helped agency leadership prioritize the report and any subsequent implementation activities. This would have been especially salient for agencies whose traditional mission space does not include climate migration issues.

Report Implementation

The sole recommendation in the report was to establish within the NSC a standing interagency policy process on climate change and migration. Coinciding with the release of the report, an Obama-era Climate and National Security Working Group was reconstituted, co-chaired by the NSC and the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Unlike the NSC, the working group was not a decisionmaking body, but rather mandated to *inform* national security doctrine, policies, and plans. The administration intended to use the working group to coordinate climate migration work, but because it was not a decisionmaking body, interagency staff were not as compelled to engage and commit resources to the process. Going into the last year of Biden's administration, the NSC reassumed the coordination role, but there was limited time left to make meaningful progress.

Lessons to Inform Future Efforts

Approach

There are several actions that a government at any level—national, state, or local—can take to develop a climate migration program. These include:

- Use a signaling vehicle (such as an EO or relevant equivalent) to communicate to all agencies or ministries that the government is prioritizing this issue and compel agency commitment and associated dedication of time and effort.
 - Before moving forward with initiating a climate migration program, discuss and understand how the issue should be viewed and approached: Through a climate lens? Through a migration lens? Through a climate and migration lens? Having clarity on the approach and clearly communicating that through the signaling vehicle will provide necessary direction at the outset.
 - This commitment requires cross-fertilization of expertise within and between agencies, as well as dedicated staffing and funding resources. Consider establishing a cross-functional team that embeds expertise in migration, climate science, and multilateral financing.
- Within the signaling vehicle, identify an “honest broker” (like the NSC or an equivalent) to ensure there is continued forward action and to coordinate across various interests and priorities.
- Apply a broader security frame, inclusive of national security and human security, to elevate the importance of climate migration and secure broader stakeholder recognition of its importance and support for the government's interest in the topic.

- This framing was useful in 2021 for getting perceived nontraditional stakeholders (such as the Department of Defense) to the table, but does run the risk of securitizing the issue and prioritizing security equities over non-security equities and stakeholders.
- Require regular, periodic, whole-of-society consultations, including with civil society, international organizations, the private sector, philanthropy, academia, think tanks, and subnational government representatives.
- Engage with legislative leaders on key issues such as funding, immigration law, and geopolitical interests.

Governments pursuing this process should also consider taking a more measured start, rather than jumping right into the issue without sufficient time to lay the groundwork both substantively and with respect to having the right people in place. Finally, including relevant budget agencies from the outset can help ensure that those making resourcing decisions understand the issue and may even result in more resourcing support for recommended actions.

Recommendations and Actions

When developing recommendations for any future government efforts related to climate migration, take an approach that is balanced between what is achievable in the context of the political climate and the priorities of the moment,⁶ and clearly frame the issue and the strategy up front. In parallel, require a stocktaking of what resources are already dedicated to climate migration and other related efforts, such as solarization of refugee camps, disaster risk reduction programs with refugee and migrant host communities, or conflict resolution efforts related to natural resource scarcity in refugee

host countries. Conducting a stocktake has the benefit of raising awareness across government agencies and offers existing efforts to highlight early in the process.

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Look to introduce more realistic solutions reflecting the global nature of climate migration strategies that include helping people stay where they are, facilitating internal movement within countries, and promoting the creation of regional mechanisms (such as the [free movement agreement](#) between some Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States members). When introducing different solution options, acknowledge that some may require significantly more spending on international development, humanitarian assistance, and climate adaptation and resilience activities.

It is also important to understand where there are overlapping needs across multiple initiatives (like increased forecasting capabilities) so that efforts can be better coordinated and targeted. For example, efforts may focus on areas likely to experience outmigration due to climate impacts and locations likely to receive those displaced by climate, often while dealing with their own climate impacts.

A government may consider developing and deploying a whole-of-government communications and resourcing strategy around climate migration. Agreeing on a consistent way of discussing climate migration both within and outside government will help to ensure that stakeholders are not speaking past one another and that external messaging resonates with the public. A similar

approach to addressing how this work is funded can create efficiencies by reducing duplication of effort and more easily identifying how to fill resourcing gaps. To support a more expansive approach, err on the side of being more inclusive of government agency participants, including those with budgetary authority. These recommendations will help create a sustainable, enabling environment for addressing climate migration over the long term.

About the Author

Jennifer DeCesaro is a nonresident scholar in the Carnegie Sustainability, Climate, and Geopolitics Program where she focuses on climate mobility and disaster recovery. She served in multiple roles on the White House National Security Council (NSC) staff from 2021-24 where she focused on climate security, resilience, and disaster recovery. DeCesaro was detailed to the NSC from the U.S. Department of Energy where she spent 15 years working on clean energy, infrastructure resilience, and technology commercialization.

Notes

- 1 Climate change and associated extreme weather events influence patterns of human mobility. This movement can happen both internally within a country and across international borders. There is no consensus on nomenclature for climate-related human movement. The term climate mobility is currently used to encompass the range of population movements that result from climate impacts, but this article uses “climate migration,” as that was the terminology utilized by the Biden administration.
- 2 In the Biden administration, the National Security Council [served](#) as “the President’s principal forum for national security and foreign policy decision making with his or her senior national security advisers and cabinet officials, and the President’s principal arm for coordinating these policies across federal agencies.”
- 3 An EO is a [declaration](#) by the president which has the force of law, usually based on existing statutory powers and requiring no action by Congress. They are numbered consecutively, so EOs may be referenced by their assigned number or their topic. A sitting U.S. president may overturn an [existing EO](#) by issuing another executive order to that effect.
- 4 The Paris Agreement specifically recognized climate-related displacement and directed the Warsaw International Mechanism to establish a Task Force on Displacement, which has been functioning since 2017. When the United States rejoined, it was a great opportunity to drive action forward.
- 5 Within the NSC, Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs) are responsible for day-to-day management of national security matters on a given region or topic. These are chaired by members of the NSC staff whose subject matter portfolios are relevant to the issue at hand. An IPC can task work on a specific topic to a smaller group, known as a Sub-IPC.
- 6 For example, in the U.S. Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration, recommendations were heavily weighted toward creating new pathways for bringing people to the United States, which was a rhetorical contradiction to the broader national security messaging of the report.