

Opinion **The FT View**

The dire situation on America's southern border

If Congress will not act, President Joe Biden may have to do so

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



A 26-year-old Venezuelan migrant plays with his young son by the Rio Grande river. The jump in migrant numbers partly reflects the lure of the US economic boom © Adrees Latif/Reuters

The editorial board YESTERDAY

In a brief outbreak of bipartisanship last weekend, the US House of Representatives approved long-stalled \$60bn aid to Ukraine that will be a vital boost to Kyiv. But the bipartisan spirit did not last long enough to pass another measure, on strengthening US border security, which Republicans had long linked to help for [Ukraine](#). Posturing by hardline GOP members scuppered the chances of a bill that largely mirrored a tough measure House Republicans supported last year. The situation on the southern border, though, is desperate.

As a Financial Times [series](#) has [highlighted](#), political and economic troubles in Latin America are leading to unprecedented mass migration. The number of people apprehended on the US south-west border hit a record of almost 2.5mn last year. Border agents and facilities are overwhelmed; many US states are struggling to deal with inflows. [Immigration](#) has become a central issue in November's presidential election. If Congress is unable to act, held hostage by hardline Republicans over the issue, President Joe Biden may have to do so.

The pity is that [congressional leaders](#) spent months negotiating a bipartisan border bill that represented the most extensive attempt at immigration reform in over a decade. It included a trigger mechanism enabling the border in effect to be shut down when numbers peak and provided \$20bn funding to increase capacity and employ

when numbers peak, and provided \$200m funding to increase capacity and employ thousands more border protection agents and asylum officers. Most Republicans in the Senate, plus a scattering of Democrats, rejected the package in February after Donald Trump signalled he did not want to hand Biden a pre-election “gift”.

At least some of the border problems are of Biden's own making. Under pressure from his party's progressive wing, he repealed some of the Trump presidency's more drastic anti-immigration measures. As migrant numbers have surged, the White House response has been plodding and inconsistent, partly for fear of taking steps that would upset the Democratic left. But the president inherited a badly broken system, facing record problems with separated families and clogged asylum centres.

The jump in migrant numbers also reflects not just growing misery in parts of Latin America but the lure of the US economic boom under Biden. Indeed, legal migration has contributed to the buoyant growth. If America is to tame inflation while growing robustly, and to fill skills gaps, the labour force must continue to expand. But migrants need to enter in a controlled way through the front door, rather than the back.

Biden on Wednesday lamented the absence of border security from the weekend's package, noting that this year he had “proposed, negotiated and agreed to the strongest border security bill this country has ever . . . seen”. He insisted he was “determined to get it done” and would come back to it. If Congress will not act, the president needs to do whatever he can — but not the draconian lockdown Trump has promised if he wins again. This month, Biden hinted he was considering possible executive action to dramatically limit the number of asylum seekers who can cross the border.

He has powers to do so without congressional approval, under the same legal article Trump used for some of his measures. Executive orders cannot, however, appropriate the billions of dollars to reinforce the border and hire more staff that the congressional bill would have done.

So the president should use every chance to remind voters who is responsible for the failure to adopt a more comprehensive solution: the many Republicans who seem more intent on ensuring Trump's re-election than on governing in the broader interests of Americans.

