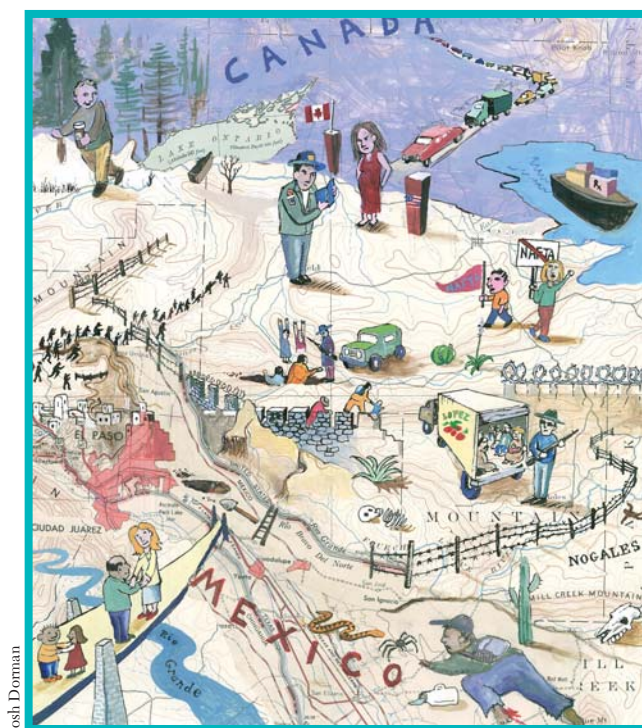


BRIDGES, BARRIERS OR BOTH? THE U.S. BORDERS



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LIKE SIAMESE TRIPLETS, THE U.S., CANADA AND MEXICO HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FATE HAS LINKED THEIR VITAL ORGANS.

BY LESLIE BASSETT

e often forget that the United States has many borders with the rest of the world, but only a handful of them are geographic. There are stock exchanges and reserve banks, borders for investment and finance. There are Internet service providers, media conglomerates and university networks, all borders for information exchanges. And there are multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations and international entities that may be headquartered in one city or country but reach out across many.

While all these entities, and many others, facilitate the movement of goods and services from portal to portal, they are also restrictive, controlling the flows and monitoring passages. These virtual borders offer the model we seek for our geographic ones: membranes that screen the dangerous from the desired, and a governing paradigm whose job is to preserve the membrane.

Whether we think of trade, migration or security, we tend to think geographically, especially after Sept. 11, 2001. The United States shares a 7,500-mile land and air border with Canada and Mexico. The many ports of entry along those borders seem more vulnerable because the numbers of people and vehicles that flow through them daily are already unimaginable. But this flow is essential to all three countries' employment, production and commerce. According to the Migration Policy Institute, both Mexico and Canada send at least 85 percent of their exports to the United States. The U.S. sends more of its exports to Canada than anywhere else, and Mexico is in third place for U.S. exports. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, since the North American Free Trade Agreement between the three countries came into effect in 1994, two-way trade between Canada and Mexico has tripled.

On an average day, nearly one million people cross legally through U.S.-Mexico ports of entry in both directions. In 2005, five million trucks, 91 million cars and 730,000 railroad cars crossed that same border. While many people first think that the 11.2 million people living along the border must be the primary destination for all this activity, trade figures show the impact is broader. According to the Woodrow Wilson Center, 22 U.S. states count on Mexico as either the primary or secondary destination for their exports. The border grows wider as trade relationships and population flows deepen.

Nearly 200,000 Mexicans migrate to the United States legally every year, according to the Pew Hispanic Foundation. For obvious reasons, it is harder to pin down figures on "illegal" (i.e., unauthorized) border crossings by Mexicans, which vary seasonally and respond to changes in both countries' economies, as well as to U.S. border enforcement measures. And, of course, some Mexicans who enter with valid non-immigrant visas

overstay them. Taken together, the Pew Hispanic Foundation's figures for 2006 show that Mexican migration to the U.S. between 1995 and 2005 averaged around 400,000 people per year. According to Department of Homeland Security statistics, this is out of a total of 4.8 million visitors (in 2005) admitted with non-immigrant visas annually.

While Mexican migration was once concentrated in a few states, migrants are now settling in new ones (e.g., New York, Georgia, North Carolina) in increasing numbers. One sign of this is that Mexico now has 48 consulates in the U.S., the most recent one opening in Little Rock, Ark., earlier this year.

Our own figures suggest that one million Americans reside in Mexico, while 12 million more visit every year. We see colonies of Americans settling in warm areas where the cost of living is low and access to the U.S. is easy. We also have a floating "snowbird" population that travels south in the winter, then moves back north for the summer. U.S. cross-border bilateral trade totals about \$1 billion a day.

Shared Concerns

The challenge for all three nations has been to build across an immense physical expanse a membrane of technology, enforcement personnel and infrastructure that can expedite the flow of licit, mutually beneficial migration and trade while effectively impeding smuggling, trafficking in persons, narco-trafficking and terrorist threats.

Mexico, too, seeks such a membrane. Its government shares the goal of having licit goods and travelers move freely across the border while sharing U.S. concerns about drugs, contraband, third-country nationals and possible terrorists moving through its territory into the United States. Inevitably, Mexico must confront — and already faces — the risks if those illicit products and criminal elements, unable to penetrate the U.S., settle into Mexico and look for markets or targets there. Violence, drug use, money-laundering and related crimes are already growing challenges for Mexico. It is also vocal about the southward flow of arms and cash from the United States into its territory, enabling organized crime gangs to outgun local law enforcement and use the country as a base of operations.

As the other partner in this dynamic, Canada shares the same vision: trade, people and information flowing

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seamlessly through a border that efficiently screens out the illegal, the unhealthy or the dangerous. The raw numbers are numbing: \$1.4 billion in two-way commercial traffic per day; 200 million crossings of the U.S.-Canadian border at 150 ports of entry (just 90 of which are staffed) every year. Those statistics translate into a reality where the CEO of Home Depot Canada says the company trades more with the city of Atlanta than the entire country trades with France. More trade moves across the Ambassador Bridge spanning Detroit and Windsor than U.S. commerce with all of Japan.

With upward of 80 percent of all exports heading to the U.S. and with an economy whose GDP is 20 percent dependent on trade, Canada's preoccupation with a functioning border is nonstop. It has to be; the cost to Canadian business of a border closure is estimated at \$100 million per hour. The United States shares that economic burden, of course, both because so much of the trade takes place within firms, and because many of the businesses are U.S.-owned.

Developing Zones of Confidence

Taking this concern into account, Washington has sought to frame its post-9/11 border security enhancements in terms of protecting the trade and prosperity that benefits all three nations. In a dual-bilateral fashion, the U.S. launched action plans with Canada and Mexico for secure, smart borders that increased the use of infrastructure, technology and personnel to monitor border crossings — especially overland borders.

With Canada, the United States agreed in December 2001 to "develop a zone of confidence against terrorist activity" by securing the flow of people and the flow of goods, improving border infrastructure and increasing information-sharing. Innovations included the provision of passenger data in advance, non-intrusive inspections of cargo and harmonized commercial processes at the border to move goods faster. A 22-point "U.S.-Mexico Border Partnership Action Plan" followed shortly thereafter, seeking to eliminate border bottlenecks while securing infrastructure and the flow of people. In addi-

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tion, all three countries continued their bilateral consultations on related issues, such as water, invasive species, air pollution and toxic rain.

The inevitable delay in putting new plans into action along the borders, coupled with increased media coverage of the migration phenomenon, allowed critics to argue that U.S. land borders were virtually unprotected. At the same time, increased NAFTA-induced trade among the three partners put pressure on land-border crossings to move products predictably, in order to get fresh produce to markets and meet “just in time” supply chains. Finally, existing security measures along the U.S.-Mexico border succeeded in pushing migration increasingly to isolated desert areas along the border, posing new humanitarian, environmental and enforcement challenges. They also succeeded in forcing criminal organizations to compete for access to border areas through which, by corruption, force or guile, they are able to smuggle drugs, people and other commodities. As a result, the few secure “plazas” routinely used by organized crime organizations have become more valuable, prompting cartel wars for control of the plazas and thereby access to the lucrative U.S. drug market.

To address such issues, in March 2005 the three nations’ leaders agreed to form the Security and Prosperity Partnership to catalog existing bilateral border

The challenge is to expedite the flow of licit, mutually beneficial migration and trade while keeping out criminal and terrorist threats.

control and security efforts, prioritize some trilateral trade opportunities and provide transparency to ongoing efforts.

The SPP provides a good overview of the potential threats to each country’s security that could affect either of the partners. For example, the maritime component allows consultation on sea-based threats, trafficking routes and information-sharing. The health component allows coordi-

nation on possible responses to avian flu or other pandemics, including border protocols to prevent the spread of disease across land, sea or air borders. And the North American Energy Security Initiative acknowledges that a “secure and sustainable” energy supply is essential for the three countries’ shared prosperity and strives to improve transparency of the market and regulatory compatibility.

In addition, recognizing that terrorist attacks, natural disasters and other emergencies can all have an impact across borders, the three governments are working to develop joint plans and protocols for incident response.

The ongoing U.S. congressional debate on illegal migration reflects tension between the growing demand for foreign labor and trade and the need to reassure Americans that their land borders are secure. While there is no evidence that terrorists have crossed into the U.S. from Mexico, the proliferation of tunnels under the border, violent incidents against Border Patrol agents, and the continuing flow of illegal migrants and goods across the border all signal reason for concern. At the same time, economies on both sides of the border rely on the ports of entry as arteries for survival. Cut them off and vital organs will suffer — and possibly die.

Like Siamese triplets, the U.S., Canada and Mexico have to acknowledge that fate has linked them. They may disagree about what direction to go in, but as trade ties deepen, population flows continue and interests coincide, they will inevitably have to communicate and, ideally, cooperate. The three nations are only as healthy as the borders that both bridge them and protect them. ■

North American Partnership Blog

Is there such a thing as a North Americanist, in the same way diplomats specialize in Asia, the Middle East or Africa? Colleagues at our two missions in Canada and Mexico are engaged in a unique collaborative weblog on the intranet to explore the overlaps and overlays of U.S. interests in those countries. Border-crossing issues, export-market trends and implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative are just a few of the topics treated on the blog. You can visit the North American Partnership Blog on the intranet at: <http://www.intelink.gov/communities/state/nap/>.