

Toward a Sovereign Vision of North America

Hacia una visión soberana de América del Norte

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Abstract:

This article takes stock of North American regional cooperation and integration, particularly between Mexico and the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the depth of the ties between Mexico and the United States and has challenged their understanding of the last decades, while motivating both countries to re-examine what they have built together and the steps they must take in order to better avail of their potential and build a better future for their populations. An important element to take away from the relationship between Mexico and the United States is that together they are more than the sum of their parts.



Resumen:

En este artículo se hace un balance de la cooperación y la integración regional norteamericana, en particular, entre México y Estados Unidos. La pandemia de covid-19 evidenció la profundidad de los vínculos entre México y Estados Unidos, y ha supuesto un reto el entendimiento de las últimas décadas, además de que ha motivado reexaminar lo que ambos países han construido juntos y los pasos que deben adoptar para aprovechar mejor su potencial y construir un mejor futuro para sus poblaciones. Un elemento importante que rescatar de la relación entre México y Estados Unidos es que juntos son más que la suma de sus partes.



Key Words:

Cooperation, trade, migration, community, security, regional integration.



Palabras clave:

Cooperación, comercio, migración, comunidad, seguridad, integración regional.

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The always complex relationship between Mexico and the United States is in a new phase. We are witnessing geopolitical stress, characterized by the breakdown of apparent harmony and the search for hegemony, accompanied by the erosion of confidence in multilateral institutions. In this context, we are experiencing the worst health crisis in the last hundred years and the worst economic crisis in decades, stemming from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As if all this were not enough, Russia has invaded Ukraine, and the effects of climate change are being felt more and more. These global shocks have led to long-term effects on world politics and the global economy.

The actions we take today will determine what our tri-national neighborhood will look like for years to come; billions of human beings will face poverty or prosperity, war or peace, oppression or freedom, which places a great responsibility on the present generation. The geopolitical weight of our area, three democracies with a total population of five hundred million people and trade worth 1.3 trillion dollars, inevitably impacts other regions of the world.

Every crisis has two aspects: it deepens existing trends and, at the same time, opens up new perspectives. This crisis revealed the depth of the ties between Mexico and the United States and challenges our understanding of the last decades. It has forced us to reexamine what we have built together and the steps we must take to better harness our potential and build a better future for our populations.

After the closure of businesses and activities during the height of the pandemic, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security established a list of 16 “essential” sectors that had to continue operating in order to “guarantee the continuity of functions critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security.”¹

That tipping point demonstrated that our supply chains are indispensable to our economies and well-being. Trade in essentials did not stop with the COVID-19, although the world economy ground to a halt. Mexico and the United States worked with U.S. companies to better align their priorities across North America and prevent disruptions to critical supply chains.

In addition, the importance of essential workers was highlighted, many of them Latinos, Mexicans, or undocumented migrants. The U.S. economy came to understand that without the labor of those essential workers in agriculture, meatpacking plants, dairies, and grocery stores, U.S. families would not have food on their tables. This is a story that is little known in U.S. society. In addition, about 29 000 recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, known as *dreamers*, worked non-stop as doctors, nurses, and health workers.

These essential sectors form part of the backbone of the economy in the United States, and integration with Mexico means our country is key to the proper functioning of the U.S. economy. This integration can be best illustrated in the North American automotive sector, where an auto part can cross the border up to eight times according to the “just-in-time” model, before the vehicle is fully assembled. More than a third of the auto parts imported into the United States come from Mexico and this rises to 70% for some critical components.

Critical manufacturing in North America is closely linked to the productivity and competitiveness of Mexico. The aerospace industry in Mexico now produces engines, cargo doors, airframes, engine parts, and landing gear assemblies for U.S. aviation companies. A single plant in Chihuahua designs and produces 95% of the wiring used in the Boeing 787 Dreamliner

¹ “Identifying Critical Infrastructure during COVID-19,” in Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, August 13, 2013, at <https://www.cisa.gov/identifying-critical-infrastructure-during-covid-19> (date consulted: November 29, 2022).

commercial aircraft. Parts for helicopters and military aircraft are also designed and built in Mexico.

In the agricultural sector, more than 80% of the tomatoes consumed in the United States come from Mexico. In fact, most of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the United States are imported, with 40% of them coming from Mexico.

Our trade and human integration has served as a catalyst for peace and stability, and perceptions in both countries have gradually changed. In Mexico, decades-old anti-U.S. sentiment has waned dramatically, while nearly two million U.S. citizens call the country their home. Mexico City has become a well-known metropolis in U.S. circles for its cultural and culinary pleasures.

These new realities have forced us to act with a vision of the future in order to realize our potential. What actions have we taken in the most important areas that shape the bilateral relationship?

In diplomatic matters, thanks to coordinated government work, we have managed to redirect our institutional paths at all levels. We activated all our principal bilateral mechanisms: first, the U.S.-Mexico High Level Economic Dialogue (HLED), which had not been held for four years; later, the Bicentennial Framework was created to replace the Mérida Initiative, and fundamental technical mechanisms such as the 21st Century Border mechanism were revitalized; finally, the North American Leaders' Summit was reactivated.

Trade

Mexico has consistently been one of the two leading trading partners of the United States for several years now. In 2021, total bilateral trade amounted to USD 660 billion. What do these numbers mean? How do they compare to other trading partners? In 2021, Mexico imported more from the United States than all the countries of the European Union combined. Mexico represents 16% of all U.S. foreign trade. In addition, for 34 individual states of the U.S. Mexico is one of their two top export markets.

The scale of this reality and the impact it has on millions of people on both sides of the border meant the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) had to be negotiated with a forward-looking vision, in order to support fairer trade and economic growth in the region.

With the signing of this treaty, Mexico achieved four key objectives: support competitiveness in North America by strengthening regional value chains; increase trade and investment; restore legal certainty to ensure businesses have the confidence they need to invest and hire, strengthening dispute resolution mechanisms and incorporating a review mechanism that helps keep the agreement in line with economic reality; and improve the conditions of workers.

Another positive effect of the USMCA was to strengthen the labor policy that Mexico had already been developing, by adopting a labor reform that replaced previous labor laws. In their place, it created new obligations to ensure that workers can freely vote for their union representation and contracts, and guarantee them increasing wages in accordance with international standards. This was a statement of support for workers throughout Mexico, and means that the competitiveness of the Mexican economy will no longer be based on low wages, but on increased productivity.

For the rest of the world, the United States is a market; for China and other Asian countries, for example. In the case of Mexico, Canada and the United States, we trade to produce things together. The depth of our economic integration and our proximity has allowed us to create a tightly integrated North American supply chain. More than merely a market, North America is a humanist space that seeks to develop a competitive model in the economic sphere, a democratic one in the political sphere, and a humanist one in the social sphere.

Migration

On the migration issue, we have maintained systematic communication with government decision makers, congresspeople, and experts from U.S. think tanks about the importance of thinking about migration in a broader context and the value of understanding it as a constant social phenomenon. We have also worked to emphasize the need to think about new schemes, including exploring the idea of circular migration.

We believe that the punitive approach to migration, which has been gaining strength in recent years, prevents us from fully understanding the phenomenon, and from protecting the most vulnerable people. If you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

This broad and coordinated effort at dialogue and persuasion is a starting point for reflecting on an issue that has increasingly become an electoral instrument, not only in the United States, but in other parts of the world.

It is enough to look at the migratory challenges that the European Union faced with the arrival of migrants from the Middle East, the position of Türkiye with regard to the flow of Syrian migrants, the situation of the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar, or the most recent Ukrainian exodus as a result of the attack by Russia. North America is not independent or autonomous when it comes to global trends and the resulting flows of people.

What has differentiated Mexico from many countries, whether of origin, transit or destination of migrants, is its determination to find comprehensive solutions with a regional vision, reject the “securitization” of migration,² and propose the importance of understanding the causes of migration before dealing with them.

There are structural factors that attract migrants to the countries of destination and that expel them from their countries of origin, and these cannot be transformed overnight. Central America, for example, faces unemployment, extremely low social security, violence, and the effects of climate change. These regional challenges require regional responses.

The real answer is to improve the quality of life of people in their places of origin. The migration phenomenon is in constant flux and requires creative solutions and a humanistic commitment. Mexico, for example, went from being a transit country to also being a destination country for migrants and refugees.

Mexico already receives the third-highest number of refugee applications in the world. From 2019 to October 25, 2022, the Mexican Government recorded a historic high of 329 000 people applying for refugee status in the country. 92 319 of those applications have already been approved.

The scale of Mexican efforts becomes evident when the total number of immigration documents granted (including visitor cards, whether

² In the study of International Relations, *securitization* means the process by which state actors transform ordinary political affairs into matters of security that must be treated as threats. See Ole Wæver, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 46-86.

regional, border worker, or for humanitarian reasons) is counted, which add up to more than one million in the last four years.

This is the motivation behind the regional expansion of programs such as *Sembrando Vida* and *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*. These initiatives promote the development of the southern region of Mexico and Central America, aimed at the communities from which the largest numbers of young people leave, in order to generate jobs and expand opportunities and income.

As a result of the ongoing bilateral dialogue we have engaged in and the trust we have built, on October 12, 2022 it was announced that the United States responded positively to Mexico's request to increase labor mobility in the region with 65 000 new work visas and access for 24 000 people with pathways to join the U.S. labor market.

It is important to note that without sustained immigration, economic growth in the United States would be considerably lower. According to analysis by Moody's Analytics, if annual immigration to the United States fell by more than the average of one million over the past decade, in ten years' time gross domestic product would be USD 1 billion lower.

One of the persistent challenges is that, despite the advances made in the perception of some migratory schemes, the issue of the border continues to be exploited in the media and politically. There is a lot of demand from the media and little context when talking about it.

To put into perspective the accusations that migrants are "rapists," "murderers," or "terrorists," and that paint the border only as a place of conflict, it is worth referring to data published by the CATO Institute: zero people have been killed or injured in attacks on U.S. soil by terrorists who crossed the border illegally (1975-2020).³

The border also takes on a different meaning when we focus on the intensity of exchanges it makes possible. The 56 ports of entry that dot the over two thousand mile border are an indicator of the strong ties that unite and link our economies, cultures, and communities.

³ Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorists Are Not Crossing the Mexican Border," in CATO Institute, March 18, 2021, at <https://www.cato.org/blog/terrorists-are-not-crossing-mexican-border> (date consulted: November 29, 2022).

Every day, nearly two million people, on average, cross in both directions to travel, shop, work, attend school, do business, or receive medical treatment. In addition, approximately USD 1 million crosses the border every minute, equal to USD 1.8 billion per day.

A paradigmatic example of the intensity of our commercial exchanges can be seen in “the World Trade International Bridge,” located in the Laredo region, across which some 16 000 commercial vehicles pass daily.

Importance of our community

A comprehensive perspective on migration requires a better understanding of the human story behind migration. In the case of the United States, its prosperity is due, in large part, to the labor and creative force of its migrant community, including the nearly 38 million people of Mexican origin. About 10% of the U.S. population is made up of migrants of Mexican origin who enrich the U.S. experience.

The beneficiaries of the DACA program are a clear example. There are approximately 600 000 DACA recipients living in the United States, of which 80%, or nearly half a million, are of Mexican origin. According to various estimates, DACA individuals contribute USD 9.5 billion in federal and local taxes, and their households have a purchasing power of USD 25.3 billion. As noted, thousands were classified as essential workers. Their social and economic influence is undeniable.

DACA is just an example, since the tasks that our migrants perform are varied. In addition to farm or construction workers, there are nearly a million Mexicans working in the United States with higher education or graduate credits.

The paradox is that these data coexist with a rise in racist and xenophobic discourses around the world that put migrants at risk. To address this, we work shoulder to shoulder with the 51 Mexican consulates in the United States, the largest consular network in the world, focused on continuing to protect Mexican communities. That is the motivation that led the Government of Mexico to present before the Supreme Court of the United States two documents known as *amicus curiae*, in defense of the beneficiaries of the DACA program. These highlight their numerous contributions with powerful statistics, together with warnings about

the adverse consequences that the termination of the program would have for their families and U.S. society.

To mark the tenth anniversary of the program, letters were sent to the Speakers of the House of Representatives and the Senate, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer respectively, as well as the Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, urging them to recognize the contributions of our communities and push for a permanent solution.

Security

In the past, the focus of security matters was the “war on drugs,” which sought to combat organized crime in Mexico. The Mexican government devoted unprecedented resources to eradicate crops, seize drug shipments, destroy clandestine laboratories, and break up drug trafficking organizations. However, the emphasis on a punitive and prohibitionist approach contributed to a spiral of violence with no clear end in sight. The war on drugs failed miserably.

In 2007, before this so-called “war” began, Mexico had a homicide rate of 9.7 per 100 000 inhabitants. Ten years later, in 2017, the figure had risen to 25 per 100 000 inhabitants, before the López Obrador government took office. From 9.7 to 25 in a ten-year span, an increase of 157%.

What is worse, drug use on both sides of the border has continued to rise. Similarly, the rate of drug overdose deaths in the United States has more than tripled in the last two decades. In 2020, there were 91 799 drug overdose deaths in that country.

In response, Mexico presented a new security vision that is people-centered and holds that coercive actions must go hand in hand with a comprehensive approach to prevent the recurrence of violence. It is essential to address the root causes of violence through institutional consolidation, reconciliation, and social, political and economic transformation, in addition to the direct fight against organized crime.

Given that the international demand for drugs is growing, the idea that there can be a total and permanent suppression on the supply side in the short term is not realistic. We need effective policies that help in the short term as well as with a broader perspective.

The drug problem is a shared problem, and Mexico promotes a more effective collaboration with the United States, based not only on a criminal justice approach, but also one that is aimed at addressing social grievances, reinforcing prevention strategies, as well as strengthening public health and attention to victims and vulnerable groups.

For this reason, the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities was created to replace the Mérida Initiative, in order to address drug policy, money laundering, arms trafficking, and consolidation of judicial institutions in a cooperative manner and with a new regional vision.

One of our priorities revolves around reducing the illicit trafficking of firearms originating in the United States, since they are used in more than 70% of homicides in Mexico. The United States responded to this demand from Mexico to fight, at the same time, against arms smuggling in our country.

The cooperation between our two countries will allow us to face together the emergence of new criminal challenges such as the use of fentanyl and its destructive effects among Mexicans and U.S. citizens.

In security, as in other sensitive issues, the condition of our cooperation does not lie in having identical visions; on the contrary, it is vital when our policies differ.

We recognize the inherent challenges, but we are convinced of the need for continued dialogue in the face of a changing world, because as long as we remain neighbors, the futures of the United States and Mexico will be intertwined.

A new approach to security policy is that it is already considered a regional effort in which the two countries are co-responsible, and not just Mexico, as was previously the case.

Regional integration as a response to a changing world

In 1992, against the background of the U.S. triumph in the Cold War, the academic Francis Fukuyama proposed that the advance of Western liberal democracies would be inevitable, making ideological and state

conflicts less and less viable.⁴ It goes without saying that Fukuyama's thesis was not fulfilled, as the tensions between China and the United States, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine have recently shown. This geopolitical stress has a direct impact on North America: in the blink of an eye we have become the breadbasket of the world and a strategic location for its energy future.

Global tensions show us that we cannot afford to depend on distant regions for strategic components, such as medical devices, batteries, or semi-conductors, on which our health and economic security depend.

We have a unique opportunity to create new regional value chains, attracting investment in strategic sectors from other regions, particularly Asia. It is not a question of a protected bloc, but of an integrated alliance within a global system.

Mexico and the United States, as part of an integrated North American region, have a key role to play in today's geopolitics, not only in the reconfiguration of supply chains, but also in areas such as the exponential progress seen in biotechnology and the fight against climate change.

The Inflation Reduction Act recently adopted by the United States Congress, for example, is an example of how the North American region can influence a sustainable future for both countries. It is the first time that the United States includes North America in a mandate from the U.S. Congress, as a region that can receive tax credits. The law contains a series of provisions and measures that favorably impact job creation, innovation, and development in the automotive industry: it includes tax credits of up to USD 7500 for the acquisition of new electric vehicles and up to USD 4000 for used ones. The main requirement that must be met is that electric batteries and their materials must come from the United States or from free trade partner countries. In addition, the vehicles must be assembled in North America. Originally, the bill considered applying the tax credit only to electric vehicles made in the United States, which would have harmed the Mexican auto industry. As a result of intense dialogue and diplomacy, it was possible to extend its application to all of North America.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Avon Books, 1992.

Likewise, the CHIPS and Science Act, which contemplates a subsidy program of almost USD 50 billion and seeks to expand the productive capacity of semiconductors to compete with China, includes Mexico from the outset as a fundamental partner in this task. These are two laws with regional visions of the future.

In the framework of the second annual meeting of the HLED, the United States government raised with Mexico its interest in supporting supply chains in the country, as a result of the intense dialogue that has been pursued in Washington, as well as the influence of semiconductor companies. These are two efforts to align national policies to a broader regional vision, which position Mexico as a reliable partner and a competitive destination for productive investments.

Both laws make it possible to move forward with efforts to build an integrated, better educated North America, with shared development, less dependent on the outside, for the benefit of our peoples. In order to compete globally as a region, it is necessary to continue deepening productive integration and strengthening supply chains between the three countries.

We have the conditions and the human capital to move in the right direction. Mexico is now one of the world's leading producers of engineers, with roughly half as many engineering graduates as the United States and only a third of its population, surpassing several European countries. This allows us to mobilize technology and innovation, not only to generate economic benefits, but also to anticipate and respond to social problems.

In 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that there are one million vacancies in the U.S. technology sector each year, which represents another critical area of opportunity.⁵ This means that companies can reduce risk by considering both Mexico and the United States as integrated partners.

We also believe that a deeper association must be rooted in social, cultural, and humanistic values. The power of Mexico in these areas is important. The new generations of Mexican men and women, for example, represent an added value for the region. They have a keen sense of inclusion and social responsibility, and defend individual liberties.

⁵ Angus Loten, "America's Got Talent, Just Not Enough in IT," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2019, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-got-talent-just-not-enough-in-it-11571168626> (date consulted: November 29, 2022).

Mexico, the world's largest Spanish-speaking democracy, is a founding member of the United Nations. and has always been a constructive global actor.

Conclusion

This text provides material for reflection on what a new association for North America represents. It is true that each of the countries has a unique history, internal sensitivities, and entrenched political cultures. However, geopolitics forces us to make profound decisions about our alliances and their characteristics, while always defending our sovereignty. The world is in need of a region that offers a new model of integration and humanistic cooperation between sovereign states.

Let us take advantage of current demands to build a solid framework that allows us to better exploit our common strengths, with full respect for our sovereignties.

We need to keep working to align our priorities at all levels. This implies a commitment between the federal authorities of the countries, but it is also the responsibility of the governments, the private sector, and civil society in the three countries.

A strong North America will translate into economic growth, innovation, job creation, technology development, trade and investment flows. It will allow us to be self-sufficient in certain strategic industries and not depend on distant regions, but above all it will allow us to propose a humanist development that is based on respect for human rights, freedoms, and democracy.

William Walker postulates that, throughout history, global shocks resulting from the worst horrors of humanity have led to *illuminations* that generate paradigm shifts and create new opportunities. He explains that the terrible Thirty Years' War in Europe ended with the Peace of Westphalia; the League of Nations was born in response to World War I; and the atrocities of World War II, including the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led to the creation of the United Nations.⁶

⁶ William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012.

Currently, we are facing new opportunities that can change the face of our region. Like those involved in the great projects that have transformed humanity, it is up to us to turn the lessons of the crises of our times into innovative actions that entrench North America as an example for other regions of the world. We have the conditions to cement this a competitive, inclusive, and humanist region.

If there is one key element to take from the relationship between Mexico and the United States, it is that together we are more than the sum of our parts.