

SETTING THE STAGE - STRATEGIES FOR THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN BORDERS DUNCAN WOOD¹

As my colleague Chris Wilson has laid out on a number of occasions, the border is a line between the two countries that serves to divide but also unite. In many ways the border is the nexus between the two economies and societies that brings them together through commerce, investment and communications, yet also serves to separate the one from the other.² As an artificial line in the sand, the border marks where one society ends and another begins, but of course that is an entirely false distinction, as the border region has always been a collection of unique societies in their own right, sharing much more in common with their counterparts immediately on the other side of the line than with the rest of the country.

At its most basic level, the challenge on both sides of the border centers on controlling and facilitating flows. This means putting in place infrastructure, procedures and cooperative mechanisms that block the majority of unwanted flows yet allow legitimate and necessary flows to cross the border as freely as possible. When we observe the progress that has been made over the last decade, it is impressive to observe how much investment has taken place along the border. Much of this stems from the vision that was laid out in April 2010 when the governments of Mexico and the United States issued a *Declaration of the 21st Century Border*, which stated that: “a joint and collaborative administration of their common border is critical to transforming management of the border to enhance security and efficiency.” The focus in the 21st Century Border project on the need for infrastructure spending, new measures to speed border-crossings and to relieve pressure on the border by enacting policies and programs away from the border, such as pre-clearance, increasing the number of visas for legal workers, employment pre-verification, and trusted traveler programs all hold great promise.

What’s more, the joint declaration by Presidents Calderon and Obama’s that “A key component of our global competitiveness is creating a border for the Twenty-First Century” struck exactly the right now. By focusing on the competitiveness theme, the presidents recognized that the border is more than a problem; it is also an opportunity. The presidents called for development and management of the border “in a holistic fashion and in ways that facilitate the secure, efficient, and rapid flows of goods and people and reduce the costs of doing business between our two countries”.³

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² Christopher E. Wilson, “A dividing line that unites: the U.S.-Mexico Border”, in *New Ideas for a New Era: Policy options for the next stage in U.S.-Mexico Relations*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2013.

³ Joint Presidential Declaration on the 21st Century Border, April 2010, <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/mexico/310329/16may/21st%20Century%20Border%20Vision%20May%202011%20Final-.pdf>.

The problem is that not nearly enough resources have been devoted to the project. While cross-border trade is five times what it was two decades ago, most major border ports of entry have “experienced major expansion or renovation since they were built several decades ago”. According to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) an extra \$6 billion in infrastructure investments are needed to fully modernize the border. This seems like a huge sum, but when we consider that “In the year that ended Sept. 30 (2012), the federal government spent \$18 billion on immigration-enforcement programs, dwarfing the combined budgets of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Secret Service by about \$3.6 billion”.

This contrast in spending figures gives us a clue about the somewhat misplaced priorities of the U.S. (and Mexican) government when it comes to the border. Massive spending on border fencing, patrols and arrests has responded to political concerns about security and illegal immigration rather than a strategic vision of how to best manage the border in the best interests of the economy, national security, and quality of life for those who live in border communities. Instead, as a 2006 study estimated, in the San Diego area alone, “the total local economic impact of border congestion is \$2.259 billion in production losses (about 1.2 percent of the regional output) and 31,454 lost jobs (about 1.7 percent of the regional labor force)”.⁴

The consequences of this under-funding of the 21st century border have been made particularly acute in recent weeks with the implementation of the Federal government fiscal sequester. Customs and Border Protection is being hit with around \$512 million in cuts in 2013 alone, and by early March had already issued furlough notices to its 60,000 employees. This will clearly impact on both border crossing wait times and on the ability to control illegal crossings.

In light of this chronic underfunding, and the acute situation facing us today, it is crucial that the two governments work on reenergizing their focus on the border. Several priorities emerge.

Focus on border crossings rather than the spaces between them. The intensive focus on the illegal immigration “problem” in recent years has resulted in enormous spending on patrolling the border between crossings, rather than devoting those funds to improving border crossings themselves. Such improvement would center on adding new infrastructure, new CBP agents, and new technologies that would speed border crossings while increasing controls over illegal flows of drugs, weapons and humans.

The need for a focus on border crossings cannot simply involve the U.S. government. It is high time that Mexican authorities devote resources to improving infrastructure on its side, with increased security, improved checks on southbound goods and people, while at the same time providing more lanes for northbound traffic. There are encouraging signs early in the Pena Nieto administration that the new government is willing to spend on infrastructure and recognizes the importance of the border.

Funding this new infrastructure will be a challenge, particularly in view of the fiscal problems in the United States. Public private partnerships at the border, involving fee-based border crossings, make more sense than ever before, and could provide a much-needed boost for bridges and express lanes.

⁴ San Diego Association of Governments, California Department of Transportation, District 11, “Economic Impacts of Wait Times at the San Diego–Baja California Border. Final Report”, 2006.
http://www.sandag.org/programs/borders/binational/projects/2006_border_wait_impacts_execsum.pdf.

Mexico's southern border is more important than ever, and joint action between the U.S. and Mexico on the border is crucial. It will be impossible to patrol the border effectively along its entire length, but strengthening formal border crossings will help to regularize traffic. Given the problems with violence, migration and disease, such action is urgent.

The need for information exchange and understanding is a joint action. One of the most important advances of the past decade has been the implementation of trusted traveler programs (TTPs). The time has come to unify and expand the existing programs (Sentri and Nexus) so that a truly North American TTP can facilitate movement for frequent travelers. It makes sense for Global Entry to become the standard for travel in the region and beyond, and the U.S. government should consider a more aggressive marketing campaign for the program.

The FAST program (Fast and Secure Trade) is an initiative that also requires further investment. Most of North America's trade moves by road, and making it easier for trusted truck drivers to move seamlessly across the region's borders makes good economic sense. More companies should be encouraged to join the C-TPAT (Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism) program, as it is the gateway to FAST.

At the border itself, it is vital that information exchange becomes a priority between the different authorities. A case in point is the challenge faced by Mexican border mayors who weekly receive thousands of Mexican and Central American deportees into their cities, commonly left there by U.S. authorities with little or no information about their background. This poses a serious threat to public order, as well as to social security and health systems, and could easily be addressed by a simple exchange of information between federal authorities, which then pass on the information to their municipal counterparts.

One of the most fruitful initiatives on the Canada-U.S. border has been the IBETs (Integrated Border Enforcement Teams) program. The IBETs program is comprised of both Canadian and American law enforcement agencies:

- Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)
- Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA)
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection/Office of Border Patrol (CBP/OBP)
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)
- U.S. Coast Guard (USCG).

The partnership enables the five core law enforcement partners to work together for more efficient sharing of information and intelligence. There is great potential for increasing understanding and effectiveness on the U.S.-Mexico border through a similar program, particularly with regards to maritime enforcement.⁵ There may even be scope for making IBETs teams trilateral in nature so that Mexican officials can learn from the experience on the U.S.-Canada border.

In 2012 Robert Kaplan published *The Revenge of Geography*, in which he emphasized the enduring importance of geography and geo-politics in the modern world. In the case of our region, geography has become a huge competitive opportunity for all three NAFTA partners. Jointly implementing measures that allow us to take full advantage of that opportunity should now be a priority for our governments.

⁵ I am indebted to Christopher Sands for this insight.