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Of-Forgotten Mexico: The United States' Indispensable Strategic Partner

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The conventional wisdom in the United States is that Mexico and Canada are not important. A cursory reading of the U.S. newspapers in the last decade would lead one to conclude that Iraq and Afghanistan were the most important countries to U.S. national security, China was its dominant trading partner, and Saudi Arabia was its main source of energy imports. All three propositions are false. - Robert A. Pastor, *The North American Idea: A Vision of a Continental Future*, p.40

January 2014 marked the twentieth anniversary of the implementation of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which eliminated numerous trade barriers that existed between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. In light of this significant milestone, pundits and politicians have engaged in a contentious debate on NAFTA's accomplishments, failures, and future. Often lost in these vitriolic exchanges, however, is the serious need to engage in a larger, strategic-level discussion surrounding the U.S.'s relationship with Canada, and even more importantly, *with Mexico*. This strategic reevaluation of our relationships with our North American neighbors, particularly Mexico, proves all the more critical as the U.S. military conducts its drawdown in the Middle East and Central Asia after 13 years of conflict while it simultaneously executes a much heralded "pivot" to the Pacific.

The emergence of China and the "Asian Tigers" as economic dynamos clearly justifies and warrants the U.S.'s greater strategic investment and engagement in the Far East. However, the need for a radical

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strategic reorientation westward has been exaggerated. It also obscures and subordinates the obvious strategic advantages that can be found closer at home. As an economic bloc, North America is “a global economic powerhouse, with the three countries containing 470 million citizens and a \$19 trillion economy, which nearly matches the European Union in population and outpaces it in production.”¹ Unfortunately, the full potential of NAFTA, and more importantly, the enormous rewards provided by greater strategic cooperation between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico remain unrealized. In particular, the U.S.’s failure to fully embrace an emergent Mexico has a strategic partner has proven counterproductive.

Instead, historical animosities, cultural misunderstandings, and exaggerated fears surrounding security continue to stymie trilateral cooperation. The U.S.’s strategic relationship with Mexico remains particularly fractious. In spite of ever-increasing interdependence, the U.S. has often opted to pursue unilateral and contrary economic, security, and immigration policies towards its southern neighbor. In particular, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. shifted its priorities to security on its borders instead of promoting trade. Journalist Thomas McLarty underscores “concerns about terrorism, illegal immigration, and the explosion of drug-related violence in Mexico meant that billions of dollars were spent to stymie the movement of people, which, of course, also inhibited the movement of goods.”² By default, “security has become the continent’s entrenched governance mode. And NAFTA is old and tired.”³

Yet by isolating itself from Mexico, the U.S. continues to commit a grave strategic miscalculation, which inflicts significant economic and social harm to all three North American countries. By viewing Mexico as a problem, rather than as an asset, the U.S. negates Mexico’s unparalleled strategic value in an expansive North American economic and security zone.

The Positive Results of NAFTA

A large part of North America’s economic dynamism stems from its interdependence. Bound together by a shared geography, environment, companies, supply chains, people, community, beliefs, and culture, NAFTA has served as a valuable, albeit flawed and limited, mechanism to promote prosperity in the region. Since the enactment of the treaty, intraregional trade has multiplied from \$290 billion in 1993 to over \$1.1 trillion in 2012. Foreign direct investment in North America has also increased by six times.⁴ NAFTA has undoubtedly created enormous wealth and opportunities, and made the continent more globally competitive.

The degree to which all three countries have become more economically and socially interdependent in the last 20 years is astounding. The statistics speak for themselves. Mexican consumers and companies now support over two million U.S. workers directly, and another four million indirectly.⁵ On a per capita basis, Canadians and Mexicans buy twelve more times from the U.S. than the Japanese and Chinese do. Moreover, the U.S. exports nearly three times more to Canada and twice as much to Mexico than to China. Specifically, the U.S. now exports more to Mexico than to the BRIC countries-Brazil, Russia, India, and China-combined. “An estimated 40% of the content of imports to the US from Mexico, and 25% of what Americans buy from Canada, originated in the US.”⁶ This increased efficiency has sharply driven down the price of consumer goods in the continent. Furthermore, North American companies such as General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, General Electric, and Hewlett-Packard have drawn on comparative advantages in design, technology, labor, and component manufacturing in all three countries to produce high-quality goods that are sought after throughout the global economy.



NAFTA has also served as one of the primary catalysts for the profound amalgamation of the Mexican and U.S. populations. Once again, the numbers underscore the remarkable depth of the demographic changes of the last 40 years. More than 50 million Hispanics now live in the U.S., two-thirds of them are of Mexican heritage. The wider Mexican-American community, including the American-born offspring of immigrants, is over 33 million people.⁷ The U.S. Census Bureau projects that over 66 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans will live in the U.S. by 2050.

The border has failed to impede this integration. After Mexico City, the largest concentration of Mexican citizens resides in Los Angeles. In fact, one in ten Mexican citizens, 12 million in total, live in the U.S., half of them illegally.⁸ In recent polls, over half of all Mexicans have indicated that they have a relative or friend living in the U.S. Furthermore, in 2011 Mexicans living in the U.S. sent an estimated \$23 billion in remittances to their families at home. However, the migration of peoples is certainly not one way. Over one million Americans now live in Mexico, the largest U.S. community abroad in the world.⁹

As the drafters of NAFTA anticipated, the economic ascendancy of Mexico, coupled with its declining birth rates, has stabilized immigration flows between the two countries. Ironically, this stabilization has occurred *in spite of* flawed U.S. immigration policies and renewed efforts to shut down the U.S. southern border after 9/11. This positive trend underscores the importance of U.S. efforts to assist Mexico's continued economic development. The promotion of expanded free trade within NAFTA contributes to greater prosperity *and* security for all.

Ascent of the "Aztec Tiger"

NAFTA has radically transformed Mexico. As the most undeveloped economy of the three, it has naturally benefited disproportionately from NAFTA. However, Mexico's gains have also benefitted the U.S. and Canada immensely by shoring up the continent's southern flank. In a remarkably short time, Mexico has become a multiparty democracy with a broadening middle class and a competitive export economy.

Advanced manufacturing industries such as aerospace and automotive have invested billions of dollars in Mexico. Companies such as Bombardier, Honda, Nissan, and Volkswagen have made the country a vital leg of their global supply chains. Astoundingly, Mexico is now the world's largest exporter of cars after Germany, South Korea, and Japan. Increased trade and wealth have also given rise to a burgeoning middle class that now consists of over 40 million Mexicans.¹⁰

Reforms within the Mexican government have also contributed significantly to the ascent of the "Aztec Tiger." Since the administration of Vicente Fox, the federal government has supported sound public finances, low inflation, liberal trade policies, and a currency that has been unpegged, and since 1994, never overvalued.¹¹ President Enrique Peña Nieto has implemented an ambitious and laudable series of policy initiatives that address political, labor, and tax reform, dissolution of current monopolies and promotion of economic competition, and foreign investment in energy.¹² The effective implementation of these reforms will certainly bolster Mexico's attractiveness to investors.

China's entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, unfortunately, decimated Mexico's manufacturing sector, particularly textiles and apparel. Nevertheless, this trend is now reversing, and Mexico looks increasingly attractive for foreign investment. It remains, in essence, an anti-China play. Higher wages in China, combined with higher Mexican productivity, increased energy costs, and worries about intellectual property rights have led a number of U.S. manufacturers to choose Mexico over China.¹³



The Unfulfilled Potential of NAFTA

All of the fundamentals favor a resurgence in North American trade. The region continues to reap the benefits from cheap and abundant energy, a young workforce, and costs that are increasingly competitive with those in China. In fact, the Boston Consulting Group estimates that by 2015 Mexico will have a cost advantage of almost 30% over China. Transport times from Mexico to the U.S. and Canada can be measured in hours and days versus the weeks required to ship products to and from the Far East. Comparatively favorable demographics will persist in the next 15 years as well. Mexico's labor force is expected to grow 58% between 2000 and 2030 while the US will grow by 18%. In contrast, China's will shrink by 3%. The continent's strategic location and abounding resources are incomparable and the envy of the world. For instance, Canada possesses more fresh water than any nation in world.¹⁴ With the rise of shale oil and gas production in the U.S., oil-sands in Canada, and the enormous potential of Mexico's energy sector, the continent's prospects of achieving energy self-sufficiency within the next decade are extremely favorable.

Yet in spite North America's numerous advantages and NAFTA's myriad accomplishments, the region continues to underachieve economically- particularly because Mexico's full potential has not been fully leveraged. From a peak share of world trade in 2000 of 36%, the North American economy has been in steady decline. Currently, it rests at 25% and is forecasted to fall further as it loses market share to China. It is clear that North America has not developed a strategic response to China. Political scientist, Robert Pastor, succinctly summarized, "NAFTA sat down, and China ran over it."¹⁵ Even today, the incredible promise of a larger Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) languishes in contentious, and seemingly endless, negotiations between potential candidate nations.

In the interim, the reformulation of NAFTA is clearly necessary. Limited infrastructure investments, higher security hurdles, duplicate regulations, and unnecessary bureaucratic procedures have doubled border delays, inflicting unneeded costs for many North American operations. Our borders remain "dumb and slow," particularly between the U.S. and Mexico.¹⁶ For example, only a single rail bridge exists between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo even though it is one of the most important ports of entry. A low estimate of \$70 billion are lost a year due to inefficiencies caused by divergent regulations, delays, and border security restrictions.¹⁷ Since 2001, the U.S. has spent \$186 billion in border security and only achieved dubious results. Unfortunately, only a tiny fraction, in comparison, has been invested in improving border infrastructure to facilitate the free flow of trade.¹⁸ Dismayed with the U.S.'s counterproductive security measures, which contribute to economic bottlenecks, the Mexican government has similarly failed to make appropriate infrastructure improvements on its side of the fence.

The U.S.'s Disastrous Immigration Policy

Perhaps the greatest impediment to improving NAFTA is the U.S.'s myopic immigration policy. Instead of focusing its efforts on helping to improve the Mexican economy, the primary factor that determines the rate of Mexican migration to the U.S., American policy has wrongly focused upon costly law enforcement. According to the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank, border enforcement costs the U.S. \$18 billion a year, more than all other federal criminal-law-enforcement agencies combined.¹⁹ Fueled by irrational concerns about illegal immigration and unfounded fears of a grossly overplayed terrorism threat, the U.S. Border Patrol's budget has increased 800% since 1998. It has also tripled in size and now boasts a bloated force of over 21,000 agents. Still it is doubtful that these expenditures have appreciably increased the U.S.'s security. Instead, by unnecessarily sealing its border and



restricting the free flow of needed workers, the U.S. has caused significant harm to both countries' economies, the very bedrock of cooperative security.

The militarization of the border has certainly made it easier to catch illegal migrants. Its fortification also clearly deters others from trying to cross. In 2000, the Border Patrol foiled 1.6 million attempts to cross the border. In 2011, that number was just 286,000, the lowest in 40 years. It is now apparent that the world's biggest migration has now reversed.²⁰

Yet the Bush and Obama administrations' attempts to seal the border have created many negative and unintended effects. The human costs of shutting down the border have been weighty. Criminal gangs and drug cartels, for example, now control illegal crossings. Unlike the "mom and pop" coyotes of yesteryear, they charge more and care less for their clients. Guides often obligate migrants to carry drugs to pay for their exorbitant journeys.²¹ In 2013, human trafficking into the U.S. was worth \$6.6 billion. The drug cartels and criminal gangs now make more money trafficking humans than drugs.²²

Surveys of recent deportees report that over 20% had offspring who were American citizens. "Parents separated from their children are unlikely to be put off by extra helicopters or double fencing."²³ Many deported Mexicans are forced into the unenviable position where they must choose between social isolation or death in the desert as they attempt to evade U.S. law enforcement by using evermore remote and treacherous areas of the border to cross. On average, one person dies attempting to cross the border every day.

"Circular migration" in which Mexicans once freely moved between both countries in accordance with work opportunities and harvest schedules has all but ceased. A decade ago, 75% of illegal aliens returned to Mexico within two years. Now it is only 20%. Mexican parents of 5.5 million youths, 4.5 million who are U.S. citizens, continue to hide in the shadows in the U.S. due to their illegal status. Hence, quixotic attempts to construct an impermeable barrier have now achieved the opposite effect. It now keeps illegal immigrants in the U.S. instead of out.

The paradoxes continue. Long term demographic trends suggest that the U.S. will eventually need to dismantle its fortified border to facilitate the entry of direly needed labor (illegal or not) to maintain its economy. Without immigration, the U.S. birth rate is insufficient to support future growth. Yet it is forecasted that the number of 15-24-year-olds in Mexico will start declining precipitously in the next five years. Moreover, fertility rates in Mexico have already fallen below America's. Immigration to the U.S. now stands at a net zero. In the future, substantial incentives may be needed to entice others to cross.

Ultimately, the long-term solution to the immigration problem is to close the income gap between the U.S. and Mexico and increase mutual cooperation by facilitating the legal transit of a fluid labor force in accordance with market demands. If Mexico's economy collapses or violent crime soars again, the pull of higher wages, jobs and increased security across the border will prove too powerful for many to resist regardless of the physical obstacles imposed before them.²⁴ Better U.S. immigration and economic policies towards Mexico can certainly mitigate these risks far better than higher fences.

Resistance to NAFTA and Further U.S. Integration with Mexico

The critics of NAFTA and further social, economic, and political integration with Mexico are many. Baseless prejudices and misinformation about NAFTA lamentably persist in both the U.S. and Mexico. Pastor once complained that NAFTA had become a "piñata for pandering pundits and politicians" in all three countries.²⁵ U.S. trade unionists often raise fears of 'a race to the bottom' for American workers if further U.S. economic integration with Mexico occurs. Meanwhile, many Mexican socialists rile up the



lower classes' historical fears of 'Yankee imperialism' by painting NAFTA as an insidious Gringo design to rob Mexicans of their sovereignty.

Before evaluating the validity of these criticisms, it is crucial to underscore first the limited nature of NAFTA. By design, it is only a restricted trade treaty whose language emphasizes sovereignty more than seamless cooperation. Hence, many criticisms levied against the treaty are simply unfair. For example, NAFTA was never designed to solve emigration problems, yet this is often cited as one of the treaty's central failures. Ironically, many critiques of the treaty underscore not its intrinsic shortcomings, but rather what it is not, and in the future, *should* be.

A somewhat peculiar coalition of the American far left and right to include conservationists, trade unionists, Tea Party members, National Rifle Association members, and neo-isolationists has coalesced around their common opposition to the treaty and further integration between all three countries. On the far left, criticisms against the treaty center on environmental concerns and the loss of manufacturing jobs in the U.S. For example, a "vituperative opposition" to the Keystone XL Pipeline, which would transport tar-sands oil from Alberta, Canada to Texas has emerged.²⁶ The Obama administration has, thus far, proven very reluctant to weigh in on this issue to the dismay of energy boosters and the Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper. Yet most environmentalists' concerns about the pipeline have proven to be unfounded. In fact, a recent Department of State study determined that the pipeline would significantly reduce environmental impacts as much of the Canadian oil is now being transported to the U.S. by trains and trucks. Conservationists' efforts would be better spent ensuring that NAFTA's environmental regulatory measures are improved upon and strictly enforced in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico.

Numerous American trade unions also mistakenly blame NAFTA and the emergence of the Mexican economy for the reduction of America's manufacturing base. For instance, labor advocacy groups such as Public Citizen cite NAFTA as the principal culprit for the loss of more than one million manufacturing jobs. The treaty and cheap Mexican labor, in particular, are also blamed for income inequality and the diminishment of middle-class wages as American manufacturing workers are forced to compete with imports made by lesser paid workers abroad.²⁷

While "globalization has certainly played a major role in the loss of American manufacturing jobs, and, more broadly, the stagnation of U.S. wages and incomes," other market forces have had a far greater impact.²⁸ Advances in technology, automation, and education have been proven to be far more influential in reducing U.S. manufacturing jobs than international trade. Furthermore, the elimination of many U.S. blue collar jobs has been inevitable and desirable. Many outdated, inefficient, and lower-end industries such as textiles have been eliminated in the U.S. due to healthy market forces. International competition has markedly increased efficiency and the availability and variety of consumer goods. The resultant lower costs in consumer goods have also compensated for the lack of wage increases for lower and middle class Americans.

Changes in the composition of jobs available to the 63% of American workers without a college degree have been painful, but necessary.²⁹ Instead of focusing their efforts on lower-skilled jobs that can be filled by others overseas, portions of the labor force can now be concentrated on higher-skilled occupations in which the NAFTA countries possess distinct advantages. The costs of retraining portions of the U.S. workforce will inevitably be expensive; however, the continued investment in a highly skilled workforce will serve as an invaluable impetus for North American innovation and continued competitiveness.



Some economists have also criticized NAFTA for favoring Canada and Mexico to the detriment of the U.S. For example, the average annual growth of the U.S. trade deficit has been 45% higher with Mexico and Canada than with countries that are not party to a NAFTA-style pact. Additionally, the U.S. trade deficit with Canada and Mexico has risen from \$27 billion in 1993 to \$181 billion in 2012.³⁰ However, these statistics do not tell the full story. As stated earlier, all three countries are so interdependent that goods exchanged between all three often contain components of all three. Hence, very little unilateral trading occurs that distinctly favors one NAFTA nation at the expense of another. Besides, the U.S. runs a trade deficit with *many* nations. Proponents of NAFTA sensibly argue that if other nations own U.S. debt, it is far more advantageous that they be our strategic partners and neighbors such as Canada and Mexico instead of China.

Mexican illegal aliens are also frequently blamed for increased social costs and criminality within the U.S. Both assertions are baseless. A recent editorial in *The Economist* points out “America has done rather well out of illegal immigrants: many of them pay social-security under a false identity, so they cannot claim the benefits that they are paying for.”³¹ Illegal workers contribute more to the U.S. tax base than they consume. Moreover, multiple studies have shown that Mexican illegals tend to be more law abiding than American citizens. The fact remains that concentrations of Mexican immigrants make communities safer.

American conservatives often bemoan the Mexican threat to “American” (or Anglo-Protestant) culture. These fears are simply overstated and unjustified as well. Unlike most immigrants, Mexicans and their Spanish, Indian, and Mestizo forefathers have been part of the North American landscape longer than the British colonists and their descendants. In many ways, they are more “American” than their Anglo counterparts. Moreover, patterns of assimilation of Mexican-Americans are no different than their German or Italian antecedents. In fact, their integration into American society generally occurs much faster. For example, amongst second-generation Mexican-Americans, fewer than 10% rely on Spanish as their primary language. For the third generation, that percentage is less than 1%.³² The rate of intermarriage between Anglos and Latinos is very high as well.

Nonetheless, it is irrefutable that the dramatic increase of Mexican-Americans in the U.S. is changing the face of “American” culture. This change, however, is irreversible *and* positive. Mexican-Americans have and will continue to make invaluable contributions to the social, political, and economic vitality of the U.S. Moreover, the continued incorporation of Mexicans into the U.S. economy is an absolute imperative in order to fuel future prosperity. By 2030, when all Baby Boomers will have turned 65, fully 18% of the U.S. population will be at least that age, according to Pew Research Center population projections. Without a youthful workforce, the U.S. will not be able to pay for and take care of over 50 million retirees.³³

A Strategic Roadmap for the Future

In order for the U.S., Canada, and Mexico to develop a more meaningful strategic partnership, policy makers should consider a more ambitious path. Most importantly, the U.S. must start viewing the myriad problems and challenges that threaten Mexico’s stability as its own as well. Increased U.S. support in the drug war, the implementation of more sensible immigration policies, and the reformulation and expansion of the parameters of NAFTA will inevitably benefit all three countries. Cooperation between all three countries must be based upon mutual respect and responsibility. For example, the U.S.’s traditional, paternalistic approach of ‘helping’ a hapless Mexico must change to one of ‘supporting and assisting’ an ever increasingly capable nation. Similarly, Mexico must strive to be a better neighbor and solve its own internal problems independently to the greatest degree possible.



One area that demands greater U.S./Mexico collaboration is the drug war. The U.S. must accept its complicity in the ongoing violence south of the border. Americans' insatiable demand for illicit drugs continues to fuel criminality in Mexico. U.S. weapons also contribute significantly to the ongoing violence between warring cartels, which has resulted in over 70,000 deaths since 2006. The U.S.'s failure to stem the iron river of guns flowing southward is shameful. Over 80% of guns seized in Mexico come from the U.S. Currently, there are 6,700 U.S. gun sellers within a few miles of the border, averaging one shop for every third of a mile along the 1,922-mile border.³⁴ Ultimately, drug policy on both sides of the border needs to shift from its law enforcement focus to a social one. Illicit drug use is more a health problem than a criminal one; therefore, more effort needs to be invested in prevention and rehabilitation in both countries.

The implementation of immigration reform is absolutely necessary as well. U.S. and Mexican immigration laws should become more flexible in order to encourage the free movement of labor in accordance with market demands. Congressional Budget Office (CBO) forecasts that a Senate immigration bill would reduce the federal deficit by \$197 billion over the next decade and \$700 billion the following decade due to increased tax revenue, raised American output, and productivity.³⁵

Moreover, the three countries need more of NAFTA, not less of it. Castañeda recommends that "NAFTA 2.0" be more of a comprehensive, EU-style agreement.³⁶ He, and others, endorse resource transfers between the U.S. and Canada to Mexico similar to investments made in Italy, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, and Poland by the wealthier EU countries during the 1960-1990s. Greater collective investment in Mexican infrastructure and its energy sector is in the U.S. and Canada's best interests as well.

Perhaps most importantly, the U.S. must continue to support and encourage Mexico's ongoing internal political and social reforms. The challenges Mexico continues to confront are considerable and varied to include ongoing drug violence, criminal impunity, ineffective judicial system, corrupt police, and bad schools.³⁷ Mexico must obviously take the lead in addressing these internal problems, but the U.S. and Canada must also play a critical, albeit supportive role. Yet these problems are not insurmountable, particularly with a coordinated, continent-wide effort to address them. Ultimately, increased democratic rule of law would alleviate many of today's security worries in Mexico.

Conclusion

In spite of Americans' generally outdated perceptions of Mexico, "its real story today is one of fundamental political, economic, and social transformation: from authoritarianism to democracy, from a closed to open economy, and from a poor society to a middle class nation." However, Mexico's future prosperity and stability are not guaranteed unless the U.S., Canada, and Mexico work together to address their common problems. Political scientists such as Shannon O'Neil rightfully contend "Mexico is the most overlooked U.S. foreign policy challenge of our time."³⁸ It is also one of the most important. It could potentially become a top-ten world economy bolstered by a strong democracy, global voice, and burgeoning middle-class. Or it could fall into a morass of illegality and bloodshed. The U.S. and Canada can either assist Mexico or obstruct it. As the predominant power of the three, the U.S. must exert its role as a protagonist to promote mutual support. If the U.S. chooses to further its integration with Mexico, its oft-forgotten, but indispensable strategic partner, the *entire* continent will reap enormous benefits. Conversely, if the U.S. continues to pursue insular, counter-productive economic, immigration, and security policies, it may lose out on the many gifts that its southern neighbor can bestow. This strategic myopia could cause irreparable harm to all three countries.



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