

NAFTA's Future and Regional Security Cooperation

Written by Richard W. Coughlin

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, MAR 7 2015

NAFTA's future is constrained by multiple paradoxes. Before turning to these, consider how one might think about NAFTA as a form of regionalism. Lerner and Walters characterize regionalism as

...a new kind of internationalized government that emerged since the 1970s to deal with an increasingly global and market driven society. Regional alliances can be understood as a collective response, a way in which states can win back some control over otherwise undisciplined economic and social forces (2004: 409).

Regionalism involves the effort to construct political institutions that can shape economic flows of workers, trade, investment and finance in ways that can create or enhance comparative advantage for states and regions. But there are questions that can be raised about political resilience and sustainability of regionalism, and of NAFTA, in particular.

NAFTA is deeply enmeshed in what Ashby (2014) terms "the border paradox," which is that as economic integration between the United States and Mexico has deepened, issues of border security for the United States have become increasingly pronounced. Border security for the U.S. is a political problem, not merely a technical one, rooted in conflicting conceptions of American identity and purpose. The clash is between imperatives to pry open new spaces for trade and investment for U.S. corporations and the protection the U.S. domestic society from being penetrated by foreign actors who pose threats to its identity and security (Coleman, 2005).

In the case of the U.S.-Mexican border, this clash is complicated by the issues of immigration and transnational drug trafficking. Under the weight of the debt crisis and structural adjustment policies, economic liberalization of Mexico resulted in sudden cuts to agrarian subsidies and trade tariffs and, in addition, a far reaching privatization of the Mexican economy. Peasant and workers were pushed into the migrant stream, provoking border militarization in the United States even as the U.S. pursued NAFTA. By securing the border, U.S. policy makers could create the conditions for deeper economic integration with Mexico (Andreas, 2000). This was, however, just a temporary resolution of the border paradox.

The border paradox reasserted itself with the events of 9/11 and the implementation of security measures that impaired that operation of the transnational commodity chains set in place by economic integration. It is noteworthy that in the weeks prior to the 9/11 attacks, the United States had been negotiating a far reaching immigration agreement with Mexico which sought, by means of a new guest worker program, to establish legal channels in which undocumented labor migrants could move. This possibility quickly receded as U.S. borders became newly invested with danger.

In the wake of 9/11, U.S., Mexican and Canadian policy makers undertook efforts to deepen NAFTA through "partnership" agreements (termed the partnership for Security, Peace and Prosperity or SPP), which were concerned with creating a regional security as a way of diminishing the severity of the border paradox. In a joint statement, policy makers from the U.S., Mexico and Canada signaled their commitment "...to the long term goal of dramatically diminishing the need for the current intensity of the governments' physical control of traffic, travel, and trade within North America" (Manley, 2005). The SPP sought to control mobility regionally rather than only at the point of the border, through the development of preclearance programs for the circulation of people (in the form of

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“trusted travelers”) and goods. Through the management of mobility the SPP imagined the NAFTA region not only as a geographic space, but as a population of rational, utility maximizing subjects whose health, security and well-being should become the object of state policies (Gilbert, 2007).

This project was also marked, however, by what Ong (1999) has termed flexible citizenship, entailing a stratification of subjects in relationship to the profit making objectives of regional integration. This stratification was rooted not only in the production of economic value, but also in the distinction between licit and illicit form of globalization – that is, between our globalization of legitimate trade, investment and travel and their globalization narco-trafficking, human trafficking, illegal migration and terrorism (Amoore, 2006). In this context, border security has operated – paradoxically – to intensify these different forms illicit commerce. The risk premiums associated with greater border security enabled traffickers to charge higher prices for the provision of illicit commerce. Paradoxically, increased border security ends up acting as a force multiplier for transnational organized crime, spurring it to adapt and providing those organizations that do adapt with immense financial rewards.

The counter-productive character of border security is not easy for policy makers to disavow. Citizens of the United States have a large psychological investment in the territorial integrity of the United States. It is not difficult for politicians at both the state and federal levels to “securitize” the border – to name, that is, the border as a security issue that threatens the collective way of life through the activities of migrants, drug traffickers, and potential terrorists (Williams, 2003). Many of these claims are formulated by legislators and governors from the Sunbelt region of the United States. These have resulted in a series of federal and state statutes directed against non-citizens.

These legislative enactments point toward a bifurcation of sovereignty in the United States in which the state, in some respects, is oriented toward acting globally or regionally in some contexts and nationally in others. There is a tension inherent in these modes of action, such that, as Castells has argued,

...the more that states emphasize communalism [vis a vis their national society], the less effective they become as co-agents of a global [or regional] system of shared power. They more they triumph in the planetary [or regional] scene...the less they represent their national security (1997: 308).

These tensions between global/regional and nation materialize around borders between outside and inside the state. These borders do not coincide with national boundaries. There has been, rather, a diffusion of borders in conjunction with increased volume of transnational economic flows so that it is the geographical breadth of these flows rather than the space of the border per se that forms the terrain of regional security. One can think, in this regard, of a proliferation of the border into the spaces of everyday life and, correspondingly, a recruitment of citizens, firms and non-federal law enforcement agencies into the regulation of these borders (Amoore, 2006).

The management of borders becomes, in consequence, a way of managing the larger crisis of sovereignty. The state as a manager of globalism or regionalism also emerges as the state that is concerned, domestically, with securing the proliferating borders between inside and outside, which globalization has now spread over the entire surface of society. Politics at the regional and domestic levels are superimposed upon one another in an uneven and variegated fashion. Drawing this connection enables us to think above the developmental possibilities of NAFTA in terms of both U.S. and Mexican domestic politics.

Within the United States, the formulation of de-nationalizing policy agendas (Sassen, 2006) have vested new rights in corporate actors while restructuring the powers of the state. Since the 1970s, these policies have been driven by a pervasive anti-Washington ethos, which has centered on expanding the power of market forces, but also on expanding the scope of the state's social control over those social groups that were deemed to be incapable of exercising the new market freedoms. Where the New Deal state had once pursued policies rehabilitation, the criminal justice system, at both the state and nation levels, turned in the direction of penal severity: overall levels of incarceration in the U.S. increased six fold since the 1970s (Garland, 2001). The War on Drugs declared by the Reagan administration served as a political centerpiece for this revolution in penal severity and also brought migrants within the framework of the new social control policy agenda.

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But this policy agenda is now disintegrating. Mass incarceration is now regarded as fiscally unsustainable and morally problematic. In several states, the recreational use of marijuana has been approved, a development that marks a retreat from the drug wars of 1980s. Additionally, the fusion of the criminal justice and immigration systems in the United States is running into the headwinds of an increasingly powerful Latino voting bloc within U.S. presidential politics. In its recent moves to protect undocumented immigrants from deportation, the Obama administration has ended the Secure Communities program, a lynchpin of the deportation system. The social and economic exclusions that helped to drive the implementation of de-nationalizing policy agendas are weakening. This opens the possibility for the emergence of a multi-ethnic, progressive policy majority in the United States that may be inclined toward challenging the political and economic commitments associated with neo-liberalism.

These political developments in the United States have been met by a very different set of political and economic developments within Mexico where a conjuncture of neo-liberal economic restructuring and partial democratization of the state has resulted in the emergence of a deeply fractured political order. We can think about these points with respect to the growing power of drug cartels in Mexico. During the era of PRI dominance, from 1930 to 1980, drug cartels were, like other social actors, such as the peasant sector and the workers' movement, subject to corporatist control through the party and the state (Watt and Zepeda, 2012). The army and the PRI allocated "plazas" to drug trafficking groups within particular jurisdictions in exchange for protection money. These drug traffickers received protection from the state while unrecognized groups were subject to judicial prosecution and extra-judicial violence.

In the 1980s, drug trafficking networks linking Colombia to the United States shifted from the Caribbean and Florida to Mexico. This was due, in part, to U.S. interdiction policies in Florida and the Caribbean, but also to economic neo-liberalization in Mexico. Starting with the debt crisis of 1982, economic neo-liberalization dismantled Mexico's system of import substitution industrialization and expelled workers from the economic sectors that had been integral to this model of development – such as the ejidos, protected industries, and the public sector. Structural adjustment policies were implemented in the context of demands for fiscal austerity. At the very moment when the national economy was being dismantled, the capacity of the state to maintain corporatist control over Mexican society was also weakening. In the context of these changes, the rapid expansion of border industrialization and the concomitant growth of intrafirm trade between Mexico and the United States created openings for the expansion of drug trafficking networks through Mexico.

Cartel revenues are estimated to be between \$20 and \$50 billion per year. The upper range of this estimate signifies revenues larger than Mexico's next two largest export earners – remittances and oil – combined (Hill and Zepeda, 2012: 169). The expansion of drug trafficking and the weakening of the state reversed the historical relationship between the two. Beginning in the 1990s, the drug cartels exerted direct control over the state in various jurisdictions and indirectly by means of corruption extending to the highest levels of the state.

The regional policy response to these developments has been the Merida Initiative – the provision of U.S. military and foreign aid oriented toward strengthening the military, police, and judicial sinews of the Mexican state. These policies are a reflection of U.S. strategic interests, which consist of maintaining economic liberalization while managing the security risks that go along with it. As Ashby (2014) observes, taking on transnational organized crime is a useful pretext for regionalizing security cooperation. Realistically, the objective of Merida is not the elimination of narco-trafficking. The Mexican state under the rule of the Partido de Accion Nacional (PAN) has sought to accommodate the most powerful drug cartels – most significantly, the Juarez Cartel (Hill and Zepeda, 2012: 141-79). While under President Calderon (2006-2012), the Mexican military intensified its counter-drug operations, these policies have not addressed money laundering operations from which elites in both Mexico and the United States have benefited.

There is, in this respect, a class dimension to the Merida led fight against transnational criminal organizations. Merida is not so different from Plan Colombia, which provided billions in military aid to the Colombian state. Widely lauded as a foreign policy success, Plan Colombia succeeded not in eliminating narco-trafficking, but in strengthening the Colombia as an anchor state for the projection of U.S. military and economic influence into Latin America. One should note, however, that the relative security established by Plan Colombia has created conditions in which democratic forces in Colombian civil society can challenge conservative control over the Colombian state

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(Hough, 2015). One might hope for a similar outcome in Mexico, but this should not distract attention from the central point of U.S. security policy in both of these countries, which is to stabilize processes of neo-liberalization by means ordering societies that have been disordered by neoliberal economic restructuring. As Rogers (2010) has remarked, such policies are tantamount to keeping the lid on existing conflicts in a world where the revolution of rising expectations associated with the post-World War Two development project has been replaced by the revolution of frustrated expectations stemming from global neo-liberalization.

Keeping the lid on existing conflicts may, in fact, prove to be a tall order given not only the economic inequalities associated with neo-liberalism, but also with the destabilizing impacts of climate change. These are emerging most rapidly within the global south. Societies of the global south, beset with political conflict and massive economic dislocation, are unlikely to be able to adapt effectively to the challenges of climate change. This is the situation of Mexico. In Parenti's words,

A land of billionaires and hungry masses, of drought and flood, whose social structure and institutions are infected with the gangrene of narco-corruption, is not one that can adapt to rising sea levels, extreme weather, declining crop yields and the mass migrations these processes will set into motion (2011: 205).

While the Merida Initiative could establish political space for the mobilization of democratic forces in Mexico, processes of climate change are also likely to intensify the provision of border security on the part of the United States. These responses may be countered by the emergence of progressive political coalitions in the United States, but deeply entrenched conceptions of the U.S. as an exceptional space that must be secured from undesirable foreign elements is also likely to remain strong, perhaps even overpowering. In this setting, it will be difficult for the United States to maintain its core interest of securing its economic integration with Mexico. The ultimate fate of NAFTA might be that the forces it has unleashed – mass migrations and transnational organized crime – are, in world beset with climate change, too powerful and destabilizing to contain.

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