

EXCERPTED FROM

# North America 2.0: Forging a Continental Future

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# Introduction

*Alan Bersin and Tom Long*

**The construction of North America has often happened off-stage, while the critics of integration and regionalism occupied the lime-light. Steadily over the years, businesses and bureaucrats, migrants and border residents, have forged robust ties among Canada, Mexico, and the United States. During the last thirty years, these connections have converted the region into an economic and trading giant. North Americans' relations with one another are economic and social—from commerce to cousins, from trade to *tíos*. These networks increasingly extend into the Caribbean and Central America. As a result of these myriad interconnections, we now live—and governments and firms operate—on a continent characterized by interdependences, transnational flows, and a shared position in the world.**

Despite the reality of our multifaceted relations, the *idea* of North America remains contested and, frankly, little loved in the region's politics. North America's evolution during some three decades has been characterized by seemingly contradictory dynamics: on the one hand, there is a regional connectedness that touches millions of lives daily; on the other, few voices trumpet the benefits of "the North American idea" and many attack it.<sup>1</sup> Although such fierce debates are as old as the region itself, in recent years they took on a sharper and more polarized edge, especially in the United States. These contradictions and concerns are part of the North American fabric. It is futile to wish them away or pin them to a single political figure. Instead, any pragmatic vision of a continental future must embrace the region's differences and paradoxes while recognizing and building on the astounding interaction that already exists.

This volume aspires to stoke debate on just what such a pragmatic vision should encompass, with a focus on North America's shared challenges, its potential common agenda, and the region's place in a changing world. In the chapters that follow, North American experts from government, the private sector, civil society, and academia will assess the challenges the region faces across sixteen different issues. They have been tasked with identifying where cooperation is necessary and possible, what might be gained by working together, and where we might fashion a vision of shared, North American regional interests, if we take a step back to gain greater perspective.

Both in national policy debates and on the world stage, North America often seems to be something of an also-ran, rarely topping the agenda. Despite that, we believe that North America must be a crucial element in how policymakers respond to the current moment's risks and opportunities. As the Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. heads of state gather for the 2022 North American Leaders Summit (NALS), they must grapple with the region's place at an unprecedented juncture: economic uncertainties in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, political challenges to democracy in the United States and Mexico as elsewhere in the world, the hardening of geopolitical fault lines, and the aftershocks of the contentious renegotiation of North America's charter accord.

Although the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) introduced some welcome updates, the contentious process—and some features of the new accord itself—have heightened concerns from U.S. neighbors north and south about their vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the unpredictable Gulliver next door. The new agreement, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), is often dubbed “NAFTA 2.0.”<sup>2</sup> This update hardly exhausted the possibilities for regional cooperation. There is a need to go further, with an expansive, albeit pragmatic, vision for *North America 2.0*. To lay the groundwork for such a vision, this volume returns to basic issues and raises fundamental questions. Some thirty years after “NAFTA 1.0,” what characterizes our shared region today? More importantly, what sort of region can advance our shared interests and well-being for the next generations?

## **Rethinking an Innovative Region**

When NAFTA catalyzed North American integration in the 1990s, the trade pact embodied a then-pathbreaking approach to international regionalism.<sup>3</sup> Three decades later, NAFTA remains notable for how it connected disparate economies and remade a region that had long been associated narrowly with the United States and Canada. NAFTA achieved its intended goals of

massively boosting trade and creating a friendly environment for U.S. and Canadian investment, especially in Mexico. Over this period, NAFTA fostered the creation of a trilateral business community; in turn, these businesses built a shared continental production platform of imposing stature and resilience.<sup>4</sup> Trade among the three countries now exceeds \$1.2 trillion annually, but the commercial connections are more multifaceted than even that enormous figure suggests. It has become commonplace to observe that the three countries do not so much trade with one another as make things together, especially in automobile manufacturing.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this success, NAFTA failed to generate broader social or governance results at a regional level.<sup>6</sup> In some ways, this was unexpected. Theories of regional economic interdependence expected that trade ties, especially complex networks like those in North America, should spur greater political and technical cooperation. For the most part, that “spillover” has not occurred.<sup>7</sup> In North America, these limitations were at least partly by design. NAFTA functioned more like a contract to structure economic relations than an invitation to build regional international organizations like those in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning, the integration of North America reflected the deep divisions within, and among, the countries of the region. Born of diverse histories and cultures, Canada, Mexico, and the United States possess strong attachments to their own national identities and robust ideas of sovereignty. In the early 1990s, region-building in North America responded to a vision of economic opportunity, not to reflections on how to escape the scourge of internecine war, as in Europe. This North American approach facilitated economic expansion, especially from 1994 until 2001, while preserving national autonomy as a guiding principle.<sup>9</sup>

The North American approach has been substantially less apt when the region is faced with non-economic transnational challenges, or when it needs to adjust to a changing global environment. As a result, dual bilateralism has remained the default means of responding to many issues, perhaps because bilateral forms of cooperation were familiar and often sufficed. Absence of political will, nonetheless, has been the region’s bane, as emphasized by Richard Sanders.<sup>10</sup> Unlike in many other world regions, few politicians in Canada, Mexico and the United States want to be branded as North American enthusiasts at home or abroad. Notably, North America’s integration was slowed, if not derailed, by a series of external shocks and by the rise of China as the world’s predominant manufacturing exporter.<sup>11</sup> North America’s inattention to governance, however, left the region without a coherent agenda, or clear advocates in times of domestic political polarization to counter this development in a coordinated, much less united fashion.

To the contrary, the readily exploitable sensitivities associated with three distinct sovereignties and histories, three cultures and many languages,

and three currencies, have often converted the vision of North America into a fearful specter and a regular target of populist agitation and demagoguery. Regional camaraderie in North America has long been episodic, but it reached a nadir recently as a result of Trump Administration threats and tariffs. Even usually amicable U.S.-Canadian relations were soured by unprecedentedly bitter presidential-prime ministerial relations. Politically, North America remains a piñata in ready reach, even as the continental production platform keeps showering significant economic benefits.

Now, as a result of the NAFTA renegotiations, a complete lack of trilateral camaraderie appears to have been institutionalized. Fifteen years ago, an academic observer of regionalism referred to North America as “a region that dares not speak its name.”<sup>12</sup> That quip was prescient, as “North America” has now been dropped from the name of the region’s central pact. Even though none of the signatories of “NAFTA 2.0” agree on what to call the agreement (USMCA in the United States, TMEC in Mexico and CUSMA/ACEUM in Canada), they did agree that it is not “North America.” After a quarter-century of continuity under NAFTA, “North America” no longer even appears on the map of the world’s regional economic accords.

So, what is North America’s place in the world today? The core question in a world, increasingly, of fragmented regions is whether North America will be more than a collection of countries united by the gravitational pull of the U.S. market, unevenly stitched together by productive regional value chains. It would be a loss for all countries involved if the frustrations of the past years led leaders to downgrade the economic and political importance of the region, even as regions are becoming a more prominent feature of global politics. Yet, few “North American leaders” exist to promote their region abroad with the result that the rest of the world does not engage with North America as a cohesive region. This severely devalues the potential value of the brand.

Set on the world stage, the region possesses a dazzling array of assets that confer on it unmatched comparative global advantages. As a continental and maritime bloc, centered around its core of Canada, Mexico, and the United States, the broader North American region boasts a half billion people with distinctly favorable demographics; economies that generate 30% of global goods and services; shared production platforms with trillion-dollar annual trade flows accounting for 17% of global commerce; a shared (if imperfect and now constantly threatened) commitment to democracy, rule of law and demilitarized borders; the prospect for total energy independence; a huge natural resource base, including enormous navigable rivers and copious amounts of arable land; and unimpeded access to the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans.

Despite these assets—and in contrast to Europe and other regions—North America has arisen largely despite official inaction and indiffer-

ence.<sup>13</sup> The European Union, building on Jean Monnet’s post-WWII vision, has been led by government and bureaucracy from the outset. African, Asian, and Latin American regionalism has been driven by the converging views and commitments of heads of state. But after NAFTA created a predictable and permissive environment, North America has been built mostly from the bottom-up. As a result, demographic, business, professional, and cultural ties among the United States, Canada, and Mexico, especially, are deep, varied, and strong. Although “NAFTA” was long an unpopular symbol in domestic politics, the three publics once again are plainly supportive of free trade with their neighbors;<sup>14</sup> and there is evidence that most Canadians, Mexicans, and U.S. respondents also favor cooperation in some other limited spheres, as well.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, relations between and among their governments remain sporadically conflict-ridden and counterproductive. Consistent attention from the top is scarce. Too often, there has been little vision or strategy for cooperative problem-solving to achieve shared goals in North America. Notwithstanding some incremental cooperation—mostly in parallel bilateral border management arrangements—more must be accomplished to address significant challenges at a regional level: transnational illicit markets, insecurity, disparities in productivity and wages, and regional and national inequalities. Nor has there been sustained cooperation to address conditions in the countries and territories of their extended neighborhood—Central America and the Caribbean—though conditions in those nearby countries often have important consequences for the societies, economies, labor markets, welfare, culture, and politics of the three core countries themselves.<sup>16</sup>

## **Crisis and Opportunity**

Thirty years ago, NAFTA offered an innovative vision of regional cooperation and remade North America as a trilateral region. The USMCA did not dramatically alter this, albeit preserving the economic basis of the region amidst a hostile environment. At first glance, this seems to have settled the issue. However, we suggest it did not; instead, North America faces crises and opportunities that go beyond the USMCA. The challenge for policymakers—and this volume—then, is less to rethink the USMCA than to think more seriously, systematically, and regionally about the gamut of shared challenges—many omitted by design from the agreement. We hope the reflections and suggestions on these problems presented here may suggest new forms of regional cooperation, once again redefining North America and its place in the world.

At a global level, now may be a propitious time to reassess strategy for getting North America the attention it deserves. The accelerating splintering



of the last generation's world order is evident in the re-emergence of great power rivalry—highlighted by Russian aggression in Ukraine and China's pivot away from the West. Strategically, this has led to a renewed emphasis on cooperation through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); economically, similar forces revitalize the strategic “gloeonomic” logic for North America. Given the ramifications of conflict and climate for energy markets, the promise of North America should be even clearer.

These developments, coming on top of a stubborn pandemic, have thrown global supply chains into disarray and ignited a frantic search for supply chain visibility among government regulators and the regulated private sector alike. These trends could produce a rush to nearshore production capacities, at least in select industries.<sup>17</sup> At the extreme, this could end the model of “Globalization 1.0;” at the least, considerations of political risk and resilience will now temper firms' searches for efficiency and savings. Firms and their value chains are likely to retain far-flung constellations, but these shifts open opportunities to realign production networks. As the explosion of trade in the years following NAFTA suggests, these realignments will be led by the private sector—but only if governments help create the right context through policy environments and strategic investments.

Given the region's relative stability, enormous assets, and the benefits of proximity, relations among the United States, Canada, and Mexico are even more important in periods of international disarray and transition which now appear likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. Flows north and south among them are arguably more important now than the border lines running east and west between them. These facts have created a relationship between the United States and each of Canada and Mexico that is neither international in a traditional sense, nor classically domestic in light of the separate sovereignties involved. Instead, in a phrase coined by Bayless Manning, the relationship is more fittingly characterized as “intermestic.”<sup>18</sup> What drives these relationships is not regions of shared sovereignty as in the European Union, but rather shared markets and borders, leading to interlocking societies and challenges.

By extension and for these reasons, the region's three large countries should increasingly view North America in the context of its Central American and Caribbean neighborhood. Large and small, all of these states matter deeply to one another in terms of investment and trade in goods and services. Their societies are connected by the movement—inadequately coordinated—of people, the commerce in goods and services, and the exchange of ideas and culture. They are also vital for coping with public health challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>19</sup> They face many similar and interlinked consequences of climate change, including managing and conserving water and other resources. They have shared stakes in protecting continental security—not only from military or terrorist attacks,

but in terms of citizen security. More broadly, North America's security cooperation should include public health, responding to natural disasters, cybersecurity, staunching the spread of small arms, curtailing violence, and confronting human and narcotics trafficking and organized crime.

The three key North American countries are very closely linked but at the same time are often divided by underlying and diverse demographic processes, involving decades of migration flows that have led 11 million Mexicans to make their homes in the United States, while 1.5 million people from the United States have moved to Mexico.<sup>20</sup> They are also tied together by integrated chains of economic production, interrelated labor markets, vast commerce and investment, and active political and social movement and currents that transcend borders and exert influence in multiple directions. All these forces interact to produce cooperation and discord, conflicts and positive problem-solving, significant challenges and potential cooperative solutions. But these trends are not the subject of much in-depth consideration in any of the three countries' governments nor their centers of research, and even less are they being actively considered on a region-wide basis.

## Grand Designs and Critical Details

What, then, should "North America 2.0" look like? This is not the first volume to ask that question. Earlier in this century, several thinkers and leaders in Canada, Mexico, and the United States pointed to the advantages of a "North American Community," variously defined. For example, Robert A. Pastor's seminal 2011 book, *The North American Idea*, broke new ground on rethinking the key issues that both bind and divide the three countries. Pastor argued that regional relationships must change so that challenges can be addressed in new, cooperative ways to the benefit of societies in the three countries.<sup>21</sup>

Proceeding from a similar song sheet, the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) collaborated with Canadian and Mexican counterparts to organize a 2005 task force on "Building a North American Community." The resulting report included an ambitious proposal for the establishment of an economic and security community with a common external tariff and an outer security perimeter. But ten years later, it was clear that little progress had made toward realizing this vision—in fact, forces of opposition had become more vocal and visible in response to the Security and Prosperity Partnership.<sup>22</sup> In 2014, CFR organized a second task force. Its report, "North America: Time for a New Focus," urged policymakers in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, to "elevate and prioritize the North American relationship." It recommended concrete steps in four pivotal areas: energy security; economic competitiveness; continental security; and

comprehensive immigration reform to facilitate labor mobility.<sup>23</sup> In line with these efforts, initiatives like the North American Forum sought to keep proposals for the region's future on the agenda through more regular exchanges. The Stanford University-based Forum—jointly chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, former Mexican Finance Minister Pedro Aspe, and former Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed—convened periodic meetings of leading figures to discuss North America's evolving ties, challenges, and potential.<sup>24</sup>

However, proposals from Pastor and CFR ran into an increasingly adverse political context. There was little appetite from then-Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Mexico was supportive but often preoccupied with rising insecurity at home. Most evidently, the demonization of North America took center stage in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Many involved with regional efforts rallied support for North America, but given the focus on playing defense, there was little space for offering ambitious new visions. Somewhat counterintuitively, the fact that the renegotiation of NAFTA into the USMCA was concluded under nationalist, quasi-populist presidents in both United States and Mexico, underscores that North American economic integration is here to stay. The USMCA was eventually supported by both Trump and a bipartisan group in Congress, somewhat defanging the “NAFTA issue” in U.S. politics. Although Canada and Mexico remain concerned about nationalist backlash from their largest economic partner, both countries have more pro-regionalist orientations that may extend beyond trade and investment. If the political constraints have eased, the strategic case for North American production, energy, and cooperation has only gained force. The reconvening of NALS in 2021 after a five-year hiatus, and its renewal for late 2022, should be seized as an opportunity to bring a North American perspective to more issues among and beyond Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

It is with this backdrop that the current volume—*North America 2.0: Forging a Continental Future*—was prepared and is presented. This edited volume offers an inventory of issues where North American cooperation is needed and/or could offer substantial benefits. To make sure that NALS 2022 is more than a “Three Amigos” photo opportunity, the governments should initiate in its aftermath a series of sustained issue-driven ministerial and cabinet dialogues, inviting representatives from countries beyond Canada, Mexico, and the United States where appropriate.

## Volume Overview

What should that inventory of issues for North American leaders include? Although by no means an exhaustive list, the volume covers sixteen different

issues across its three sections. The first section addresses *shared challenges* that already are salient topics on the North American agenda: migration, environment, trade, borders, emergencies and natural disasters, and energy. Although these issues are already commonly recognized as shared challenges much work on developing *shared responses* is still needed.

The second section emphasizes issues of growing importance that have not received the attention they need, at least as North American issues. This *agenda for a regional future includes* higher education, workforce development, anti-corruption, demographic change, and cybersecurity and critical infrastructure.

The third section takes a step back from the agenda for intra-North American cooperation, and instead looks at *North America in the world*. In examining this broader context, the volume explores North America in terms of global value chains, relations with the European Union, regional defense, the North American Arctic, and relations with China. This context of global change—especially geopolitical and environmental shifts—is likely to play an even greater role in shaping North America’s future than it has during the recent past. We turn to these sections and chapters in brief.

### *Section 1: Shared Challenges, Shared Responses*

**In Chapter 1, Andrew Selee and Carlos Heredia**—leading migration experts from the United States and Mexico—highlight important changes in the migration dynamics of North America. These shifts have led to greater identities of interest among Canada, Mexico, and the United States in some respects, which opens opportunities for greater cooperation for humanitarian and enforcement reasons in border management and to facilitate productivity-enhancing labor mobility. **In Chapter 2, trade-policy expert Inu Manak** assesses the challenges for building North America economic cooperation; in her view, the USMCA took one step forward, but two steps back by fragmenting important trade mechanisms along dual-bilateral lines. North America’s tremendous trade and production networks depend on efficient management on the continent’s borders. However, as **Chappell Lawson, Jorge Tello, and Jennifer Fox** observe in **Chapter 3**, border management has been hampered by excessive politicization and uneven capacity. Although many issues are bilateral by nature, the authors point to areas where North American consultations and cooperation could materially enhance security, reduce costs, and facilitate regional commerce. **In Chapter 4, Duncan Wood and Diego Marroquín Bitar** point to the paradigmatic shift in North America’s energy environment to one of regional energy abundance. This change, and the challenge of capitalizing on the region’s massive renewable energy potential, opens the door for new cooperation ranging from data-sharing to infrastructure planning and more. **In**

**Chapter 5**, researchers **Daniela Stevens and Mariana Sánchez Ramírez** emphasize the benefits of building greater environmental cooperation in North America; they note that while the USMCA took some preliminary steps in this direction, it fell far short in advancing North American cooperation on climate change.

Emergencies and disasters know no borders, and responses demand cooperation, argue **Juliette Kayyem, Daniel Jean, and Luis Felipe Puente Espinosa in Chapter 6**. Highlighting examples of successful cooperation—as well as a few notable failures—the authors call for a comprehensive North American Emergency Management Compact to address growing challenges that results from a changing climate and interwoven connections.

## *Section 2: Agendas for a Regional Future*

If the foregoing issues are essential to managing and improving North American cooperation today, there are many more topics that demand attention if we are to forge a continental future in which North America is more competitive, opens new frontiers in economics and governance, and improves the well-being of its citizens. We highlight several such issues in the second section.

The first two chapters emphasize the need for North American collaboration in education and skills development. In **Chapter 7**, addressing educational and skills needs from the perspective of workforce development, **Earl Anthony Wayne and Sergio M. Alcocer**, illustrate how skills gaps and maldistribution are holding back the region's competitive edge. Greater coordination among business, education, private sector, and governments—including, importantly, local and subnational authorities, is required to give workers the training they need for better, rewarding careers while also making employers more competitive. Rounding out the section on human capital, in **Chapter 8**, university leaders in the three countries, **Fernando León García, Sergio M. Alcocer, Taylor Eighmy and Santa J. Ono**, retrace the long—if often overlooked—history of cooperation in exchange, research, and innovation amongst North American universities. Cooperative endeavors have borne fruit, but they have had inconsistent support and inadequate connection with government and the private sector—gaining greater backing from these leaders could produce substantial benefits for the region.

In **Chapter 9**, Mexican scholars **Agustín Escobar Latapí, Víctor M. García-Guerrero, and Claudia Masferrer** assess current population patterns in North America to demonstrate the region's eminently positive demographic window—if it can enact the right policies—compared to competitor economies in Europe and China. Although often considered a domestic issue, corruption and anti-corruption have gained a place on the global stage. In **Chapter 10**, **Eric Miller & Alfonso López de la Osa**

**Escribano** explain the emergence of national and international efforts at curbing corruption in North America, and make the case for how the regional initiatives could complement them.

Increasing levels of interconnectedness among the half-billion North Americans have highlighted securing critical infrastructure, especially in cyber, energy, and finance. In **Chapter 11, Paul Stockton, Luisa Parraguez-Kobek, and Gaétan Houle** examine just how crucial these networks are to North America's well-being. Canada, Mexico, and the United States have each taken efforts to enhance the security of these grids, but they remain distinctly uneven. Coordination to respond to shared risks here plainly lags the level of integration—to each nation's peril.

### *Section 3: North America in the World*

From the outside, North America is rarely seen as a coherent region, let alone actor, in world politics. Few would even bother to echo for North America the famous, if apocryphal, cry of Henry Kissinger saying: “Whom do I call if I want to speak to Europe?”<sup>25</sup> But that does not mean that North America's international position is devalued, let alone irrelevant. In **Chapter 12, Karina Fernandez-Stark and Penny Bamber** place the North American economy into the emerging context of new global value chains—the interlinked production networks being established by the private sector. The region retains leadership in many of these, but its advantages have waned. Expanding those links to “greater North America” and beyond could restore that competitive edge and remedy the absence of cohesive North American positions in global economic talks where major actors continue to address Canada, Mexico, and the United States individually. **Michelle Egan** reviews the development of North American trade and regulatory relations with Europe in **Chapter 13**, suggesting that a more coordinated approach would permit the region to advance its own preferences and interests across the Atlantic. China, too, approaches the three North American economies and governments separately and rarely thinks about “North America” in its approach to the world, **Jorge Guajardo and Natalia Cote-Muñoz** argue in **Chapter 14**. China's rise has already affected North America's economic trajectory profoundly; now, increased geopolitical tensions are creating new possibilities and challenges for Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. leaders.

In **Chapter 15**, former high-ranking military commanders from the three countries, **Victor E. Renaurt, Thomas J. Lawson, and Carlos Ortega-Muñiz**, provide an overview of the evolution, challenges, and possibilities for trilateral defense cooperation to be considered in this context. Changes of another sort—to the global climate—are reshaping the North American Arctic. As **Jack Durkee** shows in **Chapter 16**, environmental

change is leading to unprecedented geopolitical competition in the far north as well as posing existential risks to indigenous communities and threats to longstanding patterns of U.S./Canadian cooperation there.

Although these issues deserve attention from North American heads of state and ministers as they gather in late 2022, building North America is not a challenge to be addressed in a single summit. Our contributors sketch out far-sighted agendas for how North America's leaders could advance over time an expanded agenda at trilateral, bilateral, and even subnational levels. The cooperative environment established in the early 1990s facilitated the creation of the region's trademark, shared and dynamic production networks during the decades to follow. Trade and investment remained dynamic, but many other opportunities for coordination were missed due to distraction and domestic politics. We acknowledge that the "deepening" of the regional project has stagnated in the face of internal and external challenges. Fortunately, however, at the same time, North America—a region possessed of tremendous natural and human resources—has already traveled a considerable distance in crucial directions. After several disruptive years, we submit that North America must redouble its cooperative efforts if it is to reposition itself in competitive global environment—and it may now find itself in a position to do so.

## Endnotes

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