

Security and Prosperity Three Countries, a Single Front

Leonardo Curzio*



Jim Young/Reuters

The Mexican Minister of the Interior, Carlos Abascal.

Many analysts of Mexico-U.S. relations predicted the bilateral agenda would be frozen after the September 11 crisis. The U.S. reaction to foreign aggression was vigorous and generally reaffirmed the most traditional national state. The United States, which had fostered the opening of markets to build the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and broadly supported and taken on board globalization on a world

scale, suddenly stepped on the brake and turned inward to mitigate the uncertainty that the exterior was causing it.

This reaction, understandable at first, should be learned as a historic lesson. Protecting North America with extreme security measures has prevented another attack on its territory, but since the first days, it began to create problems in other spheres like international trade, tourism and the transit of people. While it is true that potential terrorists have been limited in their actions, it is also true that life has become more

* Researcher at CISAN-UNAM.

difficult for economic actors in the region since both the guilty and the innocent have had to deal with an incipient, “stressed” security apparatus whose express mission was to turn the United States into a fortress.

Clearly, this new situation has had economic effects that would be interesting to measure in many countries with close ties to the United States, but the most affected have been its North American trade partners, Mexico and Canada. Many of the advances that NAFTA had spawned in terms of the exchange of goods and legitimate travel by the business community suddenly had to face a new generation of barriers and obstacles, from changes in passports to increasingly sophisticated controls of exports.

If until 2001, NAFTA members had worked to demolish the protectionist apparatus of the three economies, concern that security would become a new form of neo-protectionism soon manifested itself in Mexico City and Ottawa, and also—it is only fair to say—in the United States.

This also has to be seen as an important lesson because it shows the degree of integration of the three economies today. Despite the legitimate concern of the security apparatuses about averting another terrorist attack, the productive and business community had in fact appropriated the notion of North America. And, although everyone shared the security concerns, they at the same time claimed the right to keep open the North American economy. For productive chains like the auto industry, the borders that meant something like crossing the Tropic of Cancer soon became very difficult to cross. The nascent security guidelines, the massive control of cargo and the

increasingly detailed surveillance of travelers and their luggage made trade, the economy and tourism more difficult and expensive.

For the region’s three countries, the need to make the security agenda jibe with regional competitiveness became a priority. The rest of the world’s regions continued to integrate and exchange at more or less the same rate and North America faced the false dilemma of opting for security or prosperity.

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is not yet fully accepted by all. It has also not been easy to understand that in the North American security equation, the three states depend on each other, and it is in their common interest that the two agendas advance through understanding and mutual benefit. It is undeniable that sovereignty discourses continue to be widely disseminated and broadly accepted in society, but it is important to recognize that the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) opens the door to the principle of trilateralism (Mexico-United States-Canada) with a force unprecedented until now. We should

remember, for example, that Mexico and Canada negotiated their accords about intelligent borders with the United States separately.

Despite the mutual dependence among the three economies and the shared responsibility for preserving the security perimeter of our continent, it took four years to establish the basis for developing mechanisms to expeditiously harmonize security concerns that the three governments share and deal with separately (each in its own territory) and jointly (through common borders and flights) through the treaty for intelligent borders, plus certain customs regulations that have created more trust and made it possible for the flow of persons and goods to go faster.

Despite the differences that both Canada and Mexico had in their bilateral relations with the United States, the issues of prosperity and security would become the axis of the trilateral meeting held in Waco, Texas, in March 2005. Security and prosperity are now the minimum basis for common concerns contained in the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America.

Some scholars have criticized the SPP because it does not deal with issues like migration. Others have attacked it because it does not fully put forward the question of regional competitiveness in the long term *vis-à-vis* global competitors like India, China and the European Union. In any case, the Waco summit marked the beginning of the unfreezing of the growth agenda and its ranking on the same level of discourse as security, which, as has been commented, had “monopolized” bilateral and trilateral agendas in previous years. For some, this is a great deal, for others, very little. But the fact is that it is something.

In addition, it is a positive step because although only slightly and in a flexible way it continues the trend of institutionalizing relations more in the region and developing something like North American institutions in which mutual trust can grow, even if only as a reference point. The SPP is already an acronym recognized in diplomatic, specialized language.

The SPP does not imply a change in the trend; it is also a trilateral agenda with specific content and work schedules that are worthwhile examining in order to neither under- nor overestimate the instrument. The two fundamental chapters are prosperity and security. Let us look at what each contains separately.

PROSPERITY

The three countries have established an agenda with an eye toward 2007. In short, the SPP reflects the intent of having a trilateral regulatory framework for cooperation to make the norms and test and prerequisite development compatible for access to the North American market.

Outstanding among the joint actions for specific sectors is the development of a strategy for trade in steel, and the creation of an Automotive Council with a vision on a North American scale of the challenges that the issues of competitiveness, regulation and automotive security represent for the three countries, as well as their relationship to the global market.

Another of the common concerns is growing counterfeiting and piracy. The SPP's proposal is that each country fight fake and counterfeit products in their own territory and develop a coor-

dated strategy in 2006 to deal with this crime, which increasingly threatens intellectual property rights and global competitiveness in the region.

Of course, the accord mentions a series of issues that show the overlap of the economy and security, some of them related, for example, with the movement of goods or bio-protection. With regard to the latter, it should be pointed out that all the signers are determined to arrive at a specific accord to ensure the scrutiny and inspection of containers of dangerous materials and establish mechanisms for the mutual screening and inspection of laboratory

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tests for certain items, particularly chemical, agricultural and pharmaceutical products. The idea also exists of facilitating trade in medical instruments and natural products and establishing coordination mechanisms to protect public health and the consumer.

With regard to moving goods and services, the SPP contemplates reducing costs associated with rules of origin, improving e-commerce by expanding the use of electronic signatures and establishing processes to comply with the Telecommunications Commission of North America. In the sphere of finance, there are plans to increase screening

of money and capital transfers in the banking system, the stock market and insurance companies to avoid financing of illegal activities, particularly those related to terrorism. Another very important matter for Mexico is the trilateral determination to make electronic bank transfers, stock purchases and on-line insurance coverage more efficient through electronic means.

More generally—and this should not be underestimated—the heads of state of the three countries have charged a specialized group with presenting a ministerial report by the end of 2006 to identify the elements affecting North American competitiveness. This report may be just bureaucratic, but it could also be the starting point for something really important in terms of a common effort for dynamizing the three countries' economies. We shall see.

SECURITY

The SPP's most important chapter is about security. The dominant topics have to do with air space and the control of people's entries and exits.

With regard to air transport, trilateral efforts are based on the will to broaden and improve the use of air space. A good many companies of the sector, particularly in the United States, have been hard hit by the image of September 11 and the security measures they have been subjected to. Innumerable passengers worldwide avoid flying in U.S. carriers if at all possible, which has had a considerable impact.

There is also a proposal to work on a bilateral security accord for Mexico-U.S. commercial aviation and support border planning about exchange of in-

formation and communications. The central point of this effort is to revitalize the border transportation working group. The lack of security technology has created real bottlenecks at some border crossings. One of the priorities is to improve this situation in the short term; that is, by mid-2006 there should be an appreciable improvement. Other measures are being considered to facilitate the operation of freight carriers, such as intelligent transport systems and more SENTI or NEXUS lanes. The SPP puts forward the trilateral development of measures for inspecting cargo before it leaves a foreign port and standardizing the inspection and security rules and procedures in first ports of entry into North America.

Another important section is related to frequent travelers who for legitimate reasons (business, studies, family or tourism) must move through North America. In that sense, the three countries have committed themselves to standardizing the biometric elements of identity documents like passports, visas and residency cards to optimize the use of technological resources in fully identifying individuals, expediting entries and exits and reducing migratory officials' discretionary powers, which have invited abuses and excesses against honest citizens. Today, many U.S. entry points post a sign warning travelers not to joke about security matters, but there are also others reminding migration officials that they are the face of the United States and are expected to behave accordingly. Many Mexicans already have passports with multiple security features; standardization should conclude by 2008.

Bio-protection is also an issue of regional concern. Borders are useful for

many things, but in the case of North America, they are so porous and the enormous flow of goods and people across them make it impossible to ensure protection without joint efforts. A sanitary shield is of direct interest to the three countries, which have committed to a regional strategy to deal with natural or intentional threats to public health and the food and agricultural system. Natural disasters, particularly the devastating effects of Katrina, have thrown into relief the need for cooperation on this front and the benefits of understanding among partners and neighbors.

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The central concern in the chapter on security lies in appropriately coordinating actions for prevention and response to threats inside North America. To guarantee synchronized action in this effort, the SPP proposes to increase cooperation on matters related to the administration of justice. It is hoped that joint work by security agencies will make possible a smoother exchange of intelligence information with greater trust in order to successfully carry out regional operations for protection, prevention and the response to any threat. The exchange of information about "restricted nationalities" that enter into

any North American port, as well as relative convergence of visa policies about third countries (Brazil, for example) are key for the region's security.

The SPP also has other less developed chapters whose very mention should be considered a symptom of interest. First is energy. In theory, in June 2006, a meeting will be held to explore the possibilities for cooperation in this field. The second is the environment. In this chapter, the actions are more concrete and are linked to the reduction of sulphur emissions and developing a report on air quality in the region.

PERSPECTIVES

Just a couple of thoughts to conclude: the SPP can be seen as a turning point in North America after the 2001 crisis. Although security continues to dominate, other issues on the bilateral and trilateral agendas are now increasingly important for our leaders.

The SPP tends to make our problems trilateral, thus giving more presence to North America, turning it into something more than the sum of two intense bilateral relationships.

Lastly, the SPP tends to create greater trust among the three trade partners and to confirm that the region's global competitiveness does not depend on what each of the countries can do separately. In other words, the SPP incipiently recognizes that the great dispute over markets, jobs and investments is not going to be played out in North America, but against other emerging regions of the world that are more integrated and in tune than we are. In short, faced with the great challenge of the twenty-first century, we are not on different sides. **NMM**