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## Transborder Paradiplomacy And Global Problems

### Introduction

The twenty-first century is characterized by a complex international system that presents new forms of governance in which subnational governments actively participate in international relations. Their aim is to defend their interests through different kinds of cooperation with their counterparts abroad to deal with global problems like climate change, migration, and security, among others.

These governments have discovered their economic clout amidst globalization. This has allowed them to participate in decision-making and the negotiation of international treaties. Therefore, they have been able to influence the positions taken by their federal governments around issues as important as free trade, security, migration, human rights, and the environment.

For example, these subnational entities, together with a series of other actors such as U.S. business chambers, played a decisive role in the outcome of the negotiations for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). When Donald Trump said that the best road was to abandon NAFTA, states like Texas and California and the American Chamber of Commerce warned him of the negative consequences of an eventual breakdown of the agreement.

Thus, subnational states conceive of themselves not only as a territory, but as a space where global flows of capital, individuals, goods, and services, among other things, move, creating networks and interconnecting. Because of all this, border states take on particular importance because they become the point of entry for international trade; and they store products and distribute them to the rest of the country.

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## The Economic Importance Of the Border Region

The U.S.-Mexico border region is made up of 10 states: California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas on the U.S. side; and Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas on the Mexican side. This region taken together constitutes the world's fifth-largest economy. It has almost 90 million inhabitants and is the center of economic, political, and trade activities among government and social actors. It becomes a space where people, goods, and services flow. But it also has a dark side, since illicit drugs and criminals also operate there; people are trafficked; and undocumented migration takes place. For this reason, cooperation by both sides of the border is indispensable.

Trade relations between Mexico and the United States are even more intense in the border region. The four U.S. states export 55 percent of all U.S. exports to Mexico. They also facilitate the storage and transportation of most Mexican exports to the United States (about 80 percent of the total), among other logistical services, to the four corners of our neighbor to the north's territory. All of this has been strengthened by NAFTA, and millions of jobs depend on this trade relationship, plus cross-border trade and tourism.<sup>1</sup>

So, one of the United States' most important relationships is with Mexico, its third trade partner after China and Canada; the second-largest destination for its exports;

**Figure 1. STATES OF THE MEXICO-U.S. BORDER REGION**



**Source:** César Huerta, "Zona fronteriza México," *Polemón*, <https://polemon.mx/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Zona-Fronteriza-México.png>.

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and the second-largest country of origin for its imports. Recent data show that Mexico is the main destination for the products from six states, four of them border states: California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Kansas, and Nebraska. In addition, it is the second destination in importance for 22 states of the Union, and the third for five more. That means that 33 out of the U.S.'s 50 states count Mexico among its three main trade partners.

It is important to underline that the four U.S. border states represent one-fourth of the whole country's economy, while the six Mexican states represent approximately one-third of Mexico's national economy. All together, the GDP of the region's 10 states is one of the world's largest, surpassed only by that of the United States as a whole, China, Germany, and Japan.

In addition, the United States' two richest states, California and Texas, share a border with Mexico. If California were a country, it would be the world's sixth-largest economy, and Texas, the fourteenth. Also, Mexico ranks first as the country of origin for imports by states like Texas, Arizona, Utah, Michigan, and Wisconsin. This is due to the integrated supply chains of several industries, first and foremost the auto industry. That is, Mexico plays an important role in the economic prosperity and the creation of tens of thousands of jobs in a large number of our neighbor's states.

## Transborder Paradiplomacy

### *Mexico-United States*

Paradiplomacy is carried out parallel to traditional diplomacy. The latter comes under the aegis of the central government, and the former, of the non-central governments. Diplomacy is defined as the practice of international relations conducted by representatives of states centering on a series of matters catalogued as high-level political

Figure 2. STATES OF THE U.S.-CANADIAN BORDER REGION



Source: *The Economist*, "Undefended No More. Violence Has Thickened the Once-Seamless Border between the US and Canada," November 8, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2014/11/08/undefended-no-more>.

issues, like security, war, and international treaties. Paradiplomacy runs parallel to this: the fundamental difference is that it is exercised by representatives of subnational states and focuses on low-level issues like education, science, technology, and the environment, among others, as long as they do not clash with the central government's diplomatic positions. Its systems for collaboration consist of cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding, not international treaties.

Regional transborder paradiplomacy is carried out by formal and informal institutional transborder contacts among neighboring subnational bodies. The relations between the border states have intensified through a series of forums, conferences, and cooperation schemes between the neighboring states from both countries. In this case, the border, more than a point of geographical division, is a place of interaction and cooperation to deal with common problems, including trade and flows of migrants. A large part of the trade relationship between Mexico and the United States occurs between border states and represents an essential part of the link between the two countries.

**More than barriers, the borders are being redefined as bridges or channels for communication and points of convergence. That is where subnational entities agree on and deploy different forms of cooperation.**

In some cases, relations between subnational governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico have become institutionalized. Economic and trade integration fostered by NAFTA increased transborder links among subnational states in the region, involving them in different issues, like trade, border security, migration, and environmental problems, among others.

Some border states facing common problems have created forums and permanent working groups; the four U.S. states and the six northern Mexican states meet periodically to negotiate cooperation agreements about a wide range of issues as varied as economic development, commercial ports, education, health, and security. In this context, a cooperation forum known as the Border Governors Conference (BGC) was formed.

The first BGC meeting was held in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in 1980. This formally opened up lines of communication among the 10 border states. Other similar examples of cooperation are the Arizona-Mexico Commission, the Border Legislative Conference, the New Mexico-Chihuahua and New Mexico-Sonora Border Commissions, and the Commission of the Californias.<sup>2</sup>

The most noteworthy effort is the Arizona-Mexico Commission, founded in 1958. For six decades, its work has helped build a transborder community that brings together the industrial and professional sectors, even though its mission also focuses on the Arizona governor's public policy priorities. Bi-national committees are part of this commission and serve as representatives of industrial,

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producing, social, and academic actors from the region. The commission also acts in concert with the Sonora-Arizona Commission headquartered in Hermosillo.

The Arizona-Mexico Commission recognizes the importance of international relations for an increasingly interconnected economic and social global world. Arizona's shared border with Mexico offers the opportunity for coming to agreements on cooperation to achieve common goals and create an environment in the region that will attract international investment.

### *The United States and Canada*

The U.S.-Canadian border is the site of different mechanisms and agreements for cooperation between Canadian provinces and the northern U.S. border states. A greater number of transborder organizations exist here also; for example, the Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers (NEG/ECP); the Conference of Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, the Idaho-Alberta Task Force, the Montana-Alberta Bilateral Advisory Council, the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region, and the annual meeting of Canada's Western Premiers with the Western Governors Association.

That is, transborder paradiplomacy between Canada and the United States is even more intense than that which exists between Mexico and the United States. Central governments have not resolved the problems that reach beyond borders, like migration, security, the environment, and climate change, among others. The subnational states have emerged as international actors, becoming facilitators of solutions and proposals for the most serious, complex global problems.

Spaces have also been created so the subnational governments can develop and formulate alternatives, proposals, and forms of cooperation through transnational networks. They are increasingly significant centers for global interaction and exchange, gaining power and maneu-

vering room, while nation-states are losing efficiency. That is, the regions are taking on some of the roles that nation-states used to play.

In a context of free trade and integrated markets, borders are being redefined as bridges for communication more than as barriers. This presents economic opportunities, so the transborder regions benefit from the discussions and advances in the different forums that accompany paradiplomacy, as mentioned above. In these cases, the border becomes a space that encourages cooperation, congregating the subnational states of neighboring countries. That is, more than creating division, the border facilitates cooperation for dealing with a series of challenges and problems, and makes it possible to take advantage of development opportunities and economic prosperity.

### **Final Comments**

We have seen that paradiplomacy by subnational states is even more intense in border regions, as is the case in North America. More than barriers, the borders are being redefined as bridges or channels for communication and points of convergence. That is where subnational entities agree on and deploy different forms of cooperation with their neighbors, seeking solutions for security, migratory, and environment problems, as well as prosperity and economic development for both parties.

The border thus encourages trade and political and cultural interaction between public and private actors as well as social organizations in both countries, creating a specific form of regional governance. The economic relationship between Mexico and the United States is strong and is even more intense in the border states, although international cooperation between the subnational states of the United States and Canada continues to be in the forefront. ■■■

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**Notes**

1 Christopher Wilson, "A NAFTA Update for the Border Region," August 18, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/nafta-update-for-the-border-region>, accessed in November 2018.

2 Samuel Lucas McMillan, *The Involvement of State Governments in U.S. Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Earl H. Fry, "The Role of U.S. State Governments in International Relations, 1980-2015," *International Negotiation* vol. 22, no. 2 (2017), pp. 205-238.