Re-Building a Complex Partnership:

The Outlook for U.S.-Mexico Relations under the Biden Administration

Wilson Center
MEXICO INSTITUTE

January 2021

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A U.S.-Mexico Economic Agenda for Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth

Key Policy Recommendations

The challenges before the U.S. and Mexican economies are large and complex.

- Create an institution to coordinate across agencies and maintain leadership focus on the bilateral economic relationship. The HLED and Binational Commission offer potential models.
- Build out an agenda for competitiveness and inclusive growth that includes support for small businesses, entrepreneurs, innovation, education, workforce development, research, transportation infrastructure, and sustainability.
- Align essential industries and create a plan for coordinated emergency supply chain management.
- Develop a plan to safely reopen the U.S.-Mexico border to non-essential travel and coordinate to ensure the smooth implementation of air-travel safety measures.
- Prioritize cooperation over dispute resolution in the implementation of the labor side agreement.
- Take full advantage of the committees on competitiveness, trade facilitation, and other important economic issues created under the USMCA to deepen institutionalized cooperation.
- Launch a North American investment attraction initiative, focusing first on auto companies that need to comply with the more strict USMCA rules of origin.
- The U.S. and Mexico should task their consular networks with running a stakeholder engagement strategy to create an open flow of information and ideas between grassroots stakeholders and the high-level dialogue coordinating the bilateral economic agenda.
- Support binational economic development initiatives in the border region.

"I know the forces that divide us are deep and they are real."
"With unity we can do great things. Important things."

-President Joe Biden, January 20, 2021

Introduction[1]

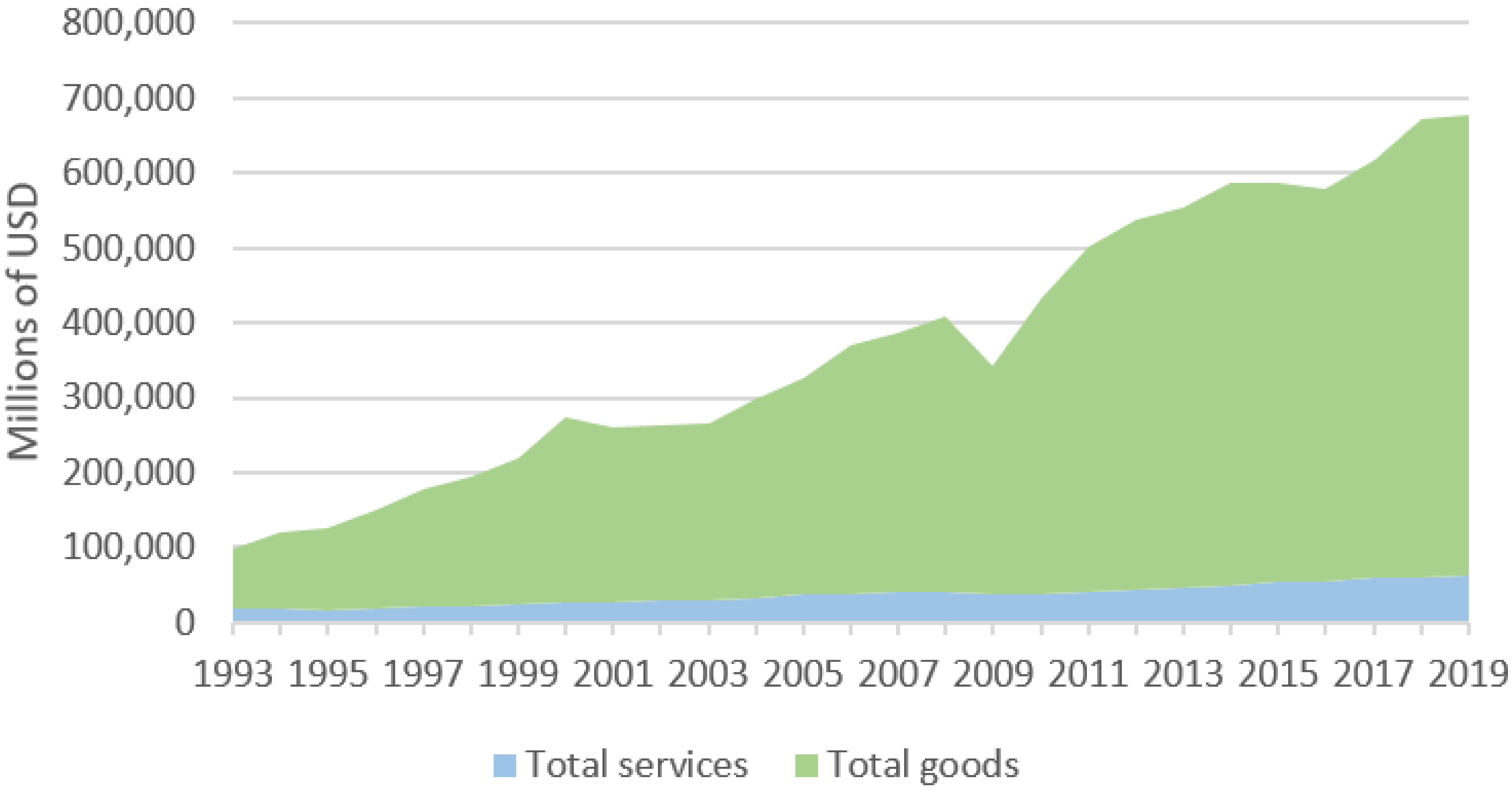
The challenges before the U.S. and Mexican economies are large and complex. Both nations face job loss, recession, and growing poverty as a result of COVID-19. The recession will only reinforce structural inequality that tears at the fabric of each country and our region as a whole. Global competition is on the rise, and the United States and Mexico have each struggled with the disruption caused by China's emergence as a global economic power. But if the challenges are complex, the argument for U.S.-Mexico cooperation is simple. As neighbors and trading partners, our economies are deeply integrated. We are connected, and we are stronger and more competitive for it. It is tempting to look inward during times of crisis, but our interdependence demands that we instead work together to meet our shared challenges.

To do so, the United States and Mexico must define an economic agenda that resonates with the moment. Issues of trade, investment, and competitiveness have, over the past three decades, come to characterize bilateral economic relations. While those issues remain extremely important and demand continued attention, they are focused primarily on growth rather than equity. Leaving distributional issues to be resolved domestically led to the perception that the U.S.-Mexico economic agenda was by and for elites. The agenda needs to be rebalanced to better respond to the economic insecurity felt by so many Mexicans and Americans. This should be achieved not by taking attention away from trade, investment, and competitiveness, but by ensuring all Mexicans and all Americans share in the prosperity created by the North American partnership. We must seek ways to cooperatively achieve inclusive growth across the region, giving prominence to issues of worker rights and training; small business participation in trade; sustainable economic development; and education and research partnership. This article seeks to construct the outlines of such an agenda, a U.S.-Mexico agenda for competitiveness and inclusive growth.

Context

The politics of partnership have shifted significantly in recent years, and they will further do so as President Biden takes office. With the implementation of NAFTA in 1994 began an era of deepened economic integration and growing economic cooperation. Trade volumes skyrocketed (See Figure 1 below) and companies invested billions of dollars in building out a North American manufacturing platform, with parts and materials whizzing back and forth across continental borders as finished products were made.[2] Following the ambitious NAFTA negotiations, policymakers took a backseat for several years while businesses took the lead in growing their productive partnerships across the region. The terrorist attacks of 2001 created challenges to regional integration, and policymakers spent the greater part of the first decade of the 2000s building systems to allow the efficient movement of goods and people across the region while putting in place more robust homeland security systems.

Figure 1. U.S.-Mexico Trade (1993-2019)



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; OECD.

Despite its success in growing trade and investment, NAFTA's reputation suffered as small-scale Mexican farmers and U.S. manufacturing workers were squeezed by technological advances and increased global competition. The Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, which was created in 2005 with the intention of deepening regional cooperation, became fodder for conspiracy theories about a non-existent plot to build a North American version of the European Union and fizzled out in the following years. Policymakers saw the need for and great value in further efforts to enhance cooperation and boost competitiveness, but they favored quiet bureaucratic dialogue over bold and ambitious initiatives. In 2013, the United States and Mexico created the High Level Economic Dialogue (HLED), which brought together cabinet leaders in both countries to drive progress across a wide range of economic issues, including educational and research partnership; energy integration; innovation and entrepreneurship; and transportation and border infrastructure, among others. This more subdued approach produced results, such as the inauguration of the first new rail line to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in a century, but it did little to address the economic and social roots of skepticism towards NAFTA, regionalism, or trade and globalization more generally.

In 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump and his advisors tapped into the pervasive sense of economic insecurity, particularly across the industrial heartland of the United States, and developed a narrative linking it to immigration and trade policy with Mexico. With his election, the trajectory of ever-deepening economic partnership was paused. The North American Leaders' Summit, a tradition of bringing together the three North American heads of state, and the HLED both stopped. In the place of cordial diplomatic ties, a high stakes renegotiation of NAFTA, the foundation of regional economic cooperation, began. Despite tariffs on steel and aluminum and the threat of much greater tariffs linked to immigration and other issues, Mexico, in alliance with Canada and business groups across North America, managed to avoid the destruction of the free trade framework and negotiate a deal that modernized NAFTA. Arriving at the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) required some concessions on the part of Mexico, particularly regarding the auto sector, but the end product was one that restored certainty to North American producers, modernized many important aspects of NAFTA, and won the overwhelming support of lawmakers in all three countries.

Deep Trade and Manufacturing Integration Align Interests

The United States' and Mexican economies are tightly linked together. The relationship is large, with about a half-trillion dollars in bilateral trade annually, making Mexico the United States' second largest trading partner and the United States by far Mexico's largest. While China has regained its position as the largest trading partner of the United States, the United States and Mexico share depth of economic integration that makes the relationship quite distinct.

The United States and Mexico do not simply trade products, they build them together. Parts and materials whiz back and forth across the border as products are made. Barley grown in the northwest United States, for example, is shipped to Mexico, where it is brewed into beer, bottled, and shipped to consumers on both sides of the border. The auto industry is the most iconic example. The thousands of parts that come together to make a car in North America come (predominately) from across the continent, are built up into larger components like brake systems and transmissions, and then shipped to a plant for final assembly. This process routinely involves several shipments crossing the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders in a process designed to maximize the competitive advantages of each economy and to achieve a scale that makes the industry globally competitive. Today, about half of U.S.-Mexico trade is trade in inputs that fuel production on the other side of the border.

This deep productive integration binds the U.S. and Mexican economies in both the short and long term. The two economies have become synchronized, and tend to experience periods of growth and recession together. At a deeper level, their competitiveness is also linked. When one country undertakes an effort to improve its productivity, this translates into better priced inputs for the other, sharing the benefit. Problems, too, are often shared. Barriers to trade, whether in the form of tariffs or simply long wait-times for trucks to get through congested border crossings, have a magnified negative impact on the regional economy, since the production of a single car or beer can involve multiple border crossings.

In short, the U.S. and Mexican economies are so deeply connected that they tend to thrive or suffer together. It is therefore in the interest of both countries to work hard and together to promote the economic success of the entire region.

New Challenges, New Opportunities: A Focus on Inclusive Growth

With the election of President Joe Biden in the United States begins a new chapter in bilateral relations. It may be tempting to some to simply attempt to reconstruct the pre-2016 U.S.-Mexico economic agenda, and there are certainly many components of that agenda that should be recovered, but it would be a mistake to simply ignore the last four years. Instead, a forward looking agenda must be built that learns from past mistakes and responds to the needs of a region in economic distress as a result of COVID-19, fast-paced technological advance, and challenges related to structural inequality. Since the modern era of U.S.-Mexico economic relations began with NAFTA in the 1990s, the agenda has broadened and deepened, beginning with a narrow focus on trade and investment before expanding to become a broader competitiveness agenda that included issues like transportation infrastructure, energy integration, and educational exchange. Now, the regional economic agenda must once again expand to prioritize not only trade, investment, and competitiveness, but also inclusive growth.

Two relevant lessons can be learned from the upheaval in U.S.-Mexico economic relations and the election of anti-establishment presidents in the United States and Mexico in 2016 and 2018, respectively. First is that the cleavages in both of our societies, which certainly go beyond economics but have unquestionably important economic dimensions, are immense, damaging, and must be healed. President Biden's inaugural address focused heavily on this theme, as has President López Obrador throughout his campaign and presidency. Second, the U.S.-Mexico economic relationship cannot be allowed to be perceived as primarily for the benefit of big business and corporate elites. That perception was at the heart of the vulnerability of NAFTA, which faced existential risk in recent years before the USMCA was ratified. The inclusion of stronger labor and environmental provisions in the USMCA and the broad-based political support garnered by the agreement help protect it against a similar fate, but more can and should be done to ensure that the regional economic agenda responds to the needs of the average citizen across North America.

In relations between wealthy and poor countries, foreign aid can be an important tool to combat poverty, but Mexico's status as a middle-income, G-20 country makes aid the wrong way to think about U.S.-Mexico relations. So too does the fact that Mexico and the United States share the huge challenge of addressing inequality; both are among the top one-third of countries around the world in terms of income inequality.[3] Cooperation, rather, with the goal of simultaneously promoting competitiveness and a reduction of inequality in the region, provides a better framework for regional economic relations.

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Designing an inclusive growth agenda for U.S.-Mexico relations is not simple, as many of the traditional tools for addressing inequality—such as tax, education, and health policy—are predominately domestic, rather than international. Still, there are many ways to create a regional agenda that promotes equality and is more in line with the economic needs of average people. They will be developed in greater detail in the following section, but it is worth mentioning some of the key elements of such an agenda here to give a sense of what an inclusive growth agenda could look like. Small businesses and especially minority and women-owned businesses can be supported in beginning to find customers across the border. The two countries can work together to support workforce development programs that help workers prepare to take part in the fourth industrial revolution instead of being left behind in its wake. Educational and research partnerships can be strengthened, with a special goal of creating funded opportunities to ensure that Mexicans and Americans of all backgrounds have the opportunity to study and work together. Binational economic development can be supported in sister cities along the border. Most importantly, however, the agenda cannot be designed by Washington and Mexico City elites alone. It should be created in consultation with citizens, civil society groups, and businesses across the region. The United States and Mexico each maintain a broad network of consulates, and they could reach out to stakeholders across the region to listen to their needs and seek out their best ideas for U.S.-Mexico collaboration.

A U.S.-Mexico Agenda for Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth

The arrival of the Biden administration at a time when both countries face pandemic-induced recessions and after the ratification of the USMCA creates both a need and opportunity for a major update to the U.S.-Mexico economic agenda. This is not an opportunity to return to the old agenda but rather to design a new agenda that learns from mistakes in the past and responds to the significant economic challenges before both countries. This section develops the outline of a potential new agenda and offers recommendations regarding both its content and implementation, including details regarding COVID-19 response; the construction of an institutional architecture for the economic relationship; effectively implementing the USMCA; components of a competitiveness and inclusive growth strategy; and effective stakeholder outreach for the design and execution of the regional economic agenda.

COVID-19 Response

- **Align essential industries and create a plan for coordinated emergency supply chain management.**
- **Develop a plan to safely reopen the U.S.-Mexico border to non-essential travel and coordinate to ensure the smooth implementation of air-travel safety measures.**

COVID-19 has hit few countries harder than it has the United States and Mexico. According to Johns Hopkins data, as of January 2021 the United States had the third highest rate of COVID-19 deaths per capita in the world and Mexico the sixth highest.[4] Though not quite as bad in terms of global comparisons, the economic fallout of the virus has been quite significant in each country as well. The IMF estimates that the U.S. economy contracted by 4.3 percent in 2020 and the Mexican economy by 9 percent. Millions of citizens in both countries have lost their jobs and fallen into poverty.[5] With vaccine distribution underway, there is hope that 2021 will bring renewed growth to the region, but this depends in large part on the health and economic policy measures taken by both governments.

It is vitally important that everyone across the region has access to and confidence in the COVID-19 vaccine. With over a million Americans living in Mexico and a much larger number of Mexicans living in the United States, the two countries should work together to ensure smooth adequate access to vaccination and timely and accurate information about how to get vaccinated for non-citizens and those who do not speak the dominant language. Perhaps even more important is ensuring that everyone has good information about the reliability and safety of the vaccine, and there is much that can be done cooperatively to promote acceptance of the vaccine.

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COVID-19 has forced both the U.S. and Mexican governments to implement measures that create economic hardship in order to mitigate risk of transmission. They have, at times, closed factories, restricted border crossings, and put in place special requirements for travelers arriving by air. In each of these cases, the deep economic ties between the two countries have caused challenges. Especially early on in the pandemic, the fact that the United States and Mexico did not have an agreed upon list of essential industries to remain open even when other businesses were closed led to significant confusion and unnecessary levels of supply chain disruption. The problem was exacerbated by the large degree of state control of these orders in both countries. With the potential for renewed closures as case counts remain elevated (and to ensure better management during future emergencies), the federal and state officials from across North America should create a plan for essential industries and emergency supply chain management.

The U.S.-Mexico border has remained closed to non-essential travel for many months. Citing the devastating cost to their local economies, many leaders in border cities are calling on the federal governments to begin relaxing those restrictions. To do so, a plan needs to be developed to ensure that the ports of entry can safely handle increased traffic without compromising the health of travelers and border officials. Similarly, close coordination will be needed to ensure that healthcare providers and airports are ready to implement pandemic protocols, including those newly imposed by the Biden administration.

USMCA Implementation

- **Prioritize cooperation over dispute resolution in the implementation of the labor side agreement.**
- **Take full advantage of the committees on competitiveness, trade facilitation, and other important economic issues created under the USMCA to deepen institutionalized cooperation.**
- **Launch a North American investment attraction initiative, focusing first on auto companies that need to comply with the more strict USMCA rules of origin.**

After extensive negotiations, both among the nations of North America and within the United States between Democrats and Republicans, the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement took force in July 2020, replacing NAFTA. The USMCA represents three main things. It is, first and foremost, a continuation of the free trade framework put in place by NAFTA, and as such, its implementation represents the elimination of the uncertainty that prevailed while NAFTA was being renegotiated. This creates opportunities to attract investment to the region that might have been put on hold due to that uncertainty. Second, the USMCA modernized NAFTA. NAFTA was negotiated 25 years ago, before the age of the internet, cell phones, and e-commerce. By adding rules to manage and protect digital trade, in addition to various other modernizing measures, the USMCA will stimulate a new period of trade and investment growth in affected industries. Finally, the USMCA responded to the criticisms of NAFTA in the United States by seeking to “rebalance” trade, meaning easing the U.S. trade deficit and attracting manufacturing investment to the United States. The auto sector was the prime target, and new rules of origin encourage the use of more parts and materials from within North America and especially the higher wage countries of the United States and Canada. New rules regarding labor rights required Mexico to reform its labor law and may lead to increased wages in that country, a change that would make the United States relatively more attractive for manufacturing investment.

The rules are now set, but there is still much work to be done to implement the agreement and, even more importantly, to ensure that the agreement leads to greater economic opportunity in the region. The USMCA contains various dispute resolution mechanisms, including a new rapid response system to address potential labor rights violations in Mexico. It also has an investor-state dispute settlement, which was scaled back in general but remains robust in its coverage of the energy, telecoms, transportation, and infrastructure sectors. The dispute settlement mechanisms are an important tool to ensure that the governments of North America live up to their USMCA commitments, and several companies and civil society groups will seek to protect their interests and test the new systems in the coming years. It would be unwise, however, to allow the USMCA to become primarily a forum for dispute.

The USMCA should instead be a structure for cooperation. To ensure that this is the case, the governments of North America will need to work together and support one another through the implementation process. U.S. technical assistance to support Mexican implementation of its labor reform, which has been funded by the U.S. Congress, can serve as an important positive point of cooperation. The USMCA also establishes some 16 different committees to both implement rules and, importantly, to deepen regional cooperation on issues such as competitiveness and trade facilitation. These committees will only be as important and relevant as they are made to be by all three countries. The governments of North America should take full advantage of the committees created under the USMCA to deepen institutionalized cooperation on important economic issues. High-level officials should be named to and given supervision over the most important and promising of these working groups.

The USMCA strengthened the rules of origin for automobiles and a handful of other sectors, requiring the use of more parts and materials from within North America in order to receive the tariff benefits afforded by the agreement. Many auto companies already meet the 75 percent regional content requirement and 40-45 percent labor value content requirement (which states the specified percentage of cars and trucks must be made in factories in which workers earn at least 16$/hr.), but many do not. They can either invest in greater in-region production or not use the USMCA, meaning they would pay the 2.5 percent tariff on cars or 25 percent tariff on light trucks entering the United States. A concerted effort should be launched by the countries of North America to attract companies to invest in greater regional production. Select USA can lead such an effort for the United States. Now that ProMéxico has been disbanded, Mexico will have to rely on its foreign ministry to contribute to such an effort.

Strategy for Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth

- **Create an institution to coordinate across agencies and maintain leadership focus on the bilateral economic relationship. The HLED and Binational Commission offer potential models.**
- **Build out an agenda for competitiveness and inclusive growth that includes support for small businesses, entrepreneurs, innovation, education, workforce development, research, transportation infrastructure, and sustainability.**

The arrival of the Biden administration at a time when both countries face pandemic-induced recessions and after the ratification of the USMCA creates both a need and opportunity for a major update to the U.S.-Mexico economic agenda. This is not an opportunity to return to the old agenda but rather to design a new agenda that learns from mistakes in the past and responds to the significant economic challenges before both countries. This section develops the outline of a potential new agenda and offers recommendations regarding both its content and implementation, including details regarding COVID-19 response; the construction of an institutional architecture for the economic relationship; effectively implementing the USMCA; components of a competitiveness and inclusive growth strategy; and effective stakeholder outreach for the design and execution of the regional economic agenda.

As deeply interconnected neighbors, the U.S.-Mexico relationship spans a wide range of issues, many of which include elements traditionally conceived as within the realm of domestic politics. But when placed in the international realm, tasks can become more complicated. Something as simple as building a bridge —when it crosses the U.S.-Mexico border—requires the coordination of multiple federal agencies on both sides of the border in addition to the support of state and local governments. In this context, making progress requires both the day-to-day attention of technically competent bureaucrats and the leadership of high-level political appointees motivated to finish projects and cut ribbons on their watch. Implementing a strategy for competitiveness and inclusive growth for the region therefore requires effective institutions to manage the effort.

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In 2013, the United States and Mexico created just such an institution, the U.S.-Mexico High Level Economic Dialogue.[6] The agenda it implemented should be updated to reflect the priorities of the moment, but the institutional design, with cabinet-level leadership (and the leadership of then-Vice President Biden) and working groups with participation from across the relevant agencies, was sound. A new dialogue for competitiveness and inclusive growth should be created to manage the U.S.-Mexico economic agenda. Another potential model is a broader institution, along the lines of the Binational Commission, that has a portfolio going beyond the economic agenda.[7]

Workforce Development is a great example of the type of issue that should become part of a new economic agenda, as it can simultaneously strengthen competitiveness and inclusive growth. Both Mexico and the United States face major skills gaps—a misalignment of the skillset of the current workforce and the skills needed as new technologies continue to transform factories and offices across the region. This saps competitiveness from both countries, but is especially harmful to the workers who see their jobs and wages affected due to automation. Major efforts are needed across North America to teach workers new skills now, and as long as the pace of technological advance continues at its current rapid pace. This issue is, at least in certain respects, already a domestic priority for both the U.S. and Mexican governments. In Mexico, President López Obrador created a large youth internship program, *Jóvenes Contruyendo el Futuro*, which could feed into a potential binational internship program.[8] As a candidate, President Biden called for a $50 billion investment in worker training, with a focus on community college-business partnership and apprenticeships.[9] Ambassador Earl Anthony Wayne has developed a comprehensive set of policy proposals for North American cooperation on workforce development that touches on internships, apprenticeships, the huge potential of community colleges, the need for strong partnerships with business, and more.[10]

Though this list is far from comprehensive, an agenda for competitiveness and inclusive growth should also include the following items:

- Support for small businesses beginning to trade. The USMCA contains new *de minimis* rules, cutting the cost and paperwork burden for small shipments across North America, and a chapter dedicated to small business. Businesses that export tend to pay their workers higher wages, so efforts to support their early forays into international markets can have a big economic payoff.[11] Neighboring markets in North America are an obvious place to start, and a regional plan conforming with the USMCA commitments in this area should be implemented.
- The United States and Mexico should revamp and relaunch MUSEIC, the Mexico-United States Entrepreneurship and Innovation Council.[12] The two countries already build products together, but we should work together to support the development of new products and new businesses. A special focus should be placed on supporting women entrepreneurs and businesses led by historically disadvantaged groups in both countries.
- Student and research exchange can enhance mutual understanding across the border; build cross-cultural and language skills; and spur innovation. Building on previous work in this area, efforts are needed to engage universities, state governments and businesses in an effort to expand exchanges.[13]

- Both the U.S. and Mexican governments have ambitious plans to enhance transportation infrastructure. Given the massive flows of commerce and travel across the U.S.-Mexico border, attention should be given to understanding and aligning these plans. A special emphasis should be placed on eliminating bottlenecks along major trade corridors and modernizing heavily congested ports of entry. Along with needed infrastructure investments, technology and updated management processes can greatly improve efficiency of trade and travel across the border.
- Given the pressing nature of climate change, water scarcity along the U.S.-Mexico border, and sensitive ecosystems that the United States and Mexico share, economic development cannot be divorced from environmental sustainability. Instead, the two countries should work together to accelerate energy transitions (while supporting displaced energy industry workers), including through grid integration. They should support NADBank efforts to promote renewable energy, air quality, and green infrastructure in the border region, and work together to improve the management and quality of surface and ground water.

Stakeholder Outreach

- **The United States and Mexico should task their consular networks with running a stakeholder engagement strategy to create an open flow of information and ideas between grassroots stakeholders and the high-level dialogue coordinating the bilateral economic agenda.**
- **Support binational economic development initiatives in the border region.**

The U.S.-Mexico relationship is distinct in the degree that it impacts the day-to-day lives of Mexicans and Americans. We share 2,000 miles of border. Millions of citizens of each country live across the border as immigrants. Bilateral trade supports some 5 million jobs in the United States and millions more in Mexico.[14] We depend on one another to produce everything from medical equipment to food that we need to stay healthy. People across the region, therefore, need to have a say and take part in the relationship, and efforts are needed to expand the range of stakeholders that are engaged in designing and implementing the binational economic agenda. The United States and Mexico should task their consular networks with running a stakeholder engagement strategy to create an open flow of information and ideas between grassroots stakeholders and the high-level dialogue coordinating the bilateral economic agenda.

Border cities and border states have a special role to play in the relationship. The border economy is already dynamic and competitive, but its potential is even greater. With effective cross-border cooperation from all levels of government, the region's bilingual, bicultural workforce and the combination of U.S. and Mexican competitive strengths in close proximity can become an engine of growth for the region. The United States and Mexico should reach out to and support border region stakeholders in their efforts to strengthen cross-border economic development.[15,16] The federal governments should also support organizations of border region officials, including the Border Governors Conference, Border Mayors Association, and Border Legislative Conference to strengthen and, in some cases, restart their important binational work.

Endnotes

[1] I would like to thank the members of the UCSD U.S.-Mexico Forum 2025 working group on economic relations for our excellent dialogue, which contributed greatly to my thinking on this topic.

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[3] Mexico has the 16th highest (most unequal) Gini coefficient and the United States has the 35th highest Gini coefficient among the 110 countries for which data is available. Average values for the 2015-2018 period were calculated by the author using Gini index values as reported by the World Bank.

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