After NAFTA: Trade Integration and the Border Three Years On

Stephen P. Mumme and Donna Lybecker

Introduction

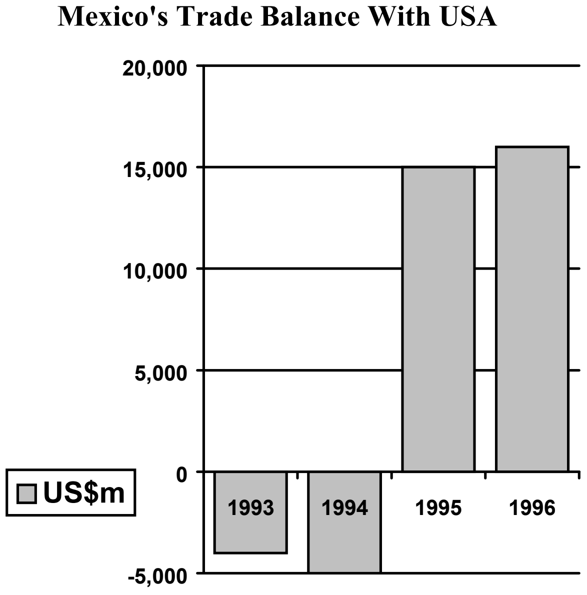
If aggregate trade is a measure of success, then the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has proven its worth. Three years after NAFTA took effect regional trade is dramatically up, reaching record levels in 1996. Volume is one thing, however, and beneficiaries are another. At this point, three years on, analysts still differ as to whether the new trade bloc has been successful in improving conditions within the trinational area or whether it has caused problems. While much has transpired in NAFTA's three-plus years of service, disentangling trade specific effects from other influential events remains complicated. Such evidence as exists suggests that neither the worst nor the best scenarios have transpired.

What is sure, however, is that the US–Mexican border region figures large in the overall debate as both site and symbol of NAFTA's promise and perversities. As the US Congress girds itself for the release of a mandated presidential review of NAFTA's effects in July, it is timely to take stock of developments across a range of issues to glimpse how this landmark trade agreement is reshaping the border's socio-economic and institutional landscape.

Border Commerce

Despite the buffeting sustained from the 1994 peso devaluation and the collapse of the Mexican economy, the three NAFTA economies are performing well three years after NAFTA, according to Tim O'Neill, Chief Economist of the Bank of Montreal.[1] The value of trade among the NAFTA countries has almost doubled its pre-pact level.

Trade growth, however, has not been equally distributed. The US trade deficit with Mexico increased substantially after NAFTA. Most analysts attribute this not just to NAFTA's easing of trade restrictions, but also to Mexico's economic recession which expanded US consumers' purchasing power while dramatically reducing that of Mexican consumers.[2]



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Retail sales have risen in the US–Mexico border area. Yet even within the border area, the effects of NAFTA and the Mexican economic crisis are felt differently in different cities. In El Paso, Texas, for example, store owners are still attracting Mexican customers. Retailers on the US side of the border have developed aggressive sales techniques, focusing on necessities. Similar retail stores on the other side of the border in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico do not have the capital to make these change and are thus losing local customers to El Paso.[3] A study published by the University of Texas at El Paso and Wilson & Co. Goodman Corporation reported that in 1996 Mexican consumers were still spending US$233m a year in El Paso.[4]

In contrast, sales in Laredo, Texas–Nuevo Laredo, Mexico did not remain on the US side of the border. Laredo, Texas retail merchants saw sales drop 25% at the end of 1995, while sales at similar stores in Nuevo Laredo rose 20% in the same period.[5] Consumers earning dollars frequented stores on the Mexican side of the border, where they experienced a huge increase in their buying power. Additionally, Laredo had the disadvantage of a US$50 tax-free import ceiling. This limiting of the value of purchases that can legally cross the border was implemented with NAFTA in January 1994.[6]

Maquiladoras

Border assembly is booming. Since NAFTA's signing, *maquiladora* jobs in Mexico have increased by around 60%, to over 900,000.[7] Last year alone the number of *maquilas* jumped 24%.[8] According to the Mexican Commerce Ministry figures, at the end of 1996 there was a total of 3,346 *maquiladoras* in Mexico,[9] with 69% of these situated on the border.[10]

Numbers of Maquiladoras and Total Workers

	Number	Border	Interior	Workers
1992	2,129	1,789	340	511,339
1993	2,143	1,773	370	546,588
1994	2,064	1,689	375	600,585
1995	2,241	1,786	455	680,209
1996	2,412	1,850	550	750,000
1997	3,473	2,362	605	901,149

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Today's *maquiladora* boom is a far cry from program expectations circa 1965.[11] Not only is the number of *maquiladoras* larger than expected, its diversity and geographic range were simply not anticipated in 1965. The aim in 1965 was to create jobs at the border, particularly for Mexican farm workers returning from the US. The program allowed *maquiladoras* to import material and components duty-free. Tariffs applied only on product value added.

NAFTA's elimination of quotas on goods such as textile exports to the US combined with Mexico's lower labour costs has encouraged producers to take advantage of the *maquiladora* program.[12] Just-in-Time distribution strategies make Mexico's border locations more attractive than locating them in the Caribbean or in Asia. Mexico's 1994 peso devaluation made *maquilas* even more attractive, holding down *maquila* wages and otherwise amplifying NAFTA's benefits to investors. Since 1994 major growth in *maquiladoras* has occurred in the automotive, textile, telecommunications, and electronic products and components sectors.[13]

At the national level, *maquiladoras* are an important part of the Mexican economy, contributing more than 30% of all manufacturing jobs.[14] Moreover, they attract much needed foreign capital and cut down on the soaring unemployment rate. Despite this, Mexican officials are also concerned with 'sovereignty' issues and the impact of foreign investment and market share on Mexico's political, social and economic framework.[15] In a move to acknowledge concerns of Mexico's manufacturers, last October President Ernesto Zedillo issued a decree prohibiting *maquiladoras* from competing in the domestic market.[16]

Even so, analysts expect more *maquilas* to locate in the interior owing to a mix of factors including improvements in transportation infrastructure, access to water, and lower wages and employee turnover rate.[17] Whether such trends will bear out predictions that NAFTA would discourage *maquiladora* growth on the border and encourage industrialisation in the Mexican heartland in the long run remains to be seen.[18]

Along the US side of the border debate on the *maquilas* largely centres on jobs – jobs lost, jobs gained. Nancy Boltinghouse, marketing director at the McAllen Development Corp., asserts that roughly 10.1 jobs are created or maintained for every *maquiladora* job created.[19] These jobs include everything from suppliers to retail and service firms and are largely located in the border region. Likewise, Hector Venegas, labour market analyst at the Texas Employment Commission, claims one-fifth of El Paso' economy is directly tied to manufacturing, mostly to the *maquilas* in Ciudad Juarez. *Maquilas* generate demand for support services, including accountants, attorneys, warehouses, parts suppliers and transportation.[20]

Trade Disputes

The persistence of a number of thorny trade disputes has dogged NAFTA's implementation. One of the largest controversies affecting the border area centres on agricultural commodities, particularly tomatoes, avocados, and citrus, produced mainly in the states that border Mexico.[21]

Under NAFTA agricultural tariffs are being phased out over a 15 year period. This, the longest period in the treaty, is an attempt to calm the public passion aroused by agricultural issues in both countries. Yet even under extended implementation concerns have been raised about backtracking.[22]

For example, recent US action restricting tomato imports is considered blatant protectionism by some analysts. For its part, the US accuses Mexican tomato producers of dumping. A pact reached in 1996 imposes a price floor on tomatoes comparable to that sought by Florida growers.[23] This pact technically falls outside the terms of NAFTA and is widely seen as discriminating in favour of the US.

Avocados also remain in dispute. Although the US has partially lifted an 83-year-old embargo on Mexican avocados, protective limitations still exist.[24] Restrictions such as limiting the areas where Mexican exporters can sell avocados during the winter months have been enacted to appease California producers.[25] Such measures smack of protectionism, California's professed fear of the Mediterranean fruit fly notwithstanding.[26] Other disputes persist over cattle, grain, milk, and citrus.[27] In general, while NAFTA has promoted the overall flow of goods, other trade obstructions, including new duties in all but name, have arisen in place of tariffs.[28]

Transportation

Few of NAFTA's issue-areas are as troubled as transportation. Three years ago, NAFTA's proponents touted a brave new world for trinational transport, an efficient world of harmonised trucking practices, expedited customs operations, new and better highways, and high-grade railroads connecting producers and consumers across North America. At NAFTA year-three that had yet to materialise.

Instead, the US and Mexico were at loggerheads on the most elementary trucking questions, free-transit remained stalled, and trucking perhaps best symbolised the enduring power of the region's protectionists. At the level of infrastructure, however, there is clear evidence that the arteries of commerce were deepening in the border region, with long-term implications for the border and the trinational area. Much of this is attributable to NAFTA.

First, trucking. Less than four days prior to the designated date for implementing NAFTA's trucking provisions, the Clinton administration opted to indefinitely delay the process pending further negotiations related to the security and safety of US highways. The US decision effectively barred Mexican drivers and Mexican trucks from operating in the US outside a range of 15 miles of the boundary, sustaining inefficient in-place practices requiring off-loading and transfer of commercial loads to US-licensed carriers with US drivers.

According to NAFTA rules, permit-carrying Mexican drivers were to have complete access to the four border states on December 18, 1995, subject only to requisite customs inspections at the border and compliance with state and federal insurance, safety, and environmental standards, with full access to all US states and Canada by the year 2000.[29] Under intense election year pressure from powerful labour unions, particularly the Teamsters, the Clinton administration retrenched, citing the need for further consultations on various particulars.

A year and half later, there is little progress. A bilateral panel has yet to agree on key points at issue, to include cargo hauling safety standards, length limits for trucks, package delivery standards, and messenger services regulations. The dispute has adversely affected the implementation of open access for commercial passenger carriers and other areas. Meanwhile, Mexican carriers' petitions for access to the US border states remain unanswered as Mexico weighs whether to invoke NAFTA dispute resolution procedures.[30]

While the trucking dispute is evident at the border in the long strings of 18-wheelers idling at ports-of-entry and the occasional blockade of border bridges by Mexican hauliers, it tends to obscure the steady development of border infrastructure for commercial traffic. Transportation infrastructure development has accelerated since NAFTA to include new bridges and border crossings and renovation and construction of railroads, highways, and ports.

Along the Texas–Mexico border four new crossings have been added since 1994. Other crossings have expanded, adding new lanes and customs stations.[31] New bridges have been built or placed on the drawing boards. Mexico's privatisation of national railroads initiative has infused new capital into the rail cargo sector. On the Pacific coast, for instance, a Korean consortium has invested heavily in the port of Ensenada and is building a line to Tecate that will accelerate access to US markets.[32] Directly cross the line at Tecate and San Diego, US investors are ploughing new capital into reviving and upgrading abandoned rail lines that will make the rail sector more competitive with trucking.[33] On the Gulf of Mexico, the State of Tamaulipas is moving ahead with an ambitious program to develop a massive intercoastal canal meant to link up with Texas' intercoastal system.[34] Mexico's system of modern tollways, developed by ex-president Carlos Salinas, despite financial troubles, is seeing steady expansion. These infrastructural changes are fundamental to the future of regional trade and are making the border steadily more permeable.

Energy

Energy development in the border region has and continues to be consumer driven, responsive to regional domestic and industrial growth. Insofar as petroleum was left out of the NAFTA accords, developments in the energy sector are less a function of new trade opportunities. Even so, several trends are worth mentioning.

Consumption trends show steady demand growth for energy on the border with Mexican growth rates leading the US. For more than a decade Mexican border communities have been net importers of electricity on the Texas and California borders, particularly in peak demand summer months, a trend that most observers expect to intensify. To satisfy domestic demand, Mexico is building and expanding a number of large coal-fired electricity plants in the border area, several of which are controversial for their potentially adverse transboundary environmental impact.[35]

Trade in natural gas is another area of interest. Substantial demand growth should make Mexican border states attractive to would-be US exporters who have thus far been deterred by a 6% Mexican tariff that, under NAFTA, declines by 1% annually, to phase out by year 2002. Mexico's national petroleum monopoly, PEMEX, which defends the tariff as an incentive for private sector investment in pipeline construction, is itself racing to develop a large natural gas field, the Burgos Basin, near the Rio Grande river in south Texas to position itself as a domestic supplier.[36] Negotiations are underway to speed up tariff reduction and, if successful, should pave the way for substantial US exports to Mexico's booming border industrial centres, such as Monterrey.

The Border Environment

NAFTA's impact on the border environment remains controversial, with debate polarised on largely ideological lines. In the past year, several leading US environmental groups, notably *Public Citizen* and *Sierra Club*, have gone public with their complaints. Much of their distress centres on the evidence of accelerated industrialisation in the Mexico border area and the slow pace at which the fledgling border environment institutions related to NAFTA have gone about their business. At root, however, are profound disagreements on how to measure border progress on environmental issues.

Situated on one side of the debate are those environmentalists opposed on principle to measures aimed at driving up consumption, urbanisation, and industrialisation along the border, with environmental stress their obvious corollary. To this faction, border development might be acceptable were it accompanied by stringent environmental regulations and government intervention aimed at mitigating growth's adverse effects.

An opposing group of environmental pragmatists generally take North American economic integration to be a secular trend with or without NAFTA. This faction tallies the benefits of post-NAFTA environmental institutions in terms of their additives to the mix of instruments available for advancing environmental protection in the region. From this latter perspective, NAFTA's impact on the border environment is a mixed bag, coupling the recent surge in border industrialisation and cross-boundary commerce with favourable initiatives in environmental administration and infrastructure development.

In the negative column, *maquila* growth on the border and the intensification of transboundary trade are unquestionably causing additional environmental stresses on the border, measured in term of hazardous wastes disposal, air quality, and the need for additional environmental infrastructure to cope with the area's growing human settlements. Unfortunately, a promised initiative to measure NAFTA induced change in the border environment has been resisted by the governments, particularly Mexico's Secretariat of the Environment, Natural Resources, and Fisheries (SEMARNAP) and its Secretariat of Commerce and Industrial Development (SECOFI), fuelling environmentalists' suspicions of trade's corrosive effects.

In the positive column, institutions and related measures coming from NAFTA's environmental side agreements have drawn greater governmental attention to the border's environmental problems. On the border, the newly established Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) and its financial affiliate, the North American Development Bank (NADBank), is garnering high marks for channelling new federal funds towards the development of needed water, sanitation, and wastewater treatment and recycling systems in the border area and ensuring they meet sustainable development criteria. While the process has been delayed due to NADBank's stringent financing standards, the BECC–NADBank tandem has institutionalised environmental awareness in project development and bolstered the search for new and innovative ways of financing environmental measures along the border.

For its part, NAFTA's other environmental agency, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), has drawn attention to transboundary environmental problems and provided mechanisms for challenging government mismanagement of environmental policies affecting the border as well as a venue for discussing important issues (long range transport of air pollutants, coastal zone management, and biodiversity protection) affecting the border community. Yet another post-NAFTA initiative, the new Border XXI Program, extends the 1983 La Paz Agreement on Border Environmental Cooperation to encompass new diagnoses of environmental ills and better binational interagency cooperation in border environmental management, and commits new funds to these tasks.

Employment and Labour

NAFTA's impact on border employment remains a matter of debate, particularly in the US. On the Mexican side, the rapid development of the *maquila* industry has unquestionably contributed to employment opportunities. In 1996, 90,915 new jobs were generated by Mexican *maquilas*, over two-thirds of these located in the border area.[37] Economists see positive spin-offs in professional services, small businesses, and other areas for Mexican border communities. Ciudad Juarez alone claims 77,000 new jobs in the past two years.

On the US side, the employment picture is less alluring. Texas economists say job losses have grown by 33% annually since NAFTA took effect. At El Paso (see story in Americas section of this issue), statistics show a net loss of 5,600 jobs since 1 January 1994, more than any location along the border. Labour activists argue that old and new companies are using the city as a trampoline, moving jobs from El Paso to Mexico.[38] *Maquila* advocates like Nancy Boltinghouse, of course, see favourable multipliers for US border communities no matter which side of the border they choose to locate.

A point on which labour activists, *maquila* sponsors, and economists all agree is that NAFTA has put pressure on low-skills workers on the US side of the border. In response, local governments on the US side are experimenting with various job training and niche employment strategies to retain their comparative advantages in labour.

At the national level, however, it has been difficult to attribute specific job losses to NAFTA *per se*. A recent University of California study notes that nationally, US NAFTA exports generated 49,000 jobs while imports cost 38,000 jobs, for a net gain of 11,000 jobs across the United States. UCLA's economists do note that the most adverse employment effects are centred in the low-skills sector where US border cities are vulnerable.

Immigration

Immigration is traditionally one of the most delicate topics in US–Mexican relations. Though strictly speaking not a NAFTA issue, the trade agreement was touted by proponents as a restraint on migration. In the short run this has proven a vain hope. Mexican immigration to the US is up, fuelling restrictionist measures in the US that, in turn, feed 'anti-gringo' sentiments in Mexico.

Deportations occur due to problems with proper documentation, resulting from both legal errors and falsification of identification. According to officials from the Mexican Chancellery, the US deported 1.6 million Mexicans in 1996.[39] This is the highest number of deportations since 1989.[40] Prior to the signing of NAFTA, and until 1996, the number of Mexicans deported from the US fluctuated between one million and 1.2 million annually.[41] There was not a significant increase or decrease in deportations with the signing of NAFTA.

Mexican migration into the US is mostly due to recent job growth within the US.[42] The majority come to work within the border region, usually in the agricultural areas, and do not plan to stay long-term. Although some analysts claim that there are more illegal aliens crossing into the US looking for job opportunities, many believe that the increase in deportations is more likely to be due to the increased number of Border Patrol agents and their more advanced equipment. In other words, the Border Patrol is simply catching more of those crossing into the US.

A World Bank-funded survey, conducted by Jorge Bustamante, immigration expert from Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, shows no substantial increase in illegal crossings over the last year.[43] Therefore, increased deportations are probably due to stepped-up border surveillance and tougher anti-immigration measures by the US.

Mexican media, intellectuals and members of Congress have attacked the US as xenophobic and increasingly anti-Mexican.[44] This is cause for concern not only within Mexico, but also for US officials as people of Mexican descent represent 7% of the current US population and it is estimated they will account for 20% by 2050.[45] In addition to this, Mexican officials are voicing concern with the high number of complaints regarding human rights. According to the Mexican Chancellery, Mexican consulates in the US received 80,000 complaints regarding human rights violations, and other migration issues in 1996.[46]

The increased border surveillance and lack of liberalisation of labour migration, which remains highly restrictive, are having an impact on the number of low-skilled workers available within the US. If the border strategy continues to have these results, it is likely that American employers who need large numbers of low-skilled workers will criticise US policy and request some form of guest-worker program. Already California's farmers have begun to push for a program similar to the 1950s Bracero program in order to contract seasonal workers from Mexico and eliminate labour shortages.[47]

NAFTA at the Border: Concluding Observations

While much remains in flux, a number of trends are evident at the US–Mexico border as NAFTA passes its third year. NAFTA's stimulation of trade and commerce across the trinational region is certainly in play at major ports-of-entry and across the border generally. Transborder shipments are up, retailers are flourishing in most locations, and *maquila* investment is booming. Some of this is certainly attributable to Mexico's peso devaluation – the acceleration of *maquila* investment is a case in point. Some of it owes to Mexico's economic liberalisation, which predates the trade agreement. A good deal of it, however, is simply due to NAFTA's striking down of tariffs and its promise of stabilising these relationships in the North American community.

Trade disputes remain and some may well run the full 15 year course for NAFTA's full implementation, though the agreement has also intensified the search for common ground. Some of the thorniest problems, the impasse over trucking for example, are not likely to persist for long, due to their structural importance for amplifying trade growth.

Clearly, some of the more apocalyptic predictions for the border economy have been averted – *maquilas* have not fled south *en masse*. Asymmetries remain, of course, reflecting the mix of comparative advantages found in the border area. As should be expected, border communities with more developed infrastructure and those situated on the principal arteries of trade have been able to take better advantage of trade integration.

Labour issues, not surprisingly, remain a sore point with US border communities as, at least in the near term, wages appear to be migrating south. In this, US border communities are still taking the brunt of the costs of structural adjustment related to NAFTA within the national economy. Mexico's recession, which stimulated border *maquilas*, has heightened the allure of northward migration, exacerbating bilateral tensions that are felt most acutely at the border.

What is also evident, and certainly more important over the long run than the short term economic effects, is the noticeable surge in developing the infrastructure for economic exchange along the border. While US–Mexican trade integration would undoubtedly have deepened without NAFTA, the agreement gave a decisive push to governments and investors without which the more costly new investment in ports, waterways, pipelines, highways, bridges, and railroads would very likely have been postponed. Much of this new NAFTA infrastructure is underway in the border area and promises to stimulate regional development and strengthen the region's commercial importance.

Directly and indirectly, NAFTA has also stimulated the development of new institutions along the border, heightened public awareness of social problems, infused new financing for their solution, and energised border publics in various forms of problem solving. Nowhere is this more evident than in the environmental sector, where NAFTA's side agreements established border specific institutions that, in turn, have drawn attention to region's environmental problems. New money and new modes of public participation in local problem solving have both been forthcoming. If far from sufficient to deal with border stresses, it is certainly a vast improvement on the chronic neglect of these problems in the past.

In sum, after three years it can be said with authority that NAFTA is neither a gift horse nor an albatross along the 2,000 mile border. It is, however, reshaping the border's economy as well as contributing to the development of its public and social institutions. As these changes embed themselves in the border community on both sides of the line it can only enhance the border's economic and political importance in the fabric of North American society, provided the governments resist the temptation to use the border as a barrier rather than a sieve.

Notes

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