

# North American Borders In Comparative Perspective during COVID Times

## Las fronteras de América del Norte en perspectiva comparada durante los tiempos de COVID

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### ABSTRACT

After the partial closure of the Canada-U.S. and Mexico-U.S. borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and considering the new vision of border management that has been evolving since 1994, the face of North American borders is constantly changing. The future of the Canada-U.S. border will essentially differ from that of the Mexico-U.S. border. The first one might become more tenuous, while the latter will probably be fortified. Such a divergence is directly connected to the structural inequalities that characterize this region, which have been magnified by the pandemic. The present article examines North American borders in comparative perspective during COVID times. This comparative exercise focuses on four main thematic areas: trade, human mobility/migration, security and public health.

**Key words:** North America, borders, United States, Canada, Mexico, COVID-19 pandemic.

### RESUMEN

Tras el cierre parcial de las fronteras entre Canadá y Estados Unidos, y las de México-Estados Unidos a causa de la pandemia de COVID-19 en el año 2020, y tomando en cuenta la nueva visión de la gestión de fronteras que ha ido evolucionando desde 1994, lo que implican las fronteras en América del Norte se encuentra en constante cambio. El futuro de la frontera entre Canadá y Estados Unidos será esencialmente distinto de aquel entre México y Estados Unidos; la primera podría volverse más distendida, mientras que la segunda probablemente será reforzada. Tal divergencia se relaciona directamente con las desigualdades estructurales que caracterizan a esta región, las cuales han sido magnificadas por la pandemia. El presente artículo analiza las fronteras de América del Norte durante los tiempos de COVID desde una perspectiva comparativa. Este ejercicio se centra en cuatro áreas temáticas principales: comercio, movilidad/migración humana, seguridad y salud pública.

**Palabras clave:** América del Norte, fronteras, Estados Unidos, Canadá, México, pandemia de COVID-19.

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## INTRODUCTION

There seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel for North America. The very forceful and apparently successful vaccination campaigns against COVID-19—notwithstanding the new variants of the virus, such as Delta and Omicron—in the United States and Canada, and to a smaller extent in Mexico, anticipate a promising future for the whole region after a period of partially-closed borders and strict public health measures to combat the spread of the virus. For almost twenty months, the borders of our region remained closed to non-essential travel (Díaz and González, 2021), which negatively affected the border economies of Mexico, the United States and Canada (Wilson Center, 2020). In this context, it is very clear how, in this region, Mexico has been affected the most due to the sanitary measures adopted as a response to the pandemic (Esquivel, 2020) and its more limited financial and development capacities to deal with them. Its economy is much smaller and more vulnerable than the ones of its northern neighbors.

The aim of the present text is to compare the Mexico-U.S. border and the Canada-U.S. border during the pandemic. Comparing such unequal borders has never been an easy, nor a common task. Actually, North American borders and border regions have been analyzed extensively, but usually separately. There are few theoretical references that compare these two very distinct border regions in the Americas directly. In fact, there are only a few volumes that center on borders when analyzing the North American region in general, its history, or particular issues or policy areas (Andreas and Biersteker, 2003; Hamalainen and Johnson, 2011; Chávez, 2012; UNEP, 2012).

There are hardly any studies that compare North American borders or analyze specific border policy areas or issues in comparative perspective within this region (Brunet-Jailly, 2007; Johnson and Graybill, 2010; Nischik 2016). One of the latest efforts to do this is found in the edited collection entitled *North American Borders in Comparative Perspective* (Correa-Cabrera and Konrad, eds., 2020). Following the theoretical approaches and simple comparative methodologies used in this collection, the present text provides a comparison between North American borders in times of the COVID-19 pandemic—centering on four key border policy areas that pertain to three countries (Canada, the United States and Mexico): trade, human mobility/migration, security and public health. The intention is to assess the effects on the Mexico-U.S. and Canada-U.S. borderlands of the measures adopted as a response to the pandemic in each of these four policy dimensions.

## CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN BORDERS

Before the arrival of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States, the three governments of the region strongly supported the idea of consolidating a North American economic block or region that would become further integrated in the years to come (Eilperin, 2016) and would be founded on the North American Free Agreement (NAFTA)—nowadays called the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) (Villarreal, 2021). The idea was to extend the three economies' integration well beyond trade (Bersin, 2012). For example, before 2017 there were serious attempts to further the idea of North America's energy independence (Petraeus, Zoellick and O'Neil, 2014), aligned to the completion and operation of the Keystone XL pipeline—cancelled by President Joe Biden on the first day of his administration.

Before the Trump era, the idea of a borderless North America—that would not allow free mobility of labor—seemed to have been consolidating and did not experience major resistance by the political leadership of the three countries (Johnson and Graybill, eds., 2010). The key points of tension were essentially associated with developments and dynamics in Mexico. The most relevant obstacles for a fully integrated North America had to do with the subjects of irregular or undocumented migration from Mexico, Central America or South America, and with drug-related violence and security issues in the poorest country of North America (Payan, 2016; Newman, 2006; Andreas and Biersteker, eds., 2003; Barry, Browne and Sims, 1994). Nevertheless, Mexico's northern neighbors never fully recognized their key responsibility in these hemispheric issues. Drug consumption and arms trafficking are two fundamental issues that have never been effectively addressed by North America's major economic players.

It is worth noting that the idea of North American integration was mainly promoted by big businesses, transnational corporations and financial interests. However, stronger barriers were imposed on human mobility, especially on the free mobility of Mexicans within this region (Payan, 2016; Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2003). Ironically, the consolidation of this idea maintained cheap labor as an engine of a more productive North America, borderless to goods, capital and financial flows (Staudt, 1998). Notwithstanding this double-discourse, since 1994 till the beginning of the Trump presidency, important steps were taken to consolidate a unified block that would, in the end, benefit big capital and corporate interests (Petraeus, Zoellick and O'Neil, 2014).

The election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 represented an important change to the logic of interdependence in North America. The U.S. president, appealing to his political base, decided to significantly transform the dynamics of NAFTA and proposed

an overall reformulation of hemispheric trade (Correa-Cabrera and Konrad, eds., 2020). He proposed the renegotiation of NAFTA and made the “big beautiful border wall” idea a clear brand of his administration. Trump distanced himself from the idea of North American integration as he proposed to “Make America Great Again” (MAGA). The nationalism and white supremacy in Trump’s project would help to redefine North American borders and would overrule some of the “globalist” projects that previous Democratic administrations had strongly supported (Reuters Staff, 2019).

Meanwhile, a more nationalist president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador or AMLO, was elected in Mexico in 2018. His plans would be benefited by a more closed off vision coming from its northern neighbor. Canada was not engaged in that logic. The possibility of Mexico’s relative independence from its northern partners in some areas seems to fit more or less with some objectives of the Trump administration and the MAGA movement. Nevertheless, the signing of USMCA did not represent a radical transformation in trade relationships in North America (Ackleson and Correa-Cabrera, 2020). The main objectives were maintained, and this agreement even assured greater benefits for big businesses and the rich countries of the region (Canada and the United States). Nevertheless, the Mexican president was able to reverse some of the developments in the energy sector that were approved in previous administrations and that favored North American energy integration (Correa-Cabrera, 2019). Mexico advanced in the construction of its own energy project and enjoyed greater relative sovereignty through the leadership of López Obrador.

Unfortunately, the economic crisis of 2020 that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic delayed Mexico’s plans and provoked a relative deterioration of all the economies in the region. North American borders stayed semi-closed for nearly twenty months, despite the negative implications. In November 2020, Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate, was elected president of the United States. His vision is, in many areas, different from Trump’s and very similar to the one that had prevailed in the years prior to Trump. It is worth noting that the new U.S. administration arrived with somewhat different priorities that differ from AMLO’s so-called Fourth Transformation project (*Cuarta Transformación*) (Felbab-Brown, 2020). Conversely, the United States and Canada seem to be committed to a drastic reconfiguration of its energy sectors based on the production of renewable energies. Canada has been advancing rapidly in this regard, while the United States seems to be seriously envisioning a “Green New Deal” (Chatzky and Siripurapu, 2021).

It is not yet clear whether these projects would effectively combat climate change or if their real objective is to promote actual welfare improvements within the three countries’ most marginalized communities—that will probably pay higher prices for the consumption of apparently cleaner energies. What seems to be clear is that

today, energy interdependence aimed at in North America will not be based on hydrocarbon markets, but on new green technologies that are not yet available to Mexico. Actually, the utilization of these technologies does not seem to be central for the current Mexican government (Linthicum, 2021), which seems reasonable for the weakest economy in North America in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mexico has important hydrocarbon reservoirs, including petroleum and coal, which in times of crisis could save resources to the country and provide viability to the project of the so-called “government of the Fourth Transformation” (Gross, 2019).

## THE MEXICO-U.S. BORDER IN COVID TIMES

Inequalities at the Mexico-U.S. borderlands seem to have magnified and have become much more visible since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the Americas hemisphere (Tucker, 2021). The newly negotiated USMCA has apparently benefited the rich countries in North America and increased their advantages over Mexico (see details of the new agreement in Villarreal, 2021). Such a situation has become more evident during the pandemic and is clearly depicted at the Mexico-U.S. border region.

### Public Health in Pandemic Times

It is evident how superior the capacity of the United States has been to deal with the effects of the pandemic compared to its southern neighbor. Moreover, Mexico’s government has not been able to design all the required projects that would ameliorate the economic catastrophe caused by the pandemic (*The Dialogue*, 2021). After a severe economic contraction in 2020 (of minus 8.2 percent), the Mexican economy grew approximately 6 percent in 2021. According to some critics, Mexico’s economic recovery has not been enough, most probably due to “the absence of a stimulus plan large enough to jump-start economic growth” (Zaga and Ortiz, 2021).

The advantages of the United States over Mexico with regards to pandemic preparedness and management became more visible after the arrival of Joe Biden to the U.S. presidency, shown in the very aggressive national vaccination campaign that led to extraordinary results for the U.S. population. However, and despite the smaller amount of resources available, Mexico has also advanced significantly in the provision of the COVID vaccine to its population. At the beginning of 2022, 62 percent of the U.S. population was fully vaccinated (and 22 percent had received an additional

dose), while 57 percent of Mexicans were fully vaccinated (*The New York Times*, 2022a; updated January 5). As of January 5, 2022, Mexico registered around 3.99 million COVID-19 cases and almost 299,581 deaths, while the U.S. recorded approximately 57 million cases and 828,436 deaths (*The New York Times*, 2022b; 2022c).

Several analysts in the North American region see great potential in Mexico-U.S. cooperation regarding public health during pandemic times (Wilson Center, 2020). In the meantime, the difference in terms of vaccine access and public health infrastructure to treat patients with COVID-19 maintained the Mexico-U.S. border closed for non-essential activities for nineteenth months, mainly affecting Mexican border cities. It is worth noting that on November 8, 2021, the border was reopened, but only for certain vaccinated individuals. Only foreign nationals with vaccines that have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or that have been approved for emergency use by the World Health Organization (WHO) are able to cross into the United States (Villagran, 2021).

## Trade

NAFTA radically transformed Mexico-U.S. relations and Mexico-U.S. border relations since its approval and signing in 1994. Its successor, the USMCA, entered into force in 2020 (Chatzky, McBride and Sergie, 2020). Former president Trump asked for the renegotiation of NAFTA, alleging it was benefiting Mexico rather than the United States. With the renewed agreement, the main logics that characterized North American relations since the first treaty were basically maintained (McDaniel, 2021). In other words, USMCA maintained free mobility of goods along the Mexico-U.S. border, but limited mobility of labor and advanced very narrow cultural integration. Hence, North American integration under USMCA continued to exclude key segments of Mexico's population.

Notwithstanding the continuity of essential relationships between Mexico and the United States under the "new" trilateral agreement, Mexico lost some privileges accessed under NAFTA, particularly those pertaining to the automotive industry. A dispute over automotive rules of origin and increasing U.S. subsidies are at the core of this argument (Gantz, 2021). Moreover, the renegotiation did consider issues excluded from the original treaty. Among those issues are environmental and labor standards (Hart, 2021), that would mainly affect Mexico's competitiveness in North America.

With the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president of Mexico—and a new wave of Mexican nationalism—some tensions have arisen. North American energy integration and the transition to an ample use of renewable energies in

the region are not priorities to the Mexican president, who wants to widen the State's participation in the hydrocarbon sector (Hackbarth, 2021). Further tensions might arise within the new North American framework of labor relations—that includes the formation of new independent labor unions in the *maquiladora* sector. Actually, in May 2021, U.S. unions filed the first labor rights petition against Mexico under USMCA (Solomon, 2021).

Notwithstanding the new wave of nationalism in Mexico, a new U.S. administration, and new tensions in the context of USMCA, “existing institutions and entrenched economic interests” will very plausibly “prevent a major transformation of Mexico-U.S. border relations, border policies and borderlands dynamics” (Ackleson and Correa-Cabrera 2020, 150). Economic restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have only reinforced Mexico-U.S. border dynamics and unequal relationships between the two countries. Mexico continues to be the country that benefits the least from the trilateral free trade agreement (González-Márquez, 2020). In spite of this, it seems that the United States might grant Mexico certain concessions, recognizing the benefits of greater regional integration in the face of rising global power competition—and a more relevant role of China in the Americas (see Runde, 2021). One of the goals under the new trade agreement would be to “outcompete China and other growing powers on the global market” (Runde, 2021: para. 31).

## Security

In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, border security continues to be at the center of Mexico-U.S. relations and a source of tension and potential conflict between the two countries. In this regard, Joe Biden's approach does not seem to be very different from Donald Trump's (Seelke, 2021). One can expect a continuation of the U.S. strategy to protect its southern border, despite Biden's deviation from Trump's discourse. Then, it is likely that the United States will maintain the securitization of its southern border, possibly reducing some of the capacities of the different components of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), incorporating more technology and maintaining—and maybe even reinforcing—the border fence constructed in previous administrations (Córdova, 2010). Nothing that has happened to date makes us think of a different outcome. In the Biden administration, one can perceive a relative continuation of the U.S. border enforcement policy approach of the past few years (Blitzer, 2021).

Notwithstanding the last, there seems to be an increasing tension between the United States and Mexico in terms of border security and anti-narcotics cooperation. The so-called “government of the Fourth Transformation” and the Mexican president,

AMLO, seem to have different priorities and a different approach to anti-narcotics cooperation. AMLO has rejected the previous strategy to prosecute the leaders of the so-called drug cartels (the “kingpin strategy”), and called for a peacebuilding strategy and a less confrontational approach to fight drug trafficking organizations and organized crime in general. This new approach is commonly referred to as the “Hugs, Not Bullets” (*Abrazos, No Balazos*) strategy.

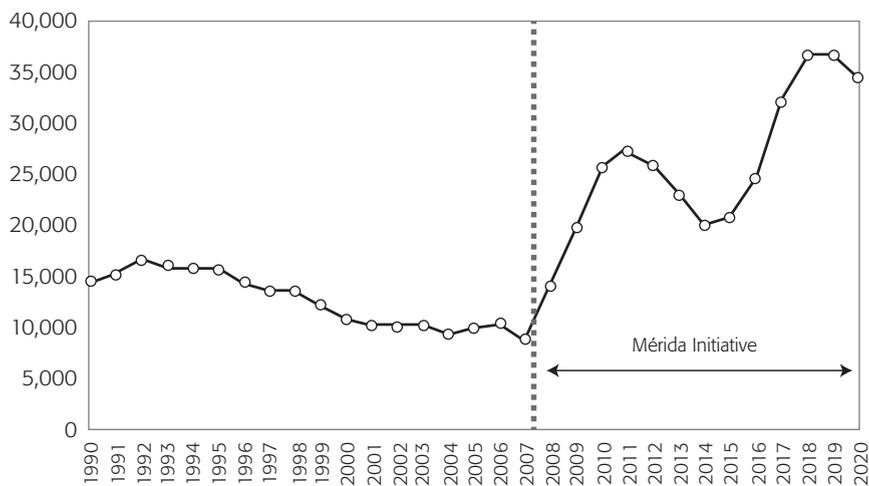
The Mérida Initiative has effectively ended and Mexico has imposed further restrictions to the activities of U.S. law enforcement agencies in Mexican territory. However, the two countries seem to keep some relevant forms of collaboration and exchange of information. Actually, Mexico continues to secure its southern border and limits the entrance of undocumented immigration coming from the south. On October 8, 2021, in the framework of the Mexico-U.S. High-Level Security Dialogue, both governments decided to support a “new” anti-narcotics cooperation program and a renewed border security strategy (Seelke, 2021). They announced the beginning of the “Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities.” Such a program resembles, to some extent, the Mérida Initiative, but now with a new discourse and a greater emphasis on public health and arms trafficking.

As a matter of fact, the new Mexican security strategy implemented during AMLO’s presidency has not yet resulted in a more stable, secure and peaceful country. In the past couple of years, high levels of insecurity and violence have continued. The adverse social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic might have contributed to this. In this new context, some have suggested that the partial closure of the Mexico-U.S. border, instead of reducing the access of Mexican cartels to U.S. drug markets, has strengthened their capacities due to a more efficient use of communications and technologies (Felbab-Brown and Ávila Martínez, 2020). This has not been confirmed yet. Additionally, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the head of the U.S. Northern Command, Air Force General Glen D. VanHerck, affirm that Mexican cartels are a fundamental threat against U.S. national security (DEA, 2021; DOF, 2021). VanHerck even mentioned that close to one third (between 30 and 35 per cent) of Mexico’s territory is controlled by the “cartels.”

High levels of insecurity and corruption characterize Mexico today. The rise in homicide rates has been exponential since the inception of the Mérida Initiative (see Figure 1). The cases of Genaro García Luna and Salvador Cienfuegos—both investigated in the United States for their alleged connections with organized crime—are emblematic of the corruption found at the highest levels of government (National Security Archive, 2020). The United States government might use these arguments to put pressure on Mexico and force further anti-narcotics cooperation and collaboration in the areas of migration enforcement and border security. It is then quite plausible

that eventually—notwithstanding the newly agreed Bicentennial Framework—the U.S. securitization apparatus will continue to extend on the Mexican side of the border and that border security cooperation between the two countries will be maintained.

**Figure 1**  
HOMICIDES IN MEXICO (1990-2020)



Source: INEGI (2021).

### Human Mobility / Migration

During the pandemic, undocumented migration—particularly the flows from Central America, Haiti, Cuba and Venezuela—continues to be a major source of tension in Mexico-U.S. relations and border relations. Problems in this regard have heightened as a result of the economic crisis caused by health security measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, Biden administration’s more favorable discourse towards undocumented immigration seems to have attracted a larger number of irregular migrants towards the Mexico-U.S. border—many of them mobilized by very sophisticated human smuggling networks. Some critics also connect this phenomenon to climate change, which has allegedly affected the occurrence of natural disasters in our continent (e.g., hurricanes Iota and Eta in Central America) (Ngong and Meyer, 2021). Therefore, even in COVID times, migration flows towards the United States do not seem to have stopped or have massively declined (American Immigration Council, 2021).

Notwithstanding some advances in the recognition of migrant rights by the U.S. government, and a more favorable rhetoric toward undocumented immigration by the Biden administration (compared to that of former president Trump), the reality is that the United States has maintained its key restrictive immigration policies (Alvarez, 2021). In August 2021, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the Biden administration must comply with a lower court's ruling to reinstate Donald Trump's Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)—also known as "Remain in Mexico" policy. This policy required asylum seekers to wait outside of the United States for their cases to be decided (Barnes, 2021). MPP was reinstated in December of that year.

The United States also attempts to continue cooperating closely with Mexico to limit mass migration flows coming from the south of the continent. Mexico has effectively joined its neighbor in these efforts in exchange for resources that will help promote economic development in Mexico's southern states and the Central American Northern Triangle region. The Biden administration has also focused on solving what some call a "migration crisis" by trying to advance (though still unsuccessfully) a comprehensive immigration reform, creating legal immigration pathways, and addressing the "root causes" of undocumented migration/immigration (Hudak and Stenglein, 2021).

In sum, the new rhetoric in the United States with regards to migration enforcement and immigration policy, a more sophisticated migrant smuggling networks, and economic crisis have incited mass migrations towards the United States in COVID times. At the same time, there has been greater cooperation between Mexico and the United States in terms of migration enforcement. Mexico has now become a destination country for asylum seekers and refugees. Thus, there is an incentive for Mexico to guard its southern border. In this regard, one can expect continuity in United States and Mexico's immigration policies and cooperation in terms of migration enforcement. Nevertheless, deterrence policy under difficult economic conditions does not seem to work in the long term. In fact, there has been an increase in arrivals at the border in 2021 (American Immigration Council, 2021).

## THE CANADA-U.S. BORDER IN COVID TIMES

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has materialized as a global phenomenon and impacted virtually all people and regions on the planet, the human response to the pandemic has been channeled through nation-states. Each country in the world has prepared a public health response based on national (and sub-national) standards and approaches, as well as political ideologies and pressures. Consequently, a form of

*border orientation* took hold globally, as borders were wielded by governments in an effort to contain and control the spread of the virus (Kenwick and Simmons, 2020). After the WHO declared a global pandemic in March, 2020, countries around the world stepped forward in an attempt to manage the pandemic and the steward of global health, the WHO, was relegated to a diminished advisory capacity. China, Russia, India, the United States, and all other populous and powerful countries were quick to fashion their own approaches to mitigating the virus.

The Canadian approach has been characteristically similar yet distinct from the approach developed by the United States. These distinctions reflect essential differences in the political, social and cultural systems of Canada and the U.S. rather than differences in public health approaches. In this section of the paper, we explore how the Canada-U.S. border was closed, and the impacts that resulted from the selective closure in trade, mobility and migration, security, and public health. The analysis draws on the available preliminary data relating to the shifts in these sectors but also on the discourse related to the border closure. We also consider the regional differences along the extensive border between Canada and the United States to illustrate how different regions and localities along the border reaffirm Canada-U.S. border regionalism.

Fortunately, the Canada-U.S. border is constantly monitored and evaluated by research groups and institutions in border regions from Alaska to Maine, coordinated by the Border Policy Research Institute (BPRI) at Western Washington University. The BPRI has published more than 100 publications on various facets of the Canada-U.S. border, and produced three reports in 2020 and 2021 on *COVID-19 and the U.S.-Canada Border*. Other recent BPRI publications have also focused on the impacts of the pandemic, most notably an extensive issue of the *Border Barometer*, which evaluates border restrictions and their impacts in eight regions and locales along the border (BPRI, 2021). Additional information on the impacts of the pandemic on the Canada-U.S. border relationship is drawn from an extensive research in academic journals, particularly in cross-border trade, migration, and security. Some literature in public health also informs the discussion. In the field of border studies, special issues on borderlands in the era of COVID-19 have been published in the *Borders in Globalization Review* (2020) and the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2021).

A closed border between Canada and the United States is not a sealed border. Where as the discourse conveyed a closed border, in fact, on March 21, 2020, the border was closed only to “non-essential travel”, which allowed food transport, trade of most goods, law enforcement and military, business travelers, emergency workers, and more, to cross the boundary. Air travel was curtailed but not halted (BPRI, 2020). For over a year, between 2020 and 2021, as the pandemic prevailed through several waves, closure policies shifted while determined travelers discovered loopholes to circumvent

regulations. Since the restrictions on border crossing began, Canadians have been more active than Americans in adjusting, extending and setting border closure policies.

## Trade

In 2019, trade flows across the border between Canada and the United States constitute the second largest bilateral trade relationship in the world, 1 percent lower than U.S. trade with Mexico, and 10 percent higher than U.S. trade with China. This bilateral trade amounted to US\$611 billion with exports from the United States to Canada amounting to US\$292 billion and imports from Canada amounting to US\$319 billion. Most of this trade crosses at land borders: 56 percent of the total in trucks, 16 percent by rail, and an additional 11 percent in pipelines. Marine and air cross-border transportation of trade goods accounts for approximately 5 percent each (BPRI, 2021).

Provided the huge reliance on cross-border truck transportation for moving goods, the decision by U.S. and Canadian Governments to keep trucks moving while restricting most personal vehicle crossings, ameliorated the economic impact of travel restrictions during the pandemic. Policy makers in both Canada and the United States acknowledged the importance of integrated commercial and industrial supply chains. Furthermore, sustained supply limited the decline of trade to mainly the second economic quarter of 2020, and enabled a return, during the last months of 2020, to normal levels in some Canada-U.S. cross-border regions: “This is a testament to the resilience of the Canada-U.S. economic relationship and the ability of both governments and businesses to work cooperatively during the crisis” (BPRI, 2021: 8).

If we examine the Gross Domestic Product of the United States in 2020, there is a slight decline in the first quarter of the year followed by a sharper decline in the second quarter, and gradual increases through the third and fourth quarters. The overall result is a 1.2 percent decline in the U.S. economy from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the fourth quarter of 2020. Yet, some border states largely register declines that are higher than 1.2 percent, and in some instances these declines are two or three times as high (New York -3.7 percent, Michigan -2.8 percent, North Dakota -2.9 percent, Alaska -4.8 percent) (BPRI, 2021: 9-10). The substantial northern border state declines are accounted for by sharp drops in energy prices in Alaska and North Dakota, and drops in automobile exports from Michigan. Conversely, the upturn in the information sector during the pandemic enabled Washington State to show an increase of 2.1 percent GDP during the same period (BPRI, 2021: 11).

In Canada, exports and imports have almost entirely recovered after a similar significant drop in the second economic quarter of 2020 (Beaulieu and Klemen, 2021).

Richard S. Gray (2020) attributes economic downturns across the country to transportation disruptions and labor shortages, and their impact on supply chains. Supply shortages and hoarding of selected goods quickly resulted in rationing by commercial suppliers without government intervention (Hobbs, 2020). Pick-up and delivery services have expanded during the pandemic. Among these services, grocery pick-up and delivery services have expanded substantially, particularly in densely populated urban areas where risks of viral infection are greater. Alcohol control during the COVID-19 crisis offers insights into how some consumer patterns in Canada have changed and the potential long term health impacts of these changes.

In Ontario, alcohol control remains largely in the hands of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO). The LCBO has kept all liquor and beer stores open throughout the pandemic, albeit with strict social distancing regulations, number of costumers in store restrictions, and some reductions on opening hours. Although pandemic social distancing procedures are in effect, and there are wait times, the sale of alcohol has grown substantially from pre-COVID levels as customers are characteristically home-bound. This has not been offset by restaurant and bar restrictions and closure. Whereas in Europe, several countries have enacted a more stringent control on alcohol sales, this pattern of restriction is not evident in either Canada or in the United States. Alain Braillon (2020) assesses these policy differences and suggests that the longer term impacts of expanded alcohol consumption may impact the health of consumers in the United States and Canada, consequently resulting in a different wave of health impacts of the pandemic.

## Human Mobility / Migration

The most significant impact of the COVID-19 crisis at the border has been the restriction on non-essential travel between Canada and the United States. In 2020, there were 94 percent fewer travelers than in 2019. Approximately 60 percent of this staggering reduction was accounted for by fewer Canadians travelling to the U.S. thus impacting economies all across the United States but particularly in states along the Canada-U.S. border (BPRI, 2021), and the “sunbelt” states frequented by Canadian “snowbirds” (Kelly, 2021). The following brief overview addresses the impacts of the pandemic in border states, provinces, and the “snowbird” winter in Canada, as well as the exceptions to bordering out migrants.

During the pandemic, the impacts on the economy and social fabric of border regions and communities have varied. The BPRI's *Border Barometer* (2021) evaluates these impacts in the Alaska/Yukon/British Columbia, Cascadia, Plains and Mountain West,

Upper Midwest, Detroit-Windsor, Buffalo-Niagara, Eastern New York/Vermont/Quebec, and Maine/Quebec/New Brunswick border regions. Although communities isolated by the border—Campobello Island, New Brunswick, Northwest Angle of Minnesota, Point Roberts, Washington, and Hyder, Alaska—experienced both economic and social impacts with the border lockdown, they, and other communities divided by the border, increased efforts toward subnational cooperation during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have region-specific impacts on the economy and social fabric. In 2019, 53 percent (or 1.3 million) of Alaska’s annual visitors were cruise ship passengers. In 2020, the entire cruise season was cancelled and the prospects for a 2021 season remain uncertain. Canada is a required stop for the cruise vessels because they travel through Canadian maritime territory.

Cascadia, arguably the most integrated Canada-U.S. cross-border region depends on cross-border interaction. Whatcom County, Washington, at the border, is dependent on Canadian customers in its shops, hotels and restaurants (BPRI, 2020). An estimate for Whatcom County places the number of tourists lost at 506,000 in 2020. Bellingham international airport which caters to mainly Canadian customers who drive into the U.S., park, then fly to U.S. destinations, saw a 70 percent drop in passengers in 2020. Layoffs in the county are at unprecedented levels: 30 percent in tourism, 35 percent in service, 38 percent in construction, 40 percent retail, and 71 percent in restaurants and bars (BPRI, 2020). Even Seattle, more than 100 km south of the border, finds that Canadian visitors account for more than 70 percent of all international visitors (BPRI, 2020). Consequently, the effect of closing the border has been to compound the economic hardship of domestic closures.

Alberta is exceptional among Canadian provinces in generating more air travelers than land travelers that predominate in other border regions. As a result, in the vast and open distances of the plains and mountain interior, the land border closure has had a more limited impact on cross-border travel. A similar situation prevails in the Upper Midwest, where isolated communities on the border suffer the greatest impacts of the border closure, whereas urban residents continue to connect across the border by air.

In Detroit and Windsor, urban places meet at the border and complex interactions across the boundary are well established. The pandemic has halted non-essential travel, yet the leading cross-border conduit for goods moving between Canada and the U.S. remains open for business. Here the delineation of “essential” and “non-essential” travel becomes acute. Many families are “cross-border” and many people live in one country and work in the other. Car crossings at the Ambassador Bridge in 2020 were down 70 percent from 2019. Car crossings in the tunnel, a more local crossing, were down 85 percent (Darroch et al., 2020: 44). Michael Darroch, Robert L. Nelson

and Lee Rodney (2020: 44) offer the following assessment: “The traffic at the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel is exceptionally quiet with the official border closure. Essential workers and family members who use this crossing are screened by Customs and Border Patrol agents upon entry to Canada. Visiting family members from the U.S. are required to quarantine for two weeks, reporting on a mobile app and monitored by a quarantine officer for two weeks after crossing.”

An agreement on the crossing of critical workers prevented a health care labor shortage in Detroit. Approximately 1,500 health care workers from Windsor work daily in Detroit hospitals, but they are restricted from working at Windsor hospitals at the same time. Yet, the majority of cross-border interaction between neighbors, family and friends has stopped, and this closure of connection calls for remedial action and socio-economic reintegration in the post-pandemic recovery (BPRI, 2020: 54-56).

In the Buffalo-Niagara region, the substantial tourism and recreation sector depends on cross-border access and the flow of Americans, Canadians, and international visitors. From 2019 to 2020, the total number of people crossings dropped by 84 percent, and tour bus traffic, which comprises a substantial conveyance for tourists, dropped 100 percent. Although the closures and restrictions are working to maintain major economic flows across the border, a nuanced analysis confirms that: the impact on bridge authorities has been severe due to the virtual elimination of cross-border tourism; area airports that have catered to Canadians flying discount airlines to the “sunbelt” (88 percent of clientele) are all but closed down; extensive cross-border business travel has been curtailed severely; “other side of the border” cottages and second homes are not accessible; and, finally, the border restrictions have impacted the economic well-being of restaurants, hotels and cultural facilities on both sides of the border (BPRI, 2021: 59-60).

The Eastern New York-Vermont-Montreal border region shares a border space characterized by a significant degree of cooperation, integration, convergence and complementarity. Consequently, there has been a preference for a more regionally-based and phased border closure rather than the federally mandated process that ensued (BPRI, 2021: 66). In Vermont, more than 85 percent of the visitors to the state in 2019 were Canadian. The border closure has devastated the tourism industry and particularly facilities like ski resorts which hold 12,000 direct and 22,000 indirect jobs in the state. In the adjacent Maine-Quebec-New Brunswick borderlands, the toll on local businesses was also severe in 2020 despite the increase in bilateral trade in the region (BPRI, 2021: 74-80).

Every region in Canada, as well as every northern state in the U.S. contribute to the winter “snowbird” migration to southern states in the U.S. (Kelly, 2021). During the winter of 2020-2021, Canadian “snowbirds” were mostly excluded from the migration

due to the Canada-U.S. border closure. Most Canadians tend to drive to the southern U.S. states, and this was not possible for all due to the border closure, yet some Canadian drivers, mainly dual citizens, did manage to enter the United States. Other Canadians, who owned vehicles parked at their U.S. winter homes, simply flew to southern U.S. destinations. Canadians returning in the spring of 2021 were obliged to quarantine for two weeks, often in designated hotels and at their expense. These policies were largely reactive and applied selectively, likely contributing to the third wave of COVID-19 infections in Canadian provinces.

During the pandemic, the delineation between essential and non-essential travel across the border has been inconsistent and inherently problematical (BPRI, 2021: 92). This emphasizes a recurrent finding and fact in Canada-U.S. border studies that the border is actually a set of regional and local borders, all with specific characteristics and challenges. Also, this inconsistency and ambiguity favors stasis and closure as a default norm in bordering. Moreover, the idea of essential entry allows for latitude to determine the admission into Canada of certain people who are accepted as legal, economically viable, and politically essential (Macklin, 2020). Essential bordering has enabled Canada to maintain a semblance of mobility and migration across the border even in the midst of pandemic, and this is premised on several underlying conditions: Canada is a settler society; Canada is economically integrated with the U.S.; and Canada has a growing dependence on migrant workers and international students (Macklin, 2020).

## Security

An immediate concern following the declaration of a global pandemic in March, 2020 was the potential impact on national security in both Canada and the United States. In the U.S., travel bans were first issued in reaction to infection spikes in European countries like Italy, and then moved to more general global restrictions. Politics played a part in the Trump administration's travel ban policies wherein China was quickly singled out for being the source of the "Wuhan Virus" or "China Virus". Many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America were also excluded. The scapegoating policies of the Trump administration have been adjusted by the Biden administration. The security concerns surrounding the virus did move the U.S. to agree to close the border with Canada, but the initiative was aggressively put forth by Canada, due to ambivalent and inconsistent U.S. policies and actions aimed at acknowledging and combating the pandemic. Canada was more cautious and developed a policy of wielding its border as a mechanism of virus control.

In both Canada and the United States, national security concerns also extended to potential risks of malicious foreign intervention as these countries were focused primarily on the pandemic. This was indeed borne out when foreign operatives hacked computers at U.S. business and government facilities during the Trump-Biden interregnum. In Canada, National Defense (DND) predicted a higher risk of inter-state conflict during the pandemic, and called for sustaining “strong, secure and engaged funding” (Clarke, 2020). Taking this stance has proved to be important for several reasons. First, DND was charged with managing the vaccine rollout in Canada and this process, although not without its hiccups, has been effective. Earlier, the armed forces played a critical role in confronting the pandemic in long term care facilities across Canada. Beyond its borders, Canada’s military commitments have been ramped up in the Ukraine as part of its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) role, where Canada is playing a peacemaker role in the current Israel-Palestine confrontation.

Kim Nossal (2021), a leading expert on Canada-U.S. security relations, identifies long-term geopolitical implications of COVID-19. He observes that geostrategic fissures have deepened between the U.S. and Canada. This may well transform the thinking about Canada-U.S. relations, and the role this thinking will play in developing security policy in both countries. Nossal sees Canada, in the wake of the pandemic, as more alone in North America, and possibly in the world. Will this distancing transform border policy as well?

## Public Health

Canada may well employ its role and participation in strengthening global health security during the COVID-19 pandemic as a springboard to reengage with the country’s former prominence in peacekeeping and international development (Chattu et al., 2020). The experience gained during the pandemic by the Public Health Agency of Canada in collective action and multisectoral coordination, and the significant contribution of the Agency in global health diplomacy, suggests that Canada may be poised to contribute substantially in this regard.

Meanwhile, what remains for Canada is to coordinate its public health response to containing and eradicating the COVID-19 pandemic with the response of the United States. Given the change in administration in Washington, D.C., this project appears to be far more likely to succeed than with the Trump administration. Already a robust vaccination program in the U.S. has shown considerable success in vaccinating a substantial proportion of the U.S. population. Nevertheless, vaccine hesitancy and the influence of “anti-vaxxers” may eventually lead to a more completely vaccinated

population in Canada. The possibility remains that “herd immunity” may be reached in different ways in the United States and in Canada.

A recent study confirms that “snowbirds” who returned to Canada at the beginning of the pandemic were not disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, but that they remained in a higher risk group due to their age (Shariff et al., 2021). It remains to be determined whether the much smaller “snowbird” return-migration in 2021 was similarly impacted. Given the substantial integration and inter-migration between Canada and the United States, an alignment of COVID-19 mitigation, containment, and eradication policies is not only desirable but imperative. Based on experiences with previous epidemics, namely SARS and Swine Flu, this coordination is feasible. Canada’s public health response to COVID-19 has featured a strong element of trust by federal authorities in each province’s ability and mandate to manage the battle against the virus, as well as the dexterity to customize the response through collaborative action (Mignone, 2020). Although this approach has encountered problems and resulted in some missteps, and the inevitable grasping for political capital, there has decidedly been less politicization of the COVID-19 crisis in Canada than in the United States.

## THE FUTURE OF NORTH AMERICAN BORDERS IN POST-COVID TIMES

Overall, it seems that COVID-19 will transform the shape of North American borders as they were conceived initially—before the Trump era (Anderson and Gerber, 2008). The dream of a “region without borders” seems to be impossible in the post-pandemic era. Canada and the United States seem to advance quickly towards herd immunity thanks to their enormous economic resources, targeted towards that goal, and massive access to vaccines (Doctors without Borders, 2021). These two economies are not so different and share today similar “progressive” goals and perspectives that characterize western countries. Overall, it seems they would take advantage of the new geopolitics of renewable energies (Natural Resources Canada, 2021). In this new context, the border between Canada and the United States would become relatively more tenuous.

Notwithstanding the last, there are lingering and revisited incongruities at the Canada-U.S. border. The pandemic has reminded Canadians that the “lest we forget” Canada is a multicultural country. During COVID-19, the politics of multiculturalism have been revisited and considered signs of settler hegemony and servient to the white population first (Lee and Johnstone, 2021). The biopolitics played out at

the border reinforces the uneasy and troubling engagement with multiculturalism in both the United States and Canada.

Conversely, the border that divides the developed from the underdeveloped world in North America could become more visible and it is quite possible that— notwithstanding Biden’s promises—the border wall/fence dividing these regions would be reinforced, rather than dismantled.

The migration situation in the Americas and the economic crisis in Central America and South America due to COVID-19 will possibly incentivize the maintenance of the wall, the involvement of more technology and more security personnel at the border that divides Mexico and the United States. Greater numbers of poor migrants and refugees from Central America, South America, the Caribbean and other parts of the world will try to cross Mexico in any way they can, in order to arrive to the “promised land.” However, Canadian and U.S. progressive attitudes and policies seem to be limited to promoting environmentalism and identity politics within their borders.

The pressure that will be exerted on Mexico for the formation of unions in the *maquiladora* sector—considered in the USMCA—would probably reduce the productivity of the Mexican border manufacturing sector. This phenomenon will most probably intensify migration pressures. One can anticipate then an extension of the restrictions to human mobility, as well as the maintenance of border and migration enforcement measures in North America’s frontier separating Mexico and the United States. We can forecast then more inequality, a more tenuous border in the north and a more visible one in the south. This is our projected future of North American borders.

Ileana I. Díaz and Alison Mountz (2020) point to intensifying fissures in geopolitics, nationalism, and militarism evident in the U.S. response to the Novel Coronavirus. These fissures are inevitably realized at the border and in the borderlands, as the United States positions “us” versus “them”. These fissures may be repaired to a certain extent by the Biden administration, but their mark will not be easily erased. The global COVID-19 pandemic has delivered a blunt message: we “need to change who we think ‘we’ are” (Sharma, 2020: 5). In North America, this is a call for re-engaging with the dialogue on borders and their multi-faceted and growing roles in our lives. In order to mitigate the negative impacts of borders, we need to explore how they can help us to know who we are.

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