

# Trump just might be giving us the opportunity to make NAFTA even stronger

*Alan Bersin, Contributor*

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Donald Trump's campaign, when it turned to issues, focused on migration, borders and trade. Characteristic of populist crusades, it zeroed in on foreigners to explain this country's purported loss of greatness. Mexico and Mexicans were targeted with particular venom: NAFTA was the worst trade deal ever, Mexican migrants were rapists and thugs, and only a big wall could ensure our border security. In office, the administration's initial policy pronouncements tracked the rhetoric: NAFTA will be scrapped, undocumented migrants will be deported and the wall will be built.

Two months into governing, the new administration's messages remain mixed, but talk has turned from abject negation of the North American Free Trade Agreement to likely renegotiation with a decidedly positive focus on competitiveness. The realities of the complex, symbiotic U.S.-Mexican relationship have begun to assert themselves: We don't trade with one another so much as make things together, and both countries protect themselves through shared perimeter security systems that won't work absent trust and confidence between officials on both sides of the border.

No one knows these realities better than the Borderlanders, *Los Fronterizos* — the roughly 14 million people who live and work on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The consequences, indeed the strategic madness, of dissolving this security and economic partnership are dawning on many policymakers inside and outside the White House. Any solutions must be devised with the wisdom of the people who know the border best, those who live and work there.

A silver lining to all this uproar is possible. NAFTA was never perfect, but neither its game-changing benefits nor its imperfections were ever treated sensibly in public debate. Now, President Trump's intense focus on NAFTA and the willingness of his administration to renegotiate it furnishes an extraordinary opportunity to rebrand North American trade, commerce and security while addressing the issues that were either too hot to handle in the 1990s or didn't even exist then.

These include Mexican labor laws and U.S. trade adjustment support; digital, cyber and artificial intelligence matters; and temporary worker programs and NAFTA labor classifications. The prize is a continental bloc (including Canada) with unparalleled comparative advantages: a half billion people; a trillion dollars a year in trade across trade-friendly demilitarized borders; energy independence within reach; a huge natural resource base (beyond hydrocarbons) including enormous navigable rivers and copious amounts of arable land; and three national commitments to democratic governance and the rule of law.

Given the massive economic impact of the region on both countries and the historic sense of interdependence that binds it, *Fronterizos* have a special role to fulfill in the reinvention of North American security and trade. The gross domestic product of the 10 U.S. and Mexican border states account for a quarter of the combined national economies of the two countries. Only the U.S., China, Japan and Germany have a larger standalone GDP than the border states. This is the base that is generating much of the dynamic of economic and social integration, not only in Mexico but along a north-south axis in North America. A third of all U.S. exports are destined for Mexico and Canada and nearly all of these goods cross the physical border in trucks and trains.

Hailing from places where cross-border commerce flows and communities live in close proximity, *Fronterizos*/Borderlanders are well-positioned to offer important guidance regarding sensible and practical integration to their countries at large. Their knowledge and experiences of what actually works for states, cities and communities on the border should drive the national debate about what “secure” and “smart” borders ought to look like in national policy terms.

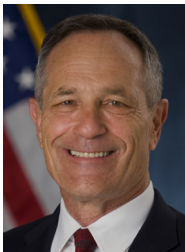
The more this political discussion is infused with insights from those public and private sector entities and people who rely on cross-border commerce and interdependence, the more self-evident it will be that North America 2.0 can serve the ends of security and prosperity infinitely better than barriers of division and fragmentation, like walls and tariffs.

Many of these ideas have been talked about for years in border communities and academic circles. Now, the border has captured the nation’s attention. *Fronterizos* should seize the opportunity to work with the Border Caucus in Congress and the White House to advance their vision for a smart, secure and competitive U.S.-Mexican border, because it could be decades before another opportunity comes again.

Border communities can prosper as never before if they build themselves into gateways and bridges for the North American future that awaits Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. But inserting this continental perspective into the national debate is the key to realizing our brightest future, from the borders inside out.

[<https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2017/06/07/trump-just-might-giving-us-opportunity-make-nafta-even-stronger>]

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