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# Strengthening the Ties that Bind Us in North America Across Our Borders

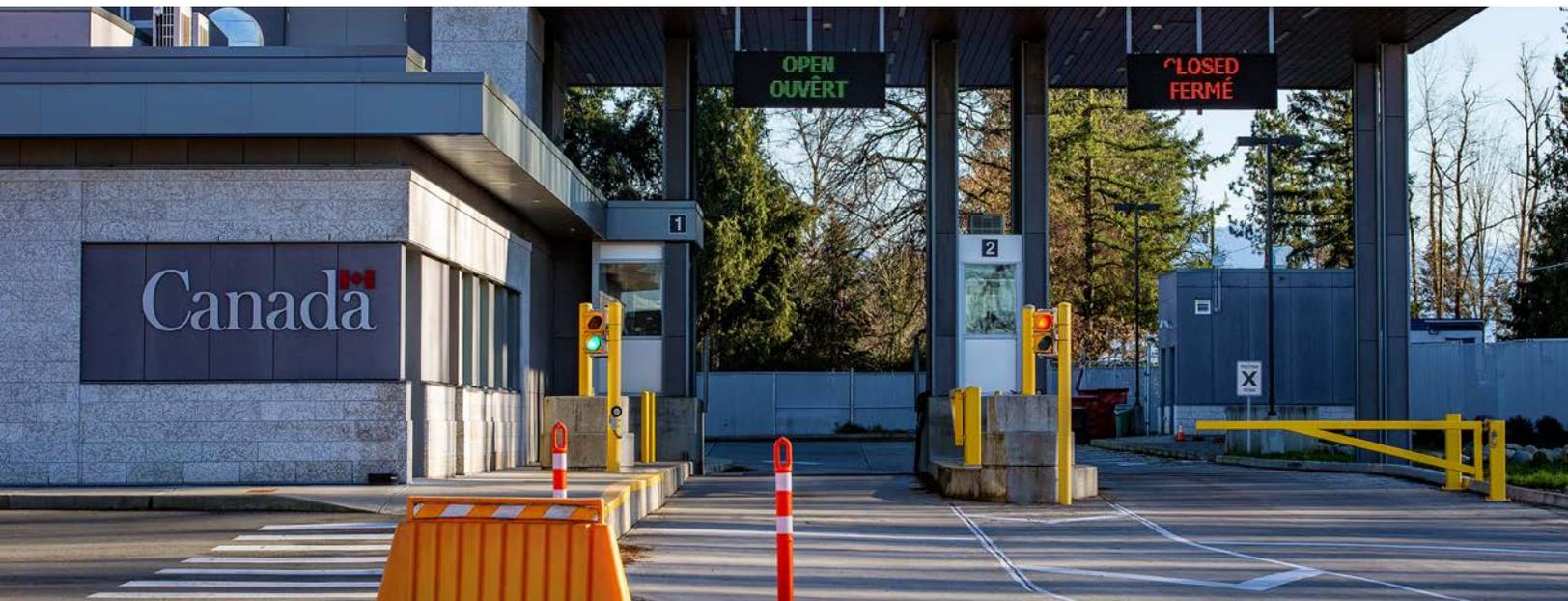
By Dr. Laurie Trautman, Director  
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There are many social and economic ties that bind the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Certainly, our integrated supply chains, multinational businesses, and linkages between families and friends spread throughout the continent undergird the relationship. It is our borders, however, that literally serve as the ties that bind us. The extent to which those borders enable goods, people, and services to flow between the three countries drives much of our ability not only to remain competitive on a global stage, but also to pursue an integrated North America.

North America has long benefited from various networks of cross-border collaboration. Undoubtedly, this includes policies enacted at the highest level of government, such as trusted traveler and trader programs, preclearance processes, and of course, the USMCA itself, which directly addresses many aspects of cross border trade.

However, there is an even more successful history of collaboration at the sub-national scale, pursued by [regional borderland communities](#). These networks consist of local, regional, state, provincial





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stakeholders from the public, private, and academic sectors. They live and work in the space where the rubber meets the road and are often the source of innovation that drives national policies that help advance the competitiveness of North America.

Several examples are the Cross-Border [Express](#) that enables pedestrians to access the Tijuana Airport from San Diego and vice versa, the [Trusted Traveler](#) programs that provide expedited passage for people traveling across the Canada – US border and the US-Mexico border, and the [Enhanced Driver's License](#) for land and sea travel across both US borders. These programs, which originated at the regional scale and were advocated by sub-national entities, help to integrate the people and goods of North America by thinning the border, enabling greater business and manufacturing efficiencies while also improving our quality of life and meeting security priorities.

Despite their obvious contributions to North American competitiveness, many regional cross-border networks remain ad-hoc, underfunded, and siloed. All three national governments should strategically leverage these networks, identify partners at the subnational scale, and collaborate

with them to advance common goals. For example, frameworks such as the North American Leaders Summit could tap on sub-national networks such as the [Pacific Northwest Economic Region](#) to continue to drive agenda items rather than letting them languish.

The need for political engagement at the highest levels is especially critical as we emerge from the pandemic without a bi-lateral or a tri-lateral border policy accord. Without the political will and capacity to align border processes, we risk exacerbating the 'thickness' of the border.

Already we are facing increased barriers to crossing the border, evidenced through [longer wait-times](#), [reduced volumes](#), and increasingly misaligned requirements. For example, the US recognizes the Cansino vaccine, which was used to inoculate educators in Mexico, but Canada does not. Canada requires the digital submission of a trip manifest prior to arrival, while the US and Mexico do not. The gaps between these approaches, which are new to our post-pandemic environment, are creating confusion and suppressing travel, which fractures our connectivity.

## STRENGTHENING NORTH AMERICAN TIES – A Must For Competitiveness

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A strong North America requires alignment wherever possible in our border policies and management. A thicker border not only inhibits competitiveness by erecting barriers, but also dampens the soft diplomacy that is a by-product of an efficient border. The three countries could use the work agenda created at the 2021 North American Leaders Summit (NALS) and the preparations for the next NALS to address the inconsistencies such as those flagged above.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we face a pivotal moment for re-energizing our political focus and investment in North America. We need to mend the ties that bind us and leapfrog our border innovations cooperatively. Now is the time to fully achieve the concept of ‘[cleared once, accepted twice](#)’ in which screening by one country is acceptable to the other, thereby avoiding duplicative

inefficiencies. It is also the time to innovate and expand our trusted traveler programs, and to leverage technology for a more seamless cross-border environment *together*.

In order to fully achieve these goals, it is critical that we approach the border as points of connection between Canada, the US, and Mexico, rather than lines of division. Non-governmental groups like the [North American Strategy for Competitiveness](#) and the [Future Borders Coalition](#) are actively working towards these goals. Our governments should leverage their energy, innovation, and collaborative frameworks. This is not a utopian vision. It is a business case for the immense value of facilitating billions of dollars of goods, millions of travelers, and countless industries and communities that depend on the efficiency of our shared borders.





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