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Getting Ready for Post-Pandemic Border Policy

By Mark Agnew

Border management was a unique and perennial challenge for the continent long before the start of the pandemic. Differing security considerations, geographies, and domestic politics, among other factors, contribute to creating relationships to each border that vary in important ways.

Yet, in spite of these differences, sound border management that facilitates legitimate commerce and travel is in the shared interest of Canada, Mexico, and the United States alike. Strengthening the points of connection between the countries is,

and will remain, fundamental to strengthening North American ties.

The challenges facing North America's borders have been recognized over the years and resolutions have been sought via joint initiatives such as the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, the Beyond the Border initiative, and the Regulatory Cooperation Council between Canada and the US, and the Twenty-first Century Border Management process between Mexico and the US.



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These initiatives have been laudable, yet episodic. Too often leaders seek a deliverable when arriving for a photo op at the White House or Parliament or at a border crossing, only to be followed by a flurry of momentum, and then withering.

We need to break this cycle, if our border policies – as it relates to the movement of people and cargo – will create the conditions for strengthening North American ties and fostering North American competitiveness. Achieving this will require two things to occur.

First is setting a realistic set of objectives that will engage stakeholders and generate momentum. Without this, initiatives are bound to fail. Success will only be achieved when there are proposals where stakeholders see a viable path to delivery and to meeting their needs, which in turn incentivizes them to engage in a process and collaborate with government to see initiatives go from inception to reality.

Second is the need for accountability and transparency, so that stakeholders can see a path ahead and sustain momentum. To adapt the

management maxim, if it can't be measured it is bound to fail. Put another way, tracking the status of initiatives to ensure milestones are met is vital for keeping stakeholders at the table. Industry is wary of new initiatives and reports that require substantial upfront work and input, if there is no hope of follow through, including regular engagement to offer feedback and collaborate moving forward.

What could a realistic set of objectives look like to reinvigorate border cooperation?

One area ripe area for collaboration is facilitating the movement of people. Travellers on both sides of each border have suffered from a patchwork of fluid travel restrictions, delays at points of entry, and troubled attempts at digitization.

Travellers need to see a renewed focus on deploying technological solutions that will increase the opportunities for contactless travel to improve flows at points of entry.

From a Canadian perspective, it is encouraging to see the [Advance Canada Border Services Agency](#)

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[Declaration](#), which mean less time spent by travellers at primary inspection kiosks when arriving at an airport. The Canadian and US (and Mexican) governments should build on these experiences and continue to support using similarly advantageous types of technologies. There also needs to be a resumption of service levels, which declined during the pandemic, to enable access by travellers to trusted traveller programs, such as NEXUS in the US-Canada context, that play a key role in reducing border congestion.

Our respective governments also cannot repeat the experience of the early pandemic period and need to ensure that enhanced border management plans are in place to meet pandemic-related challenges. Notably, it is important that governments adopt a 'risk management' approach to border restrictions, as opposed to a rigid 'zero risk' approach. We need agreed emergency plans in place and well-practiced for both borders before we face another border emergency as we faced with COVID.

Moreover, following the 2021 North American Leaders Summit, a joint statement was issued that included a pledge to re-envision and update the North American Plan for Animal and Pandemic Influenza (NAPAPI). The private sector should be invited to contribute ideas and work alongside public health officials to ensure any plans can be executed in the real world. This investment today will prepare us better for the next public health emergency.

Another ripe area for collaboration is supporting the movement of cargo. Industry coalitions, such as the Future Borders Coalition have invested significant effort to outline models across various

modes of transportation that could benefit from greater collaboration through their [Beyond Preclearance report](#). This includes priorities such as screen once, accept multiple times and expanding trusted trader programs.

All these ideas are great, but ultimately academic without accountability, regular engagement, and follow through. Too often, the press announcement takes place to much fanfare and energy, with follow through action occurring only glacially. It is critical for governments to have workplans that are published on a regular basis with transparency of progress against KPIs. This will keep governments honest, but also ensure stakeholders see a reason to remain engaged. This work will proceed largely in a bilateral context but lessons and best practices should be shared trilaterally so both the Canadian-US and Mexican-US borders can enhance as much as possible North America's economic prosperity.

The disruptions seen on the border because of the pandemic have underscored how fragile border operations are. The biggest mistake we could make is to shrug off the last few years and accept a return to mediocrity. We need to – and must - breathe new life in border cooperation as North America's economies are dependent on fluid trade between neighbors.

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