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No. 11 | July 2022

North America in the World

By Tom Long

Even as images of a “flat” world and effortless global connections gained popularity during the 1990s, regional relationships played a central role in structuring the world’s economic, social, and political landscape. The proliferation of regional agreements, organizations, and summits in Asia, Africa, and Europe responded to the opportunities and challenges presented by the shifting global environment.

Initially, so did the idea of North America. NAFTA and the region it integrated long has been thought of mostly in terms of its economic ties. But the launch of North American regionalism [was also driven by concerns](#) that the post-Cold War world would be one

of economic blocs. Canada and especially Mexico feared being left behind.

Since then, though, North American leaders have been ambivalent about the global role of their regional home. There has been little discussion—or even serious thought—about North America’s place in a [“world of regions.”](#) Compared to many other regional constructs, Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. leaders spend little effort trumpeting their region on the global stage, even as the economic powerhouse that it is. In a mirror image of South American regionalism, North America is highly integrated but rarely celebrated. Because North America does not present itself to the



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world as a cohesive region, few countries see or engage with it that way, nor do its citizens of think of “North America” per se.

But today, North America is poised to become *more* important to how Canada, Mexico, the United States—and countries in their neighborhood—are positioned in the world. North America’s importance as an economic base, long evident to anyone who cared to notice, is resurgent. So, too, is North America’s relevance to addressing global challenges. On top of that, the geopolitical logic for North America has grown more robust. Will North American leaders take notice?

Especially since the 2008-9 financial crisis, there has been a rise in regional centers of gravity and erosion of a U.S.-centric hubs-and-spokes organization at the global level. To that trend, we can add “three C’s” that are accelerating those dynamics: conflict, covid, and climate.

- **Conflict:** Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, competition between the United States and rival powers was reshaping the global context for regionalism. China had long been “NAFTA’s uninvited guest.” But wariness about

Chinese clout helped spur an escalating trade war with the United States, which also drew in Canada. China presented tough competition for Mexican manufacturing since the turn of the century and more recently clashed with Canada’s diplomatic approach. Enmity with Russia further underscores the strategic value of North America as a geopolitical and economic base. If the Russia-China axis survives the conflagration in Ukraine, North America’s geopolitical and geoeconomic importance will be even greater.

- **Covid:** The world economy remains roiled by supply chain disruptions initiated by pandemic closures. Combined with the trade tensions with China, the pandemic made plain the value of possessing regional responses with resilient and reliable supply chains to global uncertainty. But even within North America, nationalist responses trumped regional cooperation. The strongest links of North America’s economic integration were built on the [strength of flexible, timely production](#). The pandemic underscored that North America needs regional cooperative frameworks to match it with the private sector’s vibrant production platform. Updating governance ties

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would help North America address transnational challenges and be well prepared for future crises, including new waves or future pandemics. Doing so would make the region a global model in moments of uncertainty.

- **Climate:** Climate change is considered the paradigmatic global issue. In many ways, that's undeniable. But many of the *responses* to climate change, in both mitigation and adaptation, must be regional. North America is an energy-guzzling, carbon-intensive economy—this must change, rapidly and jointly. A regional turn in climate policy can help. For example, work by Daniela Stevens and Mariana Sánchez shows how regional energy and electric vehicle infrastructure is [creating subnational energy regions](#) that help transition to a lower-carbon future. The region must prepare, together, to face the powerful storms, droughts, and fires wrought by a changing climate. It has to prepare for significant water shortages in certain areas, affecting agricultural production, for example. Its adaptation needs a regional approach, including recognizing and responding to climate-induced migration.

These global trends create an impetus for building a North American region with a clear place and logic on the global stage, while also helping address regional challenges. However, trends along do

not ensure North America's future, let alone the emergence of the "[North American community](#)" that scholar Robert Pastor long advocated. Despite their shared geographies, regions are not natural or inevitable entities. Nor are they solely economic. If treated as such, they are unlikely to thrive. Both politicians and citizens of the three countries need to understand the value of cooperation. In North America, the economic interests and social forces of integration have long existed, but agreement and dedication to a regional project has been episodic. To meet the moment, North America needs a regional, political vision to buttress its integrated production capacities, shape fair and efficient markets, and tackle shared problems. If North America is to be more than a collection of countries united by the gravitation pull of the U.S. market, North American leaders should start by making a bolder case for North America's place in a world of regions.

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