

## **The Broken North American Consensus. Mexico-US-Canada Relations in the Trump Era**

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### **RESUMEN:**

La idea de América del Norte, aunque imperfecta y frágil, también se ha fundamentado en un consenso que ha facilitado las interacciones, particularmente en el ámbito comercial, entre Canadá, México y Estados Unidos. Este ensayo analiza cómo Estados Unidos, Canadá y México han construido un sentido compartido de destino, intereses y valores a través del entendimiento mutuo, creando así el Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (TLCAN). El trabajo se divide en tres secciones: la primera explora brevemente cómo los esfuerzos de cooperación durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial fomentaron

### **ABSTRACT:**

The idea of North America, though imperfect and fragile, has also been grounded in a consensus that has facilitated interactions, particularly in trade policy fields, among Canada, Mexico, and the United States. However, several signs suggest that this consensus is no longer prevailing. This essay examines how the United States, Canada, and Mexico fostered a shared sense of destiny, interests, and values through mutual understanding, thereby creating a consensus during the years of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It also explores how nationalist and protectionist movements in

lazos más estrechos entre Estados Unidos y sus vecinos, sentando las bases de un incipiente sentido de América del Norte como región; la segunda revisa las ideas fundamentales que dieron forma al consenso norteamericano durante la era del TLCAN, y la sección final destaca los momentos en los que este consenso se ha roto y se encuentra en proceso de redefinición.

**Palabras clave:**

consenso de América del Norte, relaciones Estados Unidos-México, relaciones Estados Unidos-Canadá, comercio exterior, imperialismo norteamericano, Donald Trump

all three countries have disrupted this consensus. This work is divided into three sections: the first briefly explores how cooperative efforts during World War II fostered closer ties between the United States and its neighbors, laying the groundwork for a nascent sense of North America as a region; the second reviews the foundational ideas that shaped the North American consensus during the NAFTA era. The final section decisively addresses instances where this consensus has been broken and is seeking a redefinition.

**Keywords:**

North American consensus, US-Mexico Relations, US-Canada Relations, Trade, America imperialism, Donald Trump

**Introduction**

During the first days of his presidency, Donald Trump reignited a sense of American imperialism across North America. At first glance, this may appear to be yet another example of his characteristic political bravado. While Trump's suggestion of absorbing Canada is clearly unrealistic, his ambition to annex Greenland is indicative not only of regional but also global ambitions tied to the "Make America Great Again" politics. Trump once again weaponized trade against Mexico and Canada by threatening

a 25% tariff if they failed to secure their borders with the United States. Moreover, he accused the government of Mexico of having an “intolerable alliance” with the drug cartels. Trump’s neo-expansionist rhetoric, whether it results in tangible consequences or not, is symptomatic of the broader unease afflicting international relations in North America. Robert Pastor, a referent advocate of the region, once described North America as “an idea whose time has not yet arrived,” with true trilateralism remaining largely inexistent. Nevertheless, Pastor argued, North America as an “entity” has existed in practice, particularly during the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) era (1994–2018), when the region operated under the need for a “framework of predictable [trade] rules” (Pastor, 2008; Pastor, 2011). This is precisely one of the deepest fractures inflicted on North America—the erosion of certainty once provided by mutual understanding, now steering the region toward a more Hobbesian state of anarchy.

The idea of North America, though imperfect and fragile, has also been grounded in a consensus that has facilitated interactions, particularly in trade policy fields, among Canada, Mexico, and the United States of the last three decades. The concept of consensus is inherently elusive. However, at a minimum, it can be defined as follows: It occurs among actors with differing interests and identities, implying that they have adjusted their positions to align with others. For consensus to be effective, it must be widely accepted as a truth, reducing the influence of competing policy perspectives (McLean, & McMillan, 2003). All these elements of the definition are applicable to the North American case.

This essay examines how the United States, Canada, and Mexico fostered a shared sense of destiny, interests, and values through mutual understanding, thereby creating a consensus during the years of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It also explores how nationalist and protectionist movements in all three countries have disrupted this consensus. This work is divided into three sections: the first briefly explores how cooperative efforts

during World War II fostered closer ties between the United States and its neighbors, laying the groundwork for a nascent sense of North America as a region; the second reviews the foundational ideas that shaped the North American consensus during the NAFTA era; the final section decisively addresses instances where this consensus has been broken and is seeking a redefinition.

### **Building Consensus in Critical Times**

International relations in North America have historically oscillated between periods of amity and animosity, reflecting a broader rule in world politics: interactions among societies rarely follow a linear trajectory toward peace and cooperation (Carr, 2001; Kagan, 2008). A classic example of this fluctuation occurred during the era of American Expansionism, when the United States, guided by the ideology of Manifest Destiny, pursued territorial growth at the expense of its neighbors to fulfill its national ambitions of reaching the Pacific coast. During this period, U.S. foreign policy took an aggressive stance toward both Canada and Mexico. To prevent military conflict, Canada agreed the sale of Oregon, and Mexico went to war, resulting in losing half of its territory. By comparison, during the World Wars, the United States adopted a more amicable and cooperative diplomatic approach across the hemisphere. This period saw the concretization of closer ties with both Canada and Mexico, exemplified by military alliances against Axis powers and trade agreements that fostered mutual collaboration (Vazquez & Meyer, 2012; Thompson & Randall, 2008).

Periods of sustained cooperative relations are rooted in shared understandings that provide international actors with a common ground for action (Wendt, 1995; Checkel, 2005; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). During the two World Wars, Canada, Mexico, and the United States set aside long-standing animosities to address common goals. As is well known, the United States initially hesitated

to engage decisively in World War II. However, its eventual full commitment to the war effort led to a strategic alliance with Canada, buttressing North American security through key agreements such as the Ogdensburg Agreement (1940) and the Hyde Park Declaration (1941) (Thompson & Randall, 2008). In essence, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Mackenzie King recognized that coordinating and integrating their countries' industrial and military capabilities would not only enhance war efforts but also strengthen the joint defense of North America (Mackenzie King, 1941). This acknowledgment of their economic and strategic interdependence laid the groundwork for institutions like the NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) and other military alliances.

Likewise, World War II marked a watershed in the relationship between Mexico and the United States. While the Good Neighbor Policy contributed to easing decades of strained relations—particularly following the Mexican petroleum expropriation—the ties between Mexico and the United States deepened beyond such diplomatic goodwill alone. Like Canada, Mexico's North American orientation was reaffirmed during this period. At the time, it was widely recognized that Mexico's connections with the broader world, especially Europe, were limited (Attolini, 1950). Mexican Ambassador to Washington, Francisco Castillo Nájera, captured this shift in a communication to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, stating that the war presented “from all standpoints, the most favorable [moment] for the initiation of a new era in the history of the international relations of Mexico and the United States” (Office of the Historian, 1941). The establishment of the Mexican-American Commission for Economic Cooperation (1943) underscored this new understanding. Both nations agreed that ensuring stable production and development of Mexico's strategic materials industry required the indispensable cooperation of the United States (Office of the Historian, 1943). This mutual recognition of interdependence was further cemented by the

U.S. reliance on Mexican labor, as evidenced by the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, also known as the “Bracero Program.” During the war, Mexico not only became more firmly integrated into the U.S. geoeconomic sphere but also aligned strategically with the United States. This alignment was reaffirmed years later when Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz assured U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson that the United States could “be absolutely positive that in critical situations [during the Cold War], Mexico would be unequivocally at Washington’s side” (Santa-Cruz, 2011).

### **The Good Old Days of NAFTA**

The 1980s marked another significant leap forward in North American integration. President Ronald Reagan set the tone for the decade by proposing a North American free trade agreement encompassing Canada and Mexico. Historically, both countries had been wary of free trade with the United States, but a new understanding began to take shape during this period, ushering in the neoliberal era in North America. In 1988, Canada and the United States strengthened their bilateral trade relationship with the negotiation and signing of the Canada–U.S. Free Trade Agreement (1987). This milestone, described by President George H. W. Bush and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney as a “new partnership,” marked another pivotal moment in their international relations (Thompson & Randall, 2008). Meanwhile, Mexico dismantled its protectionist economy through the structural reforms led by President Miguel de la Madrid. Later, President Carlos Salinas formally proposed the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signaling Mexico’s commitment to economic integration with North America. These were promising times for the spirit of North American cooperation. President George H. W. Bush praised Mexico’s efforts to enhance trade with the United States. Bush stated, “The Mexican renaissance has begun,” and as a sign of the

warm atmosphere surrounding the relationship, he remarked: “When I speak of Americans and Mexicans, I can only say: *Somos una familia*” (Bush, 1990). Similarly, Brian Mulroney highlighted the strengthened ties between Canada and Mexico, affirming that the two nations were building “a solid foundation for a new partnership” (Beltrame, 1990).

With NAFTA, for the first time in history, the three countries perceived North America as a region composed of three countries. This perspective was largely driven by global trade dynamics at the end of the Cold War, as regions became more relevant in the world economy. Both Canada and Mexico sought to strengthen their interdependence with the United States, while also fostering their own bilateral relations because of the regional trade spirit brought by NAFTA. It is true: Canada was not particularly eager to strengthen its relationship with Mexico. However, the possibility of a bilateral trade agreement between Mexico and the United States—without Canada—raised concerns in Ottawa about potentially losing influence with its southern neighbor. This situation highlighted the importance of maintaining a trilateral relationship in the region. In response, Canada actively sought inclusion in the emerging trilateral framework. As Prime Minister Brian Mulroney declared, Canada had “no intention of being left out of anything” (Beltrame, 1990). This stance reflected Canada’s awareness of the new regional dynamics from which it could not be disengaged. The strength of the “North American idea,” as articulated by Pastor (2011), was clearly reflected in the political dynamics of the time. Both President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien initially criticized NAFTA during their election campaigns, casting doubt on the agreement’s prospects for finalization and implementation. However, once in office, both leaders emerged as strong proponents of the pact (Thompson & Randall, 2008; Santa-Cruz, 2011).

Trade in North America was already substantial before NAFTA, but the agreement added value by enhancing institutionalization. President Ernesto Zedillo stated in an interview that “The most important thing about this new



understanding [...] is to establish clear rules for interaction” (Zedillo, 2000). The certainty provided by NAFTA’s rules became one of its most important features—a quality now carried forward in the United States–Mexico–Canada–Agreement (USMCA). NAFTA provided Canada and Mexico protection against disruptive unilateral actions by the United States, such as the general 10% tariff imposed with the “Nixon shock”. In the same token, following the 2001 Quebec Summit of the Americas, Jean Chrétien, Vicente Fox, and George W. Bush issued a joint statement that underscored the importance of predictable rules. They noted that NAFTA “led to the elaboration of clear rules of commerce, and [...] can ensure a more predictable framework for the further development of trade and investment within North America” (The White House, 2001).

Likewise, the NAFTA consensus encompassed a democratic component, particularly evident after Vicente Fox’s victory in the Mexican elections. In 2001, Jean Chrétien, Vicente Fox, and George W. Bush emphasized this shared commitment, describing themselves as “North American neighbors who share common values and interests” (McKenna, 2006). Years later, Fox reiterated this sentiment, stating, “The strength of democracy must become one of the greatest principles for our region” (Ibid.). During the closely contested 2006 Mexican presidential election when Felipe Calderón narrowly defeated Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly endorsed Mexico’s democratic processes. Harper affirmed, “Canada trusts entirely the institutions and the electoral process in Mexico” (The Globe and Mail, 2006). Years later, President Calderón asserted that “Americans, Canadians, and Mexicans have reiterated that the values upon which our societies are founded are democracy, freedom, justice, and respect for human rights” (The White House, 2009). Similarly, at the North American Leaders’ Summit in Guadalajara, President Barack Obama highlighted the region’s shared values, stating they include “peace, democracy, and human



rights” (Ibid.). During Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration, President Barack Obama praised the “deepening of Mexico’s democracy,” further reinforcing the importance of democratic principles to North American cooperation (The White House, 2013).

Foremost, free trade and the recognition of acting as a unified region were central to the North American consensus during the NAFTA era. Ernesto Zedillo described the agreement as a crucial tool to “better take advantage of the enormous commercial and productive potential shared by Canada, the United States, and Mexico” (p.10). Similarly, Robert Zoellick, U.S. Trade Representative under the George W. Bush administration, strongly advocated for free trade, asserting, “Trade is a winner,” and “We’re not afraid to make that case” (McKenna, 2001). As China’s economic influence expanded, North American leaders became increasingly aware of the necessity of addressing the challenges posed by the Asian giant collectively. In 2006, President George W. Bush remarked, “The great competition for our respective economies, in the long run, will be coming from the Far East” (McKenna, 2006). Later, President Barack Obama emphasized the importance of regional unity, stating that in the “21st century, North America is defined not simply by our borders, but by our bonds” (The White House, 2016). In 2014, at the Toluca North American Leaders Summit, President Obama, Canadian Prime Minister Harper, and President Peña Nieto jointly declared, “Our engagement as a region with the rest of the world has a direct impact on the competitiveness of our economies and the prosperity of our societies” (The White House, 2014). Just months before Donald Trump assumed the U.S. presidency, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau underscored the region’s leadership potential, stating that: “We are unanimous in our belief that on this issue, North America can—and indeed must—lead the way” (The White House, 2016).

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## **A Broken Region: In Search of Redefinition?**

The North American integration project consistently faced significant challenges in achieving success (McDougall, 2006; Domínguez & Fernández de Castro, 2001), and it has undeniably attracted criticism from both the far left and far right, including examples like the Tea Party movement and prominent figures such as Senator Bernie Sanders. However, the real challenges emerged with Donald Trump taking center stage in the political arena. Additionally, protectionist and nationalist currents in both Canada and Mexico further fractured the North American consensus that had prevailed during the NAFTA era. Trump criticized NAFTA as the “single worst trade deal ever” and replaced it with the USMCA, which marked a shift to a more protectionist framework. Key provisions of the USMCA include increased regional content requirements, minimum wage standards for automobile production, and a “China provision” mandating consultation before engaging in trade agreements with non-market economies. During his presidency, Donald Trump weaponized trade policies by imposing tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Mexico and Canada, which were later removed. He also threatened a progressive 5% tariff on all Mexican imports unless migration issues were addressed. As Trump prepares to begin his second term, he has threatened with further aggressive measures such as a 25% tariff on imports from Canada and Mexico. These moves underscore a broader shift toward a reconfiguration of trade policies in North America.

Fractures in the North American consensus have been caused not only by the United States but also by Mexico and Canada. While Morena presidents Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Claudia Sheinbaum regard trade agreements with North America as essential to Mexico’s economy, they have historically criticized free trade. Additionally, they have implemented significant institutional changes that contradict the democratic ideals of the NAFTA era. For example, the elimination of independent agencies violates the spirit

of the USMCA, particularly Chapter 28 on good regulatory practices, which requires transparency and objective analysis in policy-making—standards that are compromised when government institutions act as both judge and party. Furthermore, judicial reforms under the current administration threaten the independence of judicial processes, a principle explicitly upheld in the agreement. These reforms have been criticized by American political figures for causing “negative impact on Mexico’s democratic institutions, separation of powers, judicial independence and transparency”; and possibly contradicting “commitments made in the USMCA” (Stanton, 2024).

In a very unusual episode, both the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, and the Canadian Ambassador, Graeme Clark, publicly raised concerns about Mexico’s judicial reforms. In response, López Obrador called for a “diplomatic pause” in Mexico’s relations with Canada and the United States. While this pause had no formal legal effects, it underscored the evident fracturing in the democratic understandings of the North American consensus. Amid these tensions, some political actors in Canada are attempting to use the strained moment to distance themselves from Mexico as they are concerned about the so-called “Mexicanization” of the U.S.–Canada relationship, negatively affecting what they historically consider a “special relationship” with the United States.

Trump’s neo-protectionist policies further blur distinctions between Canada and Mexico, treating both similarly in terms of tariff threats (WOLA, 2024). Canadians have expressed strong opposition to being equated with Mexico by U.S. President Donald Trump. Ontario Premier Doug Ford called the comparison “the most insulting thing I’ve ever heard from [...] the United States of America” (Gillies, 2024). Additionally, some Canadian politicians have taken advantage of Trump’s criticism of Mexico, particularly concerning its perceived connections to China, to launch rhetorical attacks on the country. Deputy Prime Minister and former Foreign Affairs Minister

Chrystia Freeland expressed her concerns, aligning with the Americans, about “Mexico not acting in alignment with Canada and the U.S. in its economic relationship with China” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2024). These sentiments have fueled proposals to distance Canada from the trilateral framework of North American cooperation. Alberta Premier Danielle Smith has voiced her support for excluding Mexico from the USMCA, stating that she is “a thousand percent” in favor of this move (Ibid.). If these proposals were to materialize, they could spell the end of the North American integration model.

## **Conclusions**

This essay has discussed the argument that a North American consensus—built on recognized interdependence, free trade, predictable trade rules, democratic values, and the strategic benefits of acting as a unified region in the global economy—has served as a framework for international relations among Canada, Mexico, and the United States since NAFTA. However, this consensus has fractured due to the reversal and redefinition of its core components at both domestic and international levels. Paradoxically, in recent years of multiple crises, including the covid-19 pandemic and skepticism toward regionalism, economic relations in North America have strengthened. Mexico and Canada have become indisputably top trade partners for the United States, displacing China by a considerable margin —Mexico accounts for 16% of U.S. trade, Canada for 14%, and China for 11% (US Census Bureau, 2025). It is likely that the region—or at least U.S. bilateral relations with Canada and Mexico—will continue to deepen economically, albeit under new frameworks. In this evolving North American consensus, free trade no longer dominates as protectionism gains momentum as a common language in North America. Similarly, each country and the region as a whole appear to be moving

away from globalization. In Canada, the potential election of Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre as prime minister, replacing Justin Trudeau, could mark a shift in the country's stance toward free trade. Poilievre is less supportive of free trade compared to the Canadian Liberal Party, which may further reshape North America's economic dynamics.

As for democracy and liberal values, leaders such as Donald Trump and former president López Obrador seemed more comfortable removing these principles from their bilateral relations. While it is true that Trump and Morena's presidents have weakened democratic practices in their respective countries, they were democratically elected and enjoy democratic legitimacy. This may indicate that democracy in North America is evolving towards an illiberal form, and in the worst scenario, it is transiting to hybrid regimes with outward authoritarian practices. The future of the North American region remains uncertain. In 2025, the region may have three leaders with little support for integration. However, the historical evolution of the three countries makes the case for the practicality and convenience of regional cooperation. Whether the "Three Amigos" embrace it or not, several factors continue to drive regional integration. These include competition with China, the growing strategic threat from Russia, the need for better border control in Canada and Mexico, and the centripetal pull of the United States, which influences its neighbors in economic, migratory, and geopolitical terms. These dynamics make it difficult to imagine the complete dissolution of the North American project.

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