

Mexico summit must be more than photo-op

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With an overflowing domestic agenda and a proliferation of international crises, some may question whether President Barack Obama should go to Guadalajara today and Monday for a North American Summit with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderón. The answer is that our neighbors sit at the intersection of our domestic and international agendas, and the leaders have much to do to prevent accidents and forge a cooperative approach to improving our economies.

No two countries in the world are more important to the U.S. economy, security, and society than our two neighbors. Canada and Mexico are our two largest markets for U.S. exports and two largest sources of energy imports. One-third of all immigrants in the United States come from Mexico, and more than half of all the tourists visiting the United States come from Canada and Mexico.

As our economy plunged in the past 18 months, public support for free trade plummeted, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) became a veritable piñata for pandering pundits. But NAFTA accomplished what it was designed to do (and recent polls suggest that a plurality again support it). It dismantled trade and investment barriers, and trade more than tripled and foreign investment more than quintupled among the three countries.

Since the market became continental, and especially since 9/11, new problems have emerged and old ones have grown worse. The problem is not NAFTA but the failure by the three governments to move the continental experiment forward. Just like the financial crisis, governance did not keep pace with the growth of the market. Instead, the three governments have reverted to two dysfunctional bilateral relationships -- United States and Mexico and United States and Canada -- and the trilateral meetings became just photo opportunities.

That is why Guadalajara is so critical. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton correctly insisted that the leaders will make specific decisions. Here are some suggestions:

- To reinvigorate the North American economy, the three leaders should focus on transportation. Trade has tripled, but since no new roads have been built, the costs of trade have soared. The three leaders should ask their transportation chiefs to draft a North American Plan for Transportation and Infrastructure, which they could discuss

in a year in Canada. They should also agree to a uniform set of rules on truck safety, and the U.S. should permit Mexican trucks to enter.

- The paramount challenge for North America is to narrow the income gap separating Mexico from its neighbors. That is the essential missing piece of comprehensive immigration reform, and in the long-term, the only way to end illegal migration. The governments should provide substantial aid for a North American Investment Fund that would build roads and communications to connect the poorer states of Mexico to the North American market. By lifting Mexico to the "first world," the Fund would create new export opportunities for the United States and set a model for the world.
- They should pledge to adopt similar or compatible cap-and-trade systems to reduce carbon emissions. They should task their legislative leaders to work together on this, and ask the North American Commission on Environmental Cooperation to standardize measurements and assess progress and regression.
- They should prepare a single, uniform approach to deal with H1N1 (swine flu) in the fall.
- In order to improve labor rights and the environment, they should negotiate a "social charter" and instruct their ministers to identify ways to achieve the goals.
- In order to educate a new generation to the importance of their neighbors, they should provide scholarships for studying in each other's country and funding for academic centers to study North American issues. The United States funds centers for every region of the world except North America.
- To facilitate and secure legitimate crossing of the borders, the three governments should work together to train unified teams and develop uniform procedures.

Few of these decisions are possible without a vision of North America's future that gives the three publics a common purpose, a sense that they are part of a community where problems cannot be contained within one country, and all benefit from each country's success. To move forward, the leaders need to create some lean but effective institutions, and the U.S. needs to reorganize the way it deals with its neighbors as the issues slice across every domestic and foreign policy.

President Obama can make this summit more than just a photo-op by articulating a vision and making decisions that will bring our three countries together. The time is ripe for the most famous community organizer to organize a North American community.

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