

Border 2033: Three Scenarios for the United States and Mexico

By: Peter Engelke, Deputy Director of Foresight, Scowcroft Strategy Initiative

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Global Energy Center

Scenarios are stories about how the future might unfold. Designed to stir imaginative thinking about how best to manage the present in order to shape the future, scenarios are used by foresight practitioners to engage policymakers, public officials, corporate and philanthropic leaders, and the public. Built around core uncertainties that unfold over

time, scenarios are designed to show how variations in one or a few variables might result in very different future worlds. The three scenarios presented here are not predictions; rather, they portray alternative worlds that might exist ten years from now in the year 2033 based upon uncertainties in the United States and Mexico's relationship today.



Texas is seen to the left as U.S. authorities use boats along the Rio Grande river while monitoring the border between the United States and Mexico near Penitas, Texas, U.S., February 21, 2022. Picture taken with a drone. Picture taken on February 21, 2022. REUTERS/Adrees Latif

Scenario 1: A Great Muddle

Looking back over the past decade from the year 2033, not much has changed regarding how the United States and Mexico manage their shared border. Neither country has been willing to sustainably invest the resources—time, money, vision, creativity, or political capital—to maximize the economic, political, social, and environmental gains that would come from a closer working relationship. Although leadership in both countries often used the right words, both governments’ on-the-ground efforts proved to be limited.

Inertia was too great to overcome. Each country defaulted to preexisting models that prioritized individual national interests over binational accords. While studies consistently showed that tighter coordination would yield better outcomes, the cooperative needle never moved far.

Over the past decade there were several examples of this dynamic. The High-Level Economic Dialogue, which enjoyed a few years of productive life in the early 2020s, withered away due to declining political support. With it went visibility for big strategic

reforms. At lower levels of government, progress occurred, but mostly at the margins despite (frequent) good intentions within various departments and ministries. Nevertheless, there were a few improvements. For instance, the Unified Cargo Processing program was expanded, the SENTRI (Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection) program was made more efficient, and infrastructure was slightly improved to allow for more efficient traffic flows at land ports of entry on both sides of the border.

While these improvements were indeed upgrades to border management practices, they barely kept pace with the rapidly evolving global market. Wait times at land ports of entry stayed roughly the same, about 125 minutes at peak hours for commercial vehicles. Increasing traffic volumes surpassed the potential impact of border developments, meaning little to no direct economic gain from new border management mechanisms. Local air pollution and resulting carbon emissions slightly improved due to electric battery cars reducing per-vehicle emissions, but trucks and other cargo vehicles remained diesel powered, making emission reductions smaller relative to their overall potential.



Residents observe containers that were placed in El Paso, Texas, on the banks of the Rio Bravo river, the border between the United States and Mexico, with the purpose of reinforcing border security and inhibiting the crossing of migrants into the United States, seen from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico December 27, 2022. REUTERS/José Luis González

Scenario 2: Hard Border

Compared with where things are in 2033, the early 2020s look like a golden age. The border now has been hardened to the point where security overwhelms all else, including the economy, the environment, and even bilateral relations. Things unraveled fast in the mid-2020s when security-related fears in both countries turned public opinion dramatically against the border. Such fears always existed and were based in legitimate concerns, but over the decade these fears reached a new crescendo.

Surges of illicit goods—mostly drugs heading north and weapons heading south—intersected with heightened anxieties about crime and addiction in the United States, and gang violence in Mexico. As politicians in both countries discovered the perils of ignoring public

opinion, public policies and investments soon began shifting toward zero-sum security-focused solutions.

In relatively short order, the programs and initiatives that were perceived as soft on security, specifically those that were designed to stress efficiency and stakeholder engagement, were terminated or reduced. The remaining programs that had efficiency components, such as the FAST (Free and Secure Trade) trusted traveler program, were revamped to make enrollment hurdles more onerous, ultimately reducing participation to a trickle.

The voices within and outside government that stressed the benefits to be had from experimentation, cooperation, and balancing were marginalized. Bureaucratic resources, including time, attention,



US soldiers install concertina wire next to the border fence between Mexico and the United States, in El Paso, Texas, United States, in this picture taken from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, April 4, 2019. REUTERS/José Luis González

and funding, went to one-dimensional security solutions instead of cooperation mechanisms. Even worse, the goodwill between Mexico and the United States, and the momentum toward cooperative approaches to border management, fizzled, with both countries pursuing unilateral solutions thought to best protect themselves from illicit flows.

These decisions had real downside consequences. Longer wait times resulting from underinvestment, poor cooperation, and a lack of appropriate technologies had negative economic impacts in the United States and Mexico, proving harmful to nearly every sector, especially those with extensive cross-border trade dependencies: manufacturing, agriculture, tourism, and wholesale trade.

Deteriorating environmental conditions have also plagued the border region, worsening every year as the result of scarce attempts to rein in local air pollution and solid waste generation from vehicles waiting to cross between the United States and Mexico. Even the security domain, ironically, has suffered: A refusal to invest in shared border management practices has enabled rather than discouraged illicit traffickers, who find that a lack of binational data sharing and enforcement cooperation offers them more space to ply their trades.

Scenario 3: Lift-Off

It is difficult to overstate how much better relations between the United States and Mexico are in 2023 compared with a decade ago, owing mostly to transformations in border management. Put simply, because both nations' governments were willing to envisage a new border relationship, the United States and Mexico have enjoyed handsome returns in the economic, security, environmental, and diplomatic realms. Because both governments were willing to treat the border as a region—rather than a hard and bright line—deserving of joint and cooperative management, they were able to envision and build more effective programs and tools that proved to be both more productive and secure.

The benefits extended beyond the border region itself, resulting in economic gains deep within both countries and gains for Mexico

at its southern border. Improved efficiencies at the border greatly assisted exporting and importing firms located hundreds of miles away from the border, while greater cooperation between the United States and Mexico at the border proved to be a catalyst for broader diplomatic relations, with US border and customs agencies cooperating with Mexican counterparts to improve the management and security of the southern border.

With political cover provided at the highest levels within both governments, officials in the two countries identified promising approaches to managing the border region in the mid-2020s—envisioned as a territory fifty to one hundred miles wide running the length of the two thousand-mile border—and then began implementing those ideas holding the greatest potential based



US President Joe Biden takes part in a welcome ceremony with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador for the North American Leaders' Summit in Mexico City, Mexico January 9, 2023. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

on pilot programs. Wherever practical, these reforms were implemented jointly, with an eye toward getting both governments to possess similar monitoring and processing capabilities.

The reforms were strategic, designed not as piecemeal interventions on either side of the border but as part of a larger binational approach to solving a chronic set of common problems across a coherent region. This required frequent coordination between the United States and Mexico, meaning that key institutions responsible for border operations such as Customs and Border Protection on the United States side and its counterparts on the Mexican side, the National Customs Agency of Mexico, Tax Administration Service, and the National Guard, built more trusting relationships, enabling faster and more far-reaching reform.

Existing joint programs such as Unified Cargo Processing were expanded, while programs that could not run jointly were harmonized to reduce and eliminate redundancies. New capabilities were created that focused on upgrading technologies and building smart systems, for example, drawing lessons from PITA (Proyecto de Integración Tecnológica Aduanera), one of Mexico's wireless cargo manifest system. Data gathering, sharing, and

analytical capabilities were dramatically boosted, which enabled authorities in both the United States and Mexico to access vehicle data in real time from multiple monitoring points along the full length of the border and full depth of the border region. These reforms produced beneficial impacts straight away, enabling more reforms that produced benefits, and so on in a virtuous cycle.

The result has been impressive: much shorter wait times (a full twenty-minute peak reduction on average compared with 2023), reduced air and solid waste pollution at ports of entry, and enhanced security outcomes on both sides of the border. A study conducted just last year, in 2032, showed that these improvements generated nearly a billion dollars annually in extra income on each side of the border, with nearly thirty-five thousand more jobs in Mexico alone, plus higher exports in both directions.

Perhaps even more significantly, closer cooperation led to spillover effects into other geographies and thematic arenas. Rising trust levels made it easier for the two countries to work more closely on finding solutions to managing Mexico's own southern border, for example. The bilateral relationship between Mexico and the United States is about as healthy as it has ever been.