

# When 200 million travellers find themselves beltless and shoeless: Thinking thick borders

## NO MORE FLASH AND DASH

Beginning June 2009, every Canadian who enters the United States must have a passport or equivalent documentation. This regulation will transform the once permeable, undefended, and easily traversed border for day trips into a high-security crossing point. The advantage of a thin border is obvious; and while it does lower transaction costs, this comes at a high price. It increases pressure for policy harmonization. The opposite is true for a thick border, which is typically long on security but short on efficiency—increased transaction costs, longer wait times, more inspections, bottlenecks, etc.

A rough estimate of the price tag for Canada-US border transactions is in the vicinity of a 3 percent tax on Canadian business (on the southern border, the price tag is about 5 percent for Mexican producers). By international standards, these transaction costs are not high and are simply part of doing business. They are no different from customs fees or shipping charges. In fact, real transaction costs have plummeted in recent times due to the introduction of new information technologies that enable the more efficient processing of travellers and trucks. However, staffing cutbacks among US customs agents and other personnel have increased waiting times at many border crossing points, and in the name of national security regulations, US authorities are demanding more paperwork, not less, from anxious Canadian exporters.

## BORDERS ARE ALWAYS A MIXTURE OF THICK AND THIN

Contrary to the popular perception of the “undefended, easily traversed border,” borders are always thick for security, food and health, and citizenship. Since 9/11, the elephant in the room has been the US Homeland Security doc-

BY DANIEL DRACHE

Daniel Drache is the associate director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, a professor of political science at York University, and author of the recently published *Defiant Publics: The Unprecedented Reach of the Global Citizen* (Polity Press, 2008).

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trine, which can be summed up in the innocuous-sounding phrase “security is first.” What this means is that US security goals and objectives are paramount and can override Canadian goals. This is not a mere academic squabble; it is fundamental and limits Canada-US cooperation as a practical matter and by necessity extends US control on Canada’s side of the once undefended border.

## THE DOCTRINE OF MAXIMUM RISK AVOIDANCE

The Bush-Cheney presidency adopted an extreme version of the doctrine of maximum risk avoidance that says in effect the United States can go to any length or enact any regulation to protect its national security interests regardless of costs to its neighbours. The former vice-president Dick Cheney put it this

way in an interview: if there was a 1 percent risk, it had to be treated as a 100 percent threat. In this doctrine there is no established definition of “risk assessment” that is goal driven and meets the public policy criteria of reasonable risk. Instead we have the ludicrous spectacle of more than 200 million men and women every year removing their belts and shoes every time they take a flight, all justified in the name of total risk avoidance.

The doctrine of total risk avoidance has many consequences that violate Canadian sovereignty beyond belt loosening. Beginning in June 2009, all Canadian airlines will be required to submit passenger lists to American authorities for vetting. The new rules do not apply to passengers travelling to the United States but to those in planes that fly over US air space! So far the Harper government is missing in action in fighting this regulation.

Should US authorities, on the basis of the information furnished by your Canadian air carrier, determine that you are a “risk to US security,” you cannot get on the plane. This new regulation forbids a Canadian citizen from even boarding the plane, a clear violation of Canadian law. Further, once your name appears on a security list, whether by error or mix up, there is no easy way to remove it. Over 60,000 Americans were barred from flying last year. Canadian senator Colin Kenny, chair of the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence, has found himself caught in the web of US security bureaucracy. His son’s name is on the US watch list despite the prominence of his father in security circles.

Anyone with doubts that the closing of the border has become a continent-wide reality should consider the following fact: removals of migrants (mainly Mexican and Central American peasant farmers and day labourers) from the United

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States by customs officials have reached over one million persons annually. Those removed are fingerprinted by US border security guards and then transported back across the border. Despite these measures, US authorities estimate that tens of thousands return within a year or less by crossing the border clandestinely to look for work in a continuing cycle of arrest and expulsion.

## THE CONTAGION OF GUNS AND DRUGS

The obvious question to ask is: are North Americans getting good value for the \$50 billion plus spent on securing the continent's borders?

Despite the thickening of the Canada-US border since 9/11, North America's cities are besieged by unparalleled threats from gun trafficking and drug smuggling. The paradox is that guns and drugs are pouring across the border in unprecedented amounts according to both American and Canadian law officials. Tens of thousands of handguns are smuggled into Canada's cities each year. Trafficking in narcotics has reached epidemic proportions despite the draconian measures of US Homeland Security to plug the border and make it 100 per cent safe and secure. By any standard, the US security doctrine is a failure for North American society: today there are more shootings, more narco-trafficking, and more contraband crossing North America's borders.

## EYEBALLING CRIMINALS: A 21<sup>st</sup>-CENTURY MAGINOT LINE

Canadian and American experts need to do better than propose the band-aid solutions now on offer. The fact is that as long as security is "first" and the elimination of any and all risk is the goal, the Canada-US border in its day-to-day operations will increasingly resemble its southern counterpart, with long wait times, bureaucratic red tape, and expensive choke points. The great northern border will get higher, wider, and tighter

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for people, goods, and services but not so it would appear for handguns, crack, and heroin. The Harper government is working on the impossible assumption that the border police can eyeball and identify, in the words of Senator Kenny's 2007 Senate Committee report, "people who cross borders to engage in criminal activity." In what century does the Standing Committee live to believe such nonsense?

So far, the attempt to dramatically reduce waiting times through the use of high-tech border technology has failed. There is little real time efficiency on the ground, and much more time is required to get these systems up and running. In his new book on the closing of the US border, Edward Alden delivers an eye-opening account that should serve as a

cautionary tale for those scholars who dream of a world in which sovereignty for the US Congress is a thing of the past and in which high-tech scanners will make the border disappear for millions of day visitors.

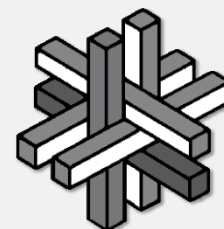
## PROLOGUE TO THE FUTURE: WE ARE IN RECOIL MODE

For North American publics, the much talked about idea of deep integration as a security and economic priority has run into a solid wall of skepticism. The free trade model of prosperity and development has been overtaken by an unparalleled global financial crisis. As a result, no one should be surprised that North American governance is in recoil mode.

In 2001-2, the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade undertook an extensive cross-country consultation and came to the conclusion that "the project of North America, whatever it turns out to be, is yet to be defined—a conclusion that has not lost its relevance in the succeeding years. As the prospects for agenda setting on a North American community grow dimmer, the interest in it from private sector actors and corporate-sponsored think tanks has reached new heights of conjecture. The inverse ratio of expert speculation to reality should set alarm bells ringing. 

## The Center for Research on North America at UNAM

The Center for Research on North America (CIS) originated in November 1988 as the University Research Program on the United States; three months later the University Council approved its transformation into the Center for Research on the United States (CISEUA). The National Autonomous University of Mexico thus made scientific research in this area a priority given the pre-eminence of the United States in the world and the importance of our geographical proximity to it.



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