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Leaders Stand Up for NAFTA

Carlos Macias
April 22, 2008

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North American leaders at the New Orleans' summit. (AP Images)

With a race for the White House in full swing and dominated by issues that hinge on North American relations—including trade policy, immigration, and border security—the leaders of Canada, the United States, and Mexico met in New Orleans for the April 21 and 22 North American Leaders' Summit.

In response to recent criticism of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by Democratic presidential candidates, U.S. President George Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and Mexico's President Felipe Calderón praised the trade pact. Harper called NAFTA "our best option to create jobs and compete effectively" while Calderón said the agreement created jobs in Mexico that helped slow emigration to the United States. Bush voiced support for NAFTA and also argued for passage of bilateral deals with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea. The North American Competitiveness Council presented a report—called *Meeting the Global Challenge*—voicing concern about recent isolationist rhetoric and providing recommendations to improve border management.

Information released by the White House in advance of the meeting emphasized the benefits of NAFTA: Canada serves as the United States' number one trading partner while Mexico ranks third; combined three-way trade reached \$930 billion last year and will likely hit \$1 trillion by the end of 2008. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, John Engler of the National Association of Manufacturers takes on the argument that a trade deficit between the United States and its NAFTA partners has led to job losses; he points out that the deficit relates largely to energy imports and not manufactured goods. On C-SPAN's *Washington Journal* COA's Vice President Eric Farnsworth explains that, "For what NAFTA was designed to do, it's been a success." He describes the treaty as a "living document" that's frequently revised by the three countries to make improvements.

In addition to NAFTA, regional security emerged as a paramount issue; Calderón emphasized the importance of bolstering security along the U.S.-Mexican border and applauded recent efforts by the Bush administration to halt arm smuggling and illegal crossings. Bush, in turn, lauded Calderón's anti-drug efforts and encouraged Congress to approve the proposed Merida Initiative, a \$1.4 billion project that aims to fight gangs, drug trafficking, and human smuggling in Mexico and Central America. A Brookings Institute analysis takes a closer look at how U.S. national security policy has shifted its attention to transnational crime in Latin America. At a recent AS/COA roundtable, Assistant Secretary of State David T. Johnson of the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs discussed the Merida Initiative.

Calderón also raised the issues of immigration, bringing attention to the contribution of Mexican immigrants in the rebuilding of New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He emphasized the importance of finding a solution to the question of immigration reform "with respect and responsibility." The U.S. presidential cycle has coincided with an upswing in anti-immigrant rhetoric and a patchwork of state immigration laws in the United States. The shift toward immigration crackdowns may be having an economic

Upcoming Programs

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- May 1 Public Luncheon: Brazilian Governors III New York
- May 1 AQ Spring 2008: Trade and Social Mobility with an Update on Cuba Miami

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Past Programs

- Apr 17 Colombia's Vice President Francisco Santos Calderón New York
- Apr 11 U.S. Congressman Eliot Engel New York
- Apr 9 Roundtable Discussion on the Merida Initiative New York

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impact; according to the World Bank, [remittances slowed down](#) (PDF) last year for the first time since they began being tracked, affecting recipients in Latin America.

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In an op-ed for the *Calgary Times*, AS/COA President Susan Segal highlights NAFTA as “[the most effective tool](#) we have to increase trade among the United States, Canada, and Mexico.” AS/COA Online [takes a closer look](#) at the remittance slowdown as well as Calderón’s [support](#) for Mexican immigrants during his January visit to the United States.