

The North American Union Farce

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It's got millions of rightwing citizens calling Congress, sponsoring legislation, and writing manifestos in defense of U.S. sovereignty. It comes up in presidential candidates' public appearances, has made it into primetime debates, and one presidential candidate—Ron Paul—used it as a central theme of his (short-lived) campaign.

Not bad for a plan that doesn't exist.

The North American Union (NAU) conspiracy theory is an offshoot of an all-too-real trilateral agreement called the "Security and Prosperity Partnership" (SPP). Cultivated by xenophobic fears and political opportunism, the NAU soon outstripped its reality-based progenitor. The confusion between the two today has made it difficult to sort out the facts. A little history helps.

The Impossible Leap from SPP to NAU After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into force in 1994, the three governments began to talk about expanding the scope of the agreement. Mexico, in particular, hoped to negotiate a solution to the border/immigration problem. However, the process was brought to a grinding halt by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

In a 2005 summit of then-Presidents George W. Bush, Vicente Fox, and Prime Minister Paul Martin in Waco, Texas, plans for "deep integration" between the three countries finally progressed with the official launch of the SPP. In the post-September 11th political context, immigration was off the table and U.S. security interests, along with corporate aims to obtain even more favorable terms for regional trade and investment, dominated the agenda.

As the executive branches of Canada, the United States, and Mexico conspired to expand NAFTA behind the backs of their unconvinced populaces, an independent task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations floated the idea of deeper integration under the name of the North American Community. Their paper, published in May of 2005 and financed by Archer Daniels Midland, Merrill Lynch, and Yves-Andres Istel, was not authored by an underground network of conspirators against U.S. sovereignty, as NAU critics would have us believe, but by a staid group made up mostly of former government officials and big business representatives.

This group envisioned regional integration as the creation of a "community" with shared commercial, security, and environmental purposes. It proposes sacrificing national policy tools to regional goals in areas such as creation of a common security perimeter, a permanent NAFTA tribunal to settle disputes, expanding NAFTA to restricted or excluded

sectors, and adopting a joint resource agreement and energy strategy. Indeed, some of these recommendations could very well present threats to democracy in all three countries. But the report does not include adopting a common currency or a single regional government and in fact states that a “union” along the lines of the European Union is not the right approach for North America .

The CFR paper was an academic exercise with pretensions of reaching policymakers. While some of its recommendations were later taken up in the Security and Prosperity Partnership talks, particularly suggestions on ways to improve transnational business, many of them were unanchored by reality and quickly went the way of the vast majority of policy recommendations.

The SPP, on the other hand, established working groups, rules, recommendations, and agreements that have had a huge and largely unknown impact on rules and policies. It is a complex web of negotiators who work without congressional oversight, public right-to-know, or civil society participation. The corporate world, however, has ample representation; the SPP advisory body called the “North American Competitiveness Council” reads like a “Who’s Who” of the largest transnationals based on the continent.

While the lack of transparency and the U.S. corporate and security-dominated agenda of the SPP are cause for great concern, they are not evidence of a plot to move toward a North American Union. Among the most bizarre assumptions of NAU scaremongers is the contention that the SPP will threaten U.S. sovereignty and erase borders. The idea of a regional union that effaces U.S. sovereignty is light-years away from George W. Bush’s foreign policy of unilateral action and disdain for international law and institutions. On the contrary, the precepts of the Bush administration’s foreign policy point to a return to the neocon belief that the world would be a better place if the U.S. government just ran everything.

Real and Conjured Threats

A poli-sci undergrad can tell you who will prevail if Canadian, U.S. , and Mexican negotiators get together to set out a common agenda. (Hint: it’s not Mexico or Canada .)

Officially described as “... a White House-led initiative among the United States and the two nations it borders—Canada and Mexico—to increase security and to enhance prosperity among the three countries through greater cooperation,” the SPP poses a much more palpable sovereignty threat to NAFTA’s junior partners. Canadians have been the most active in opposing the SPP, not out of fear of a mythical NAU but because of real threats to their ability to protect consumer health, natural resources, and the environment. SPP rules would force open oil production in environmentally sensitive areas and channel water supplies to U.S. needs. Likewise, Mexican civic organizations have protested against SPP pressures to privatize Mexican oil and allow greater U.S. intervention in the Mexican national security system.

Both these fears have been born out in Mexico in recent months. President Felipe Calderon is expected to announce a plan to privatize segments of the state-owned oil company PEMEX any day now. Plan Mexico (also called the Merida Initiative) currently before the U.S. Congress goes farther than any other measure in the history of the binational relationship toward developing a common security perimeter, within which U.S. government teams and

private defense companies would train security forces, coordinate intelligence-gathering, and provide defense equipment for use against internal threats. Few countries in the world have been willing to take this kind of risk.

As for moving toward a borderless North America , the years since the SPP began have witnessed a hardening of the U.S.-Mexico border never seen before in modern history. Fifteen thousand Border Patrol agents, 6,000 members of the National Guard, and a border fence powerfully belie any suggestion that the U.S. government aims to eliminate borders as it moves toward a secret North American Union.

Right Wing Red Herring?

How, then, to explain the fact that the NAU conspiracy has gone viral among rightwing populists in the United States ?

How to explain how a baseless myth has garnered the support of millions, made it into presidential candidates' debates, and become the subject of 20 state resolutions and a federal one?

Given the absolute lack of factual data to support the existence of a secret plan to create a North American Union, it's tempting to assume that the NAU scare was put forth as a red herring to divert attention from real issues facing the country. By channeling the insecurities of white working-class Americans into belief in an attack on U.S. sovereignty, the NAU myth obscures the very real globalization issues raised by NAFTA—job loss, labor insecurity, the surge in illegal immigration, and racial tensions caused by the portrayal of immigrants as invaders. This is convenient for both rightwing politicians and the government and business elites they attack because real solutions to these problems would include actions anathema to the right, including unionization, enforcement of labor rights, comprehensive immigration reform, and regulation of the international market. Instead, these options are shunted aside with the redefinition of the problem as a conspiracy of anti-American elites.

But espousing a conspiracy theory to contradict another conspiracy theory would be absurd. It's unlikely there's a central kitchen that cooked up the NAU red herring. The NAU myth taps into deep-rooted traditions and fears of many Americans and so, it has found a broad audience. This audience is predisposed to defend imagined communities from external threats, rather than face the complex task of unraveling the contradictions within their real communities brought about by a model of economic integration that generates insecurity and inequality.

In this context, outrage over a nonexistent NAU should not be confused with growing criticism of the Security and Prosperity Partnership. The SPP has proceeded to change national regulations, and create closed business committees without the participation of labor, environmental, or citizen voices. SPP negotiations provide a vehicle for more of the corporate integration that has eliminated jobs, impoverished workers, and threatened the environment across borders.

It has also served to extend the dangerous Bush security doctrine to Canada and Mexico , despite its lack of popularity in those countries and among the U.S. public. Its latest outgrowth, the \$1.4 billion-dollar Merida Initiative or Plan Mexico would extend a militarized model of fighting the real problems of drug-trafficking and human smuggling that would lead to greater violence and heightened binational tensions.

The NAU is a red herring. It serves to divert attention from domestic problems that have more to do with layers of contradictory policies and unmet challenges than any kind of anti-U.S. conspiracy.

It's time to separate out false threats from real threats. A good place to start is to demand transparency in trilateral talks (April 21-22 in New Orleans) and informed public debate on regional integration.

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