

COMMENTARY

The US-Mexico border's maritime gateway

Understanding North American trade dynamics requires looking beyond traditional land ports of entry to recognize the crucial role of maritime gateways in regional integration. A recent visit to the Port of Brownsville revealed an example of how strategic infrastructure can bridge continental trade and global supply chains.

Tucked away in South Texas, the Port of Brownsville might be one of North America's most strategically positioned seaports.

A gateway connecting sea to land, it demonstrates how regional trade integration functions as a complex ecosystem in which seaports and land ports create powerful synergies for North American commerce.

As the only deep-water seaport directly on the U.S.-Mexico border, it occupies a strategic position that no other port can match, enabling cargo to move seamlessly from ship to truck to Mexico — all within a single logistics ecosystem.

The Port of Brownsville's positioning for the nearshoring era reveals a crucial but often overlooked dimension of supply chain transformation. While much



Daniel Covarrubias
GUEST
COLUMNIST

of the nearshoring discussion centers on manufacturing and logistics facilities and land border crossings, seaports are vital to this continental shift.

The numbers tell part of the story: approximately 90% of the products moving through the port are either destined for or originating from Mexico, creating a natural gateway for global supply chains seeking to integrate with North American markets. The port's significance is reflected in its rise to become the 50th busiest maritime port among 150 U.S. ports for waterborne cargo, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The port's innovative approach to cross-border logistics delivers practical efficiencies. Take, for example, the persistent issue of weight limit differences between the U.S. and Mexico. The port's dedicated overweight corridor allows trucks to carry Mexico's legal maximum weight of 125,000 pounds across the border — significantly more than stan-

dard U.S. limits. This seemingly technical detail represents precisely the kind of practical solution that enhances supply chain efficiency.

Beyond logistics innovation, the Port of Brownsville has established itself as a leader in sectors critical to regional manufacturing. While most U.S.-Mexico trade discussions focus on automotive and electronics, Brownsville has become the nation's leading steel port for Mexico-bound cargo, handling approximately 5.8 million tons in 2023, with projections exceeding 6 million tons for 2024.

This positioning proves particularly relevant as manufacturers seek to strengthen regional supply chains for critical materials.

The port's openness to emerging industries demonstrates its forward-looking approach. In the renewable energy sector, the port has established itself as a major hub for wind turbine components, handling some of the largest wind blades imported into the U.S. — reaching lengths of over 265 feet. This capability sets up the port for the future of North American energy integration.

This expanding role in

energy trade further underscores its strategic importance. The scale of petroleum product exports and the development of liquefied natural gas (LNG) export facilities demonstrate how energy infrastructure reshapes regional trade patterns. As one of the largest exporters of refined petroleum products to Mexico, combined with major LNG export projects under development, the port plays an increasingly critical role in North American energy generation and supply.

The port's cargo handling grew from 11.3 million tons in 2019 to 17.8 million tons in 2023. More telling is the cargo diversity: from steel for automotive manufacturing to wind turbine components for renewable energy projects, the port's traffic reflects the evolving nature of North American industrial integration.

This evolution in maritime border infrastructure offers options for North American trade patterns. While the traditional pattern of U.S.-Mexico trade has centered on land ports, particularly in Texas, which will continue to carry most loads, the emergence of sophisticated maritime-border interfaces complements

the long-established routes.

This development may reshape how we think about cross-border trade corridors, particularly as nearshoring initiatives continue to influence industrial location decisions.

Expanding cross-border infrastructure capabilities is crucial in this pivotal moment in global trade.

As companies reassess their supply chain vulnerabilities following recent disruptions, the availability of sophisticated logistics interfaces between maritime and land transportation becomes increasingly relevant to their decision-making.

The border region's capacity to handle this complexity may influence the success of broader economic integration efforts.

Strategic investments like the ongoing channel deepening project, which will increase depth from 42 feet to 52 feet, show preparation for a future where regional trade flows become increasingly critical to global supply chains.

This forward-looking infrastructure development positions the port to accommodate larger vessels and handle growing cargo vol-

umes.

The Port of Brownsville's success demonstrates that effective regional integration requires more than manufacturing capacity or border crossings—it demands sophisticated logistics hubs that connect global supply chains with regional manufacturing networks.

The port supports over 51,000 jobs across Texas and generates \$3 billion in annual state economic activity, extending its impact far beyond the border region.

Trade between the United States and Mexico continues to grow, and the implications for policymakers and business leaders should be clear: Strengthening North American supply chains requires a holistic view of trade infrastructure, including land and maritime capabilities. The Port of Brownsville demonstrates how integrated infrastructure and systems can make regional trade both practical and efficient.

Dr. Daniel Covarrubias is the Director of Texas A&M International University's A.R. Sanchez, Jr. School of Business' Texas Center for Economic and Enterprise Development.