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Title	9.11同時多発テロ以降のカナダ=米国間国境 : カナダからの見解
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Citation	境界研究, 2, 119-131
Issue Date	2011-11-25
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/jbr.2.119
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/61262
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	05Brunet-Jailly_summary.pdf, 英文要旨



The Post 9/11 Canada-U.S. Border, a New Border? a Canadian Perspective

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Canada and the United States form a highly integrated economic region as evidenced by the fact that, since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, economic integration has progressed faster than economic growth. In the 1990s, scholarly arguments suggested that the primary characteristic of the Canadian-U.S. border, borderlands and border urban regions was that it provided an environment facilitating the seamless flow of goods and capital; that it was a border increasingly transparent to trade. But since 9/11 it seems that border has hardened, and some have argued that securitization has had a huge impact on trade and is now seeping through and influencing all policy arenas that are concerned with and establish borderland policies. This paper is a review of these questions and presents current evidence that challenge the perception that the Canada-U.S. border in 2011 has hardened.

Indeed, following 9/11 both Canada and the U.S. have engaged in discussions over their friendship and the nature of their relations; economic integration and interdependence was at the forefront of those debates. In the U.S. most discussions have been focused on the nature of security on their northern border, while in Canada issues of economic integration also raise questions of sovereignty. While these discussions are necessary and ongoing, they do guide the type of policy

answers implemented by the U.S. and Canada, which are found to be in-line with what they have successfully implemented for well over a century. These are functionally focused policies that address narrowly defined issues, and are developed and implemented with limited government-like institutions of coordination. Indeed, when security issues are at stake the traditional North American community is solely constituted by Canada and the United States, and the exemplary institutional model is NORAD. It is focused on and limited to air security, and seems to be the model for the current border security system. Yet these organizational changes also necessitated budget increases, which in turn impacted the funding structure of those policies; Federal agencies on both sides of the border share the cost of security measures with provinces/states and local governments.

All in all, prior to 9/11 the border was not as seamless a border as was generally assumed but on the U.S. side it was understaffed, and overburdened by increasing trade activities. Post 9/11, and, before the signature of the Smart Border Agreement, the border stopped functioning for a few weeks. Once the Smart Border Agreement was implemented the border became very efficient, while trade remained stable or dropped, and, in particular during the 2008 economic crisis, economic integration increased and the cost of border crossings decreased significantly. In other words, post 9/11 border security policies became much more effective, and in fact, reduced freight cost across the boundary line.

In the end, these border security policies are typical of the specific and functionally focused approaches found in all agreements between Canada and the United States since the beginning of the last century, where function does not spill over into overlapping policy arenas. These state policies that are steeped in sovereignty issues and where the fundamental principles established by Westphalia are not in question. Security policies are thus visible and target specific functions necessary to trade. Indeed, Canada-U.S. agreements are focused on tackling security matters from the narrower perspective of potential terrorist threats, and where security is not broadly understood as potentially multi-sectoral but instead as primarily associated with criminal activities. These are policies that need political visibility but whose effectiveness is continuously in question. The recent Washington Agreement will not change these fundamental assumptions even if it is premised on the creation and implementation of a secured perimeter around Canada and the U.S.