By George Friedman

Arizona's new law on illegal immigration went into effect last week, albeit severely limited by a federal court ruling. The U.S. Supreme Court undoubtedly will settle the matter, which may also trigger federal regulations. However that turns out, the entire issue cannot simply be seen as an internal American legal matter. More broadly, it forms part of the relations between the United States and Mexico, two sovereign nation-states whose internal dynamics and interests are leading them into an era of increasing tension. Arizona and the entire immigration issue have to be viewed in this broader context.

Until the Mexican-American War, it was not clear whether the dominant power in North America would have its capital in Washington or Mexico City. Mexico was the older society with a substantially larger military. The United States, having been founded east of the Appalachian Mountains, had been a weak and vulnerable country. At its founding, it lacked strategic depth and adequate north-south transportation routes. The ability of one colony to support another in the event of war was limited. More important, the United States had the most vulnerable of economies: It was heavily dependent on maritime exports and lacked a navy able to protect its sea-lanes against more powerful European powers like England and Spain. The War of 1812 showed the deep weakness of the United States. By contrast, Mexico had greater strategic depth and less dependence on exports.

The Centrality of New Orleans

The American solution to this strategic weakness was to expand the United States west of the Appalachians, first into the Northwest Territory ceded to the United States by the United Kingdom and then into the Louisiana Purchase, which Thomas Jefferson ordered bought from France. These two territories gave the United States both strategic depth and a new economic foundation. The regions could support agriculture that produced more than the farmers could consume. Using the Ohio-Missouri-Mississippi river system, products could be shipped south to New Orleans. New Orleans was the farthest point south to which flat-bottomed barges from the north could go, and the farthest inland that oceangoing ships could travel. New Orleans became the single most strategic point in North America. Whoever controlled it controlled the agricultural system developing between the Appalachians and the Rockies. During the War of 1812, the British tried to seize New Orleans, but forces led by Andrew Jackson defeated them in a battle fought after the war itself was completed.

Jackson understood the importance of New Orleans to the United States. He also understood that the main threat to New Orleans came from Mexico. The U.S.-Mexican border then stood on the Sabine River, which divides today's Texas from Louisiana. It was about 200 miles from that border to New Orleans and, at its narrowest point, a little more than 100 miles from the Sabine to the Mississippi.

Mexico therefore represented a fundamental threat to the United States. In response, Jackson

authorized a covert operation under Sam Houston to foment an uprising among American settlers in the Mexican department of Texas with the aim of pushing Mexico farther west. With its larger army, a Mexican thrust to the Mississippi was not impossible — nor something the Mexicans would necessarily avoid, as the rising United States threatened Mexican national security.

Mexico's strategic problem was the geography south of the Rio Grande (known in Mexico as the Rio Bravo). This territory consisted of desert and mountains. Settling this area with large populations was impossible. Moving through it was difficult. As a result, Texas was very lightly settled with Mexicans, prompting Mexico initially to encourage Americans to settle there. Once a rising was fomented among the Americans, it took time and enormous effort to send a Mexican army into Texas. When it arrived, it was weary from the journey and short of supplies. The insurgents were defeated at the Alamo and Goliad, but as the Mexicans pushed their line east toward the Mississippi, they were defeated at San Jacinto, near present-day Houston.

The creation of an independent Texas served American interests, relieving the threat to New Orleans and weakening Mexico. The final blow was delivered under President James K. Polk during the Mexican-American War, which (after the Gadsden Purchase) resulted in the modern U.S.-Mexican border. That war severely weakened both the Mexican army and Mexico City, which spent roughly the rest of the century stabilizing Mexico's original political order.

A Temporary Resolution

The U.S. defeat of Mexico settled the issue of the relative power of Mexico and the United States but did not permanently resolve the region's status; that remained a matter of national power and will. The United States had the same problem with much of the Southwest (aside from California) that Mexico had: It was a relatively unattractive place economically, given that so much of it was inhospitable. The region experienced chronic labor shortages, relatively minor at first but accelerating over time. The acquisition of relatively low-cost labor became one of the drivers of the region's economy, and the nearest available labor pool was Mexico. An accelerating population movement out of Mexico and into the territory the United States seized from Mexico paralleled the region's accelerating economic growth.

The United States and Mexico both saw this as mutually beneficial. From the American point of view, there was a perpetual shortage of low-cost, low-end labor in the region. From the Mexican point of view, Mexico had a population surplus that the Mexican economy could not readily metabolize. The inclination of the United States to pull labor north was thus matched by the inclination of Mexico to push that labor north.

The Mexican government built its social policy around the idea of exporting surplus labor — and as important, using remittances from immigrants to stabilize the Mexican economy. The U.S. government, however, wanted an outcome that was illegal under U.S. law. At times, the federal government made exceptions to the law. When it lacked the political ability to change the law, the United States put limits on the resources needed to enforce the law. The rest of the country didn't notice this process while the former Mexican borderlands benefited from it economically. There were costs to the United States in this immigrant movement, in health care, education and other areas, but business interests saw these as minor costs while Washington saw them

as costs to be borne by the states.

Three fault lines emerged in United States on the topic. One was between the business classes, which benefited directly from the flow of immigrants and could shift the cost of immigration to other social sectors, and those who did not enjoy those benefits. The second lay between the federal government, which saw the costs as trivial, and the states, which saw them as intensifying over time. And third, there were tensions between Mexican-American citizens and other American citizens over the question of illegal migrants. This inherently divisive, potentially explosive mix intensified as the process continued.

Borderlands and the Geopolitics of Immigration

Underlying this political process was a geopolitical one. Immigration in any country is destabilizing. Immigrants have destabilized the United States ever since the Scots-Irish changed American culture, taking political power and frightening prior settlers. The same immigrants were indispensible to economic growth. Social and cultural instability proved a low price to pay for the acquisition of new labor.

That equation ultimately also works in the case of Mexican migrants, but there is a fundamental difference. When the Irish or the Poles or the South Asians came to the United States, they were physically isolated from their homelands. The Irish might have wanted Roman Catholic schools, but in the end, they had no choice but to assimilate into the dominant culture. The retention of cultural hangovers did not retard basic cultural assimilation, given that they were far from home and surrounded by other, very different, groups.

This is the case for Mexican-Americans in Chicago or Alaska, whether citizens, permanent residents or illegal immigrants. In such locales, they form a substantial but ultimately isolated group, surrounded by other, larger groups and generally integrated into the society and economy. Success requires that subsequent generations follow the path of prior immigrants and integrate. This is not the case, however, for Mexicans moving into the borderlands conquered by the United States just as it is not the case in other borderlands around the world. Immigrant populations in this region are not physically separated from their homeland, but rather can be seen as culturally extending their homeland northward — in this case not into alien territory, but into historically Mexican lands.

This is no different from what takes place in borderlands the world over. The political border moves because of war. Members of an alien population suddenly become citizens of a new country. Sometimes, massive waves of immigrants from the group that originally controlled the territory politically move there, undertaking new citizenship or refusing to do so. The cultural status of the borderland shifts between waves of ethnic cleansing and population movement. Politics and economics mix, sometimes peacefully and sometimes explosively.

The Mexican-American War established the political boundary between the two countries. Economic forces on both sides of the border have encouraged both legal and illegal immigration north into the borderland — the area occupied by the United States. The cultural character of the borderland is shifting as the economic and demographic process accelerates. The political border stays where it is while the cultural border moves northward.

The underlying fear of those opposing this process is not economic (although it is frequently expressed that way), but much deeper: It is the fear that the massive population movement will ultimately reverse the military outcome of the 1830s and 1840s, returning the region to Mexico culturally or even politically. Such borderland conflicts rage throughout the world. The fear is that it will rage here.

The problem is that Mexicans are not seen in the traditional context of immigration to the United States. As I have said, some see them as extending their homeland into the United States, rather than as leaving their homeland and coming to the United States. Moreover, by treating illegal immigration as an acceptable mode of immigration, a sense of helplessness is created, a feeling that the prior order of society was being profoundly and illegally changed. And finally, when those who express these concerns are demonized, they become radicalized. The tension between Washington and Arizona — between those who benefit from the migration and those who don't — and the tension between Mexican-Americans who are legal residents and citizens of the United States and support illegal immigration and non-Mexicans who oppose illegal immigration creates a potentially explosive situation.

Centuries ago, Scots moved to Northern Ireland after the English conquered it. The question of Northern Ireland, a borderland, was never quite settled. Similarly, Albanians moved to now-independent Kosovo, where tensions remain high. The world is filled with borderlands where political and cultural borders don't coincide and where one group wants to change the political border that another group sees as sacred.
Migration to the United States is a normal process. Migration into the borderlands from Mexico is not. The land was seized from Mexico by force, territory now experiencing a massive national movement — legal and illegal — changing the cultural character of the region. It should come as no surprise that this is destabilizing the region, as instability naturally flows from such forces.

Jewish migration to modern-day Israel represents a worst-case scenario for borderlands. An absence of stable political agreements undergirding this movement characterized this process. One of the characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is mutual demonization. In the case of Arizona, demonization between the two sides also runs deep. The portrayal of supporters of Arizona's new law as racist and the characterization of critics of that law as un-American is neither new nor promising. It is the way things would sound in a situation likely to get out of hand.

Ultimately, this is not about the Arizona question. It is about the relationship between Mexico and the United States on a range of issues, immigration merely being one of them. The problem as I see it is that the immigration issue is being treated as an internal debate among Americans when it is really about reaching an understanding with Mexico. Immigration has been treated as a subnational issue involving individuals. It is in fact a geopolitical issue between two nation-states. Over the past decades, Washington has tried to avoid turning immigration into an international matter, portraying it rather as an American law enforcement issue. In my view, it cannot be contained in that box any longer.

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