North America: Ten Major Geographic Qualities of North America

1. North America encompasses two of the world’s biggest states territorially (Canada is the second largest in size; the United States is fourth). Russia is first and China is third. (Some geographers rank North America the third and China fourth)

2. The North American realm is marked by clearly defined physiographic regions.
   - North America’s physiography is characterized by its clear, well-defined division into physically homogenous regions called physiographic provinces. Such a region is marked by a certain degree of uniformity in relief, climate, vegetation, soils, and other environmental conditions, resulting in a scenic sameness that comes readily to mind. Examples: Rocky Mountains (dominates western segment of the continent from the Alaska to New Mexico); The Great Plains (the extensive sedimentary surface that slowly rises westward toward the Rocky Mountains); Canadian Shield (geologic core area containing North America’s oldest rock—northern part—towards the Arctic); Interior Plains (covered mainly by glacial debris laid down by the melt water and wind during the late Cenozoic glaciation)
   - Climatically, temperature varies latitudinally—the farther north one goes, the cooler it gets. Precipitation generally tends to decline toward the west—except for the Pacific coastal strip itself. The dryness of the western North America is due to Rain Shadow Effect—moisture-laden air moving onshore from the Pacific is unable to penetrate the continent because high mountains stand in the way.
• **Regions of the North American Realm.** North America’s regions are in a period of deep-seated change as new forces uproot and redistribute people and activities. The areal arrangement of the United States and Canada is presented within the framework of eight major regions.

a. **The Core Region.** Synonymous with the American Manufacturing Belt, this region was the unquestioned leader and centerpiece during the century between the Civil War and the close of the industrial age (1865-1970). The rise of postindustrialism over the past three decades has diminished that linchpin role, and strengthening challengers to the south and west will continue to siphon key functions away from the Core as this century unfolds. In certain parts of the Core region, where manufacturing has traditionally played a secondary role, post-industrial development has produced a number of new growth centers. The Boston area, for example, is well endowed with research facilities and local investment capital. It also has become the focus of innovative high-tech businesses. New York remains the national leader in finance and advertising, and it houses broadcast media.

b. **Maritime Northeast.** This is one the continent’s historic culture hearths. It has retained a powerful regional identity for almost 400 years. It consists of upper New England and the neighboring Atlantic Provinces of easternmost Canada. The urbanized southern half of New England has been the northeastern anchor of the Core. The six New England states are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut share many common characteristics. This region also extends its territories to encompass New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island as well as the outer island of Newfoundland and Labrador. A long association based on economic and cultural similarities has tied northern New England to Atlantic Canada. Both are rural in character; possess difficult environments in which land resources are limited. Development here has lagged behind the rest of the realm; development has centered on primary activities, mainly fishing the rich offshore banks of the North Atlantic, forestry
in the uplands, and farming in the few fertile valleys. Recreation and tourism has boosted the regional economy in recent times, with scenic coasts and mountains attracting millions. Skiing has also helped the region’s tourist season to extend through the harsh winter months.

c. **French Canada.** Francophone Canada comprises the effectively settled (southern) portion of the province of Quebec. Significantly, this is the only North American region that is defined by culture alone, but the reasons are compelling: more than 80 percent of this region speaks French as a mother tongue. Most of the Anglophones are clustered in the Montreal metropolitan area. The economy of French Canada is no longer rural, exhibiting urbanization rates similar to those of the rest of the country. Industrialization is widespread, supported by cheap hydroelectric energy generated by huge dams in northern Quebec. Tertiary and post-industrial commercial activities are centered in Montreal; tourism and recreation are also important.

d. **The Continental Interior.** In the heart of the continent, agriculture becomes the predominant feature of the landscape. This region extends across the center of both the conterminous United States and the southern tier of Canada. The innermost areas are fruit-and-vegetable and dairying belts, the Mississippi Valley is a meat and grain production area. Mixed crop-and-livestock farming wins out over less competitive wheat raising in the eastern half of the Agricultural Heartland. Wheat raising is found in the fertile but semi-arid environment of the central and western Great Plains. Throughout the Heartland region, nearly everything is oriented to agriculture. Kansas, Minneapolis, Winnipeg, Omaha and Denver are cities that process and market beef packing, flour milling, and pork production. People in this region are generally of northern European ancestry, and conservative. Yet, rapid technological advances require that farmers keep abreast of increasingly scientific agricultural techniques and business methods if they are to survive in a hypercompetitive atmosphere.

e. **The South.** The American South occupies the realm’s southeastern corner. Of the region’s nine regions, none has undergone more overall change during the past half-century. Since the 1970’s, the South has undergone and is undergoing wave of growth and change. People and activities streamed into the urban South. Cities such as Atlanta, Charlotte, Miami, and Tampa became booming metropolises practically overnight. This “bulldozer revolution” was matched in the most favored rural areas by an agricultural renaissance that stressed such higher-value commodities as soybeans, winter wheat, poultry and wood products. On the social front, institutional racial segregation was dismantled more than three decades ago. Yet for all the growth that has taken place since 1970, the South remains a region beset by many economic problems because the geography of its development has been decidedly uneven. Not surprisingly, the gap between rich and poor is wider here than in any other U.S. region.

f. **The Southwest.** Before the late twentieth century, most geographers did not even identify a distinct southwestern region. Today, however, this steadily developing area—constituted by the states of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona—has earned its place in the regional map of North America. This region is unique in the United States because it is a bicultural regional complex peopled by in-migrating Anglo-Americans atop the crest of the Sunbelt wave (a region of the United States generally considered to stretch across the South and Southwest) as well as by the quickly expanding Mexican-American population anchored to the sizable long-time resident Hispanic groups, which traces its origins to the Spanish colonial territory that once extended from the Texas Gulf coast to San Francisco. If one counts the Native American (Indian) population, then the Southwest is actually a tricultural region. Rapid developments in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona are
essentially built on a three-pronged foundation: (1) electricity—to power air conditioners through long, brutal hot summers, (2) water supply—to supply everything from swimming pools to irrigated crops, and (3) automobiles—so that affluent newcomers may spread themselves out of much-desired low densities.

g. **The Northern Frontier.** This is the name for North America’s largest region by far. It covers most of Canada and all of Alaska. Its peripheral nature stems from its isolation and rugged environment, which have attracted only the sparsest of populations relative to the other seven regions. Yet, the region contains great riches because it is one of the earth’s major storehouses of mineral and energy resources.

h. **The Pacific Hinge.** The Pacific coastlands of the conterminous (*having a boundary in common*) United States and south westernmost Canada has been a powerful lure to migrants. Major development here took place during the post-World War II era, accommodating enormous population and economic growth, but with the arrival of the 21st century, it is clear, in terms of its economic geography, the West Coast no longer represents an end but rather a beginning—a gateway to an abundance of growing opportunities. Amid the promising economic progress that the West Coast is enjoying, environmental hazards threaten this entire corridor, including inland droughts, coastal flooding, mudslides, brush fires, and earthquakes.

i. **The Western Frontier.** To the north of the western half of the Southwest lies the realm’s newest region: the swiftly growing, economically booming Western Frontier. In its east-west extent, this mountain-studded plateau region stretches between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada-Cascades chain; its longer north-south axis reaches from northern Arizona’s Grand Canyon country to the edge of the subarctic snow forest of the Canadian Rockies. The label Western Frontier emphasizes that the transformation under way is being driven by the influx of people and activities from outside the region.

3. Both Canada and the United States are federal states, but their systems differ. Canada’s is adapted from the British parliamentary system, and is divided into 10 provinces and 3 territories. The United States separates its executive and legislative branches of government, and it consists
of 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and a number of island territories under U.S. jurisdiction in the Caribbean Seas and the Pacific Ocean.

- Canada is a constitutional monarchy, with Queen Elizabeth II of England as the head of State. She appoints a governor-general to represent her in Canada (with the “advice” of the prime minister). The governor-general’s term has no limit but in practice, the governor-general is replaced after five years. The prime minister is appointed by the governor-general.

- U.S.A.’s government is federal-presidential, with the President as both the head of state and government.

4. Both Canada and the United States are plural societies. Although ethnicity is increasingly important, Canada’s pluralism is most strongly expressed in regional bilingualism. In the United States, major divisions occur along racial/ethnic lines.

  - **In Canada:** Linguistic bifurcation (division) between Anglophones (English-speakers) and Francophones (French-speakers) has inhibited the formation of a single overriding culture in Canada, although other unifying elements continue to bind the country together.

  - **In the U.S.A.:** The dominant European ancestries—French, Irish, and those originating from the United Kingdom were dispersed throughout the United States. Most of the others showed an affinity for a particular region: Italians, Portuguese, and Russians clustered in the Northeast; whereas Scandinavians and Czechs were localized in the north-central states. California, the most populous state, best exhibited the nation’s diverse ethnicity, with more Americans of English, German, Irish, French, Scottish, Dutch, Swedish, and Danish origin concentrated there than in any other state. About 12 percent of the total U.S. population is composed of Afro-American people. Two other minority groups are increasing in number, Asians and Hispanics. The biggest Asian group in the U.S. is the Filipinos, followed by Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese. Hispanics, on the other hand, might have surpassed Afro-African populations already—becoming as the largest minority group in the U.S. These Hispanics include the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Central South Americans, and Cubans.
5. By world standards, North America is a rich realm where high incomes and high rates of consumption prevail. North America possesses a highly diversified resource base, but non-renewable fuel and mineral deposits are consumed prodigiously [remarkably].

- North America, by every measure of national development, possesses the highest living standards on earth, but the good life is not shared equally by all of North America’s residents. Malnutrition is commonplace although its severity pales by comparison to the daily misery experienced by the Third World poor.

- Presented with a rich abundance of natural and human resources over the past 200 years, Americans and Canadians have brilliantly converted these opportunities into continent-wide affluence as their booming Industrial Revolution surpassed even Europe’s. North America’s rich mineral deposits are localized in three zones: the Canadian Shield north of the Great Lakes; the Appalachian Highlands, and scattered areas throughout the mountain ranges of the West. The most strategically important resources of North America are its coal, petroleum, and natural gas supplies—the fossil fuels. The realm’s coal reserves are among the greatest anywhere on earth, the U.S. portion alone containing at least a 400-year supply.

- The United States, with less than 5% of the global population, uses about a quarter of the world’s fossil fuel resources—burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world’s natural gas. As of 2003, the U.S. had more private cars than licensed drivers, and gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles were among the best-selling vehicles. New houses in the U.S. were 38% bigger in 2002 than in 1975, despite having fewer people per household on average.

6. North America’s population, not large by international standards, is the most highly urbanized and mobile. Largely propelled by a continuing wave of immigration, the realm’s total is expected to grow by more than 40 percent over the next half-century. (See Regional Issue on Immigration)

- North America—the New World—is symbolized strongly by the skyscraper panorama of New York, Toronto, Chicago, or San Francisco. Americans are also hyper-mobile, with networks of superhighways, air routes, and railroads efficiently interconnecting the realm’s far-flung cities and regions. Commuters stream into and out of suburban activity centers and central-city downtowns by the millions working each day. A U.S. family relocates, on the average, once every five and a half years.

7. North America is home to one of the world’s great manufacturing complexes. The realm’s industrialization generated its unparalleled urban growth, but a new post-industrial society and economy are rapidly maturing in both countries.

- (1870’s)—Industrial Revolution reached America and it took hold so successfully and advanced so robustly that only 50 years later, America was surpassing Europe as the world’s industrial power.

- (1900-1970)—The impact of industrial urbanization occurred simultaneously at two levels: macroscale (national level); and, microscale (individual cities). At the national scale, a network of new cities rapidly emerged, specializing in the collection, processing, and distribution of raw materials and manufactured goods, linked together by an efficient web of long-distance and local railroad lines. At the microscale, individual cities prospered in their new roles as manufacturing centers, generating a wholly new internal structure that still forms the spatial framework of most of the central cities of America’s large metropolitan areas.

- (Since 1970’s)—U.S.A. and Canada had been and are experiencing the maturation of a post-industrial society and economy, which is dominated by the production and manipulation of information, skilled services, and high-technology manufactures, and operates within an
increasingly global-scale framework of business interactions. The aging Manufacturing Belt (of the northern quadrant of the U.S. and southeastern Canada) is often called the “Rust Bowl,” whereas glamour and prestige are attached to such Sunbelt locales as suburban San Francisco’s Silicon Valley and its high-technology counterparts in Texas, North Carolina, Florida, Arizona, Colorado, and Southern California.

- CASE IN POINT: Silicon Valley. The best model of post-industrialism in North America is the Silicon Valley (southern part of the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California, U.S.A., originally referred to the region's large number of silicon chip innovators and manufacturers, but eventually came to refer to all the high-tech businesses in the area; it is now generally used as a metonym for the high-tech sector). Developers often cite the conditions that are likeliest to attract a critical mass of high-tech companies to a given locality: (1) A nearby major university that offers an excellent graduate engineering program; (2) Close proximity to a cosmopolitan urban center; (3) A large pool of skilled and semi-skilled labor; (4) 360 days of sunshine; (5) Recreational water within an hour’s drive; (6) Affordable nearby housing; (7) Even closer prestigious luxury housing for top executives; (8) Start-up capital worth at least $1 billion to lure new high-tech firms; (9) Lower-than-normal risk for establishment of profitable high-tech businesses; and, (10) Cooperative spirit among landowners, lenders, government, and business.

8. Agriculture in North America employs a less than 5 percent of the labor force; it is overwhelmingly commercial, mechanized, and specialized, and it normally produces a huge annual surplus for sale in overseas markets. (See Geography of the Mighty Soybean)

- The increasing application of high-technology mechanization to farming has steadily increased both the volume and value of total agricultural production, and has been accompanied by a sharp reduction in the number of those actively engaged in agriculture (to less than 2 percent of the U.S. work force today). North America is a major player of the international market of wheat, dairy, cotton, grains, and fruits.

- An enormous extension of fruit, winter vegetable, cotton, and tobacco farming has occurred in the subtropical and warm temperate areas of the United States and northern Mexico. Citrus fruits do well in Florida and the Rio Grande valley of Texas. The Central Valley of California—guarded from frosts by the Sierras, with winter rain for growth and prolonged summer sun for ripening—also is a prime area for growing fruit and vegetables. Drought is a challenge, however, and has been met only by extensive irrigation. Winter vegetables are widely grown on the sandy soils of the Gulf Coastal Plain and the southeastern parts of the Atlantic coast, which have a long frost-free season and ample rain. Cotton has proved a success in areas with less than 60 inches of rain and more than 200 days free of frost. Tobacco is concentrated on the sandy soils of old shores and deltas from Virginia to Kentucky. Many tobacco and cotton fields are now alternately planted with rye, corn (maize), soybeans, and winter wheat grown as fodder for cattle or as additional cash crops. These help to maintain the fertility of the soil, which long has been threatened by the practice of monoculture.
Over the past century, no crop in this realm has expanded faster than the soybean. This hardy legume was one of the earliest plants domesticated, and for nearly 5000 years the Chinese have revered it as a grain vital to life itself. The advantages of soybeans are numerous. They are the world’s cheapest and most efficient source of protein, with a level of concentration double that of meat or fish. They are easy to cultivate, adapting to a wide range of environmental conditions, and they are less vulnerable to pests and diseases than other temperate-climate food crops. Economically, crop yields are comparatively high, and the demand for soybeans has steadily risen across the world in recent decades.

The dramatic increase of soybean production in the United States has been propelled not only by these advantages but also by this crop’s particular suitability to the Corn Belt. It was quickly discovered that soybeans were an ideal crop to rotate with corn because they recondition the soil with nitrogen and other nutrients needed by corn. In terms of cultivation, soybeans also proved highly profitable to grow on the large, flat fields of the Corn Belt (which continues to account for about 80 percent of all U.S. soybean production) where their farm-machinery requirements were identical to those already in place for raising corn. Moreover, clever marketing constantly widened the versatility of soybeans beyond their use as a nutritious livestock feed, and today they are used in a variety of human foods (ranging from vegetable oil to a plethora of low-calorie products) as well as such industrial goods as fertilizers, paints, and insect sprays.

All of the above also contributed to steadily rising foreign demand, and in many recent years soybeans have ranked as the leading U.S. export commodity. Other producing countries have recognized this opportunity as well, and intensifying global competition after 1990 has resulted in a leveling off of America’s share of the world market. Nonetheless, the United States still produces roughly half of the world’s annual soybean output. Most of its competition (another 33 percent of the global supply) comes from Brazil and Argentina in mid-latitude South America, but China is constantly expanding its acreage in a bid to become a major producer. Soybeans will continue to play a key role in North American and international agriculture as the twenty-first century unfolds, buoyed in no small part by this grain’s important potential in the struggle to ease the global food shortage.
“The UNITED STATES and Canada are nations of immigrants’ What would have happened if our forebears had closed the door to America after they arrived and stopped the Irish, the Italians, the Eastern Europeans, and so many other nationalities from entering this country? Now we’re arguing over Latinos, Asians, Russians, Muslims, you name it. Fact is, newcomers have always been viewed negatively by most of those who came before them. When Irish Catholics began arriving in the 1830s the Protestants already here accused them of assigning their loyalty to some Italian pope rather than to their new country, but Irish Catholics soon proved to be pretty good Americans’ Sound familiar? Muslims can be very good Americans too. It just takes time, longer for some immigrant groups than others. But don’t you see that America’s immigrants have always been the engine of growth? They become part of the world’s most dynamic economy and make it more dynamic still.

“My ancestors came from Holland in the 1800s, and the head of the family was an architect from Rotterdam. I work here in western Michigan as an urban planner. People who want to limit immigration seem to think that only the least educated workers flood into the United States and Canada, depriving the less-skilled among us of jobs and causing hardship for citizens. But in fact America attracts skilled and highly educated as well as unskilled immigrants, and they all make contributions. The highly educated foreigners, including doctors and technologically skilled workers, are quickly absorbed into the workforce; you’re very likely to have been treated by a physician from India or a dentist from South Africa. The unskilled workers take jobs we’re not willing to perform at the wages offered. Things have changed! A few decades ago, American youngsters on summer break flooded the job market in search of temporary employment in hotels, department stores, and restaurants. Now they’re vacationing in Europe or trekking in Costa Rica, and the managers of those establishments bring in temporary workers from Jamaica and Romania’

“And our own population is aging, which is why we need the infusion of younger people immigration brings with it. We don’t want to become like Japan or some European countries, where they won’t have the younger working people to pay the taxes needed to support the social security system. I agree with opponents of immigration on only one point: what we need is legal immigration, so that the new arrivals will get housed and schooled, and illegal immigration must be curbed. Otherwise, we need more, not fewer, immigrants.”

“The percentage of recent immigrants in the U.S. population is the highest it has been in 70 years, and in Canada in 60 years. America is adding the population of San Diego every year, over and above the natural increase, and not counting illegal immigration. This can’t go on. By 2010, 15 percent of the U.S. population will consist of recent immigrants. One-third of them will not have a high-school diploma. They will need housing, education, medical treatment, and other social services that put a huge strain on the budgets of the States they enter. The jobs they’re looking for often aren’t there, and then they start displacing working Americans by accepting lower wages. It’s easy for the elite to pontificate about how great immigration is for the American melting pot, but they’re not the ones affected on a daily basis. Immigration is a problem for the working people. We see company jobs disappearing across the border to Mexico, and at the same time we have Mexicans arriving here by the hundreds of thousands, legally and illegally, and more jobs are taken away.

“And don’t talk to me about how immigration now will pay social security bills later. I know a thing or two about this because I’m an accountant here in Los Angeles, and I can calculate as well as the next guy in Washington. Those fiscal planners seem to forget that immigrants grow older and will need social security too. And as for that supposed slowdown in the aging of our population because immigrants are so young and have so many children, over the past 20 years the average age in the United States has dropped by four months. So much for that nonsense. What’s needed is a revamping of the tax structure, so those fat cats who rob corporations and then let them go under will at least have paid their fair share into the national kitty. There’ll be plenty of money to fund social services for the aged. We don’t need unskilled immigrants to pay those bills.

“And I’m against this notion of amnesty for illegal immigrants being talked about these days. All that would do is to attract more people to try to make it across our borders. I heard President Fox of Mexico propose opening the U.S.-Mexican border the way they’re opening borders in the European Union’ Can you imagine what would happen? What our two countries really need is a policy that deters illegal movement across that border; which will save lives as well as jobs, and a system that will confine immigration to legal channels. These days, that’s not just a social or economic issue; it’s a security matter as well.”
Summarized five themes in understanding North America’s geography

**Environmental geography:** Many North American localities across the Great Plains and in the American West are destined to experience major water shortages in the twenty-first century as groundwater supplies are utilized faster than they are replaced.

North Americans have modified their physical setting in many ways. Processes of globalization and accelerated urban and economic growth have transformed North America’s landforms, soils, vegetation, and climate. Indeed, problems such as acid rain, nuclear waste storage, groundwater depletion and toxic chemical spills are all manifestations of a way of life unimaginable only a century ago.

Settlers of North America (particularly the Europeans when they arrived) removed forest cover from millions of acres and replaced natural grasslands with grain and forage crops not native to the region. Widespread soil erosion was greatly accelerated by careless cropping and ranching practices, and many areas of the Great Plains suffered lasting damage. With 20th century urbanization, many agricultural transformations were swept aside to make way for suburbs and shopping centers.

In the urban areas, many North American localities are threatened by water shortages. Both in eastern Canada and the United States struggle with outdated municipal water supply systems. Beneath the Great Plains, the waters of the Ogallala Aquifer are also being depleted. This aquifer is a huge reserve of precious groundwater, and today it irrigates about 20 percent of all U.S. cropland.

**Settlement and population:** Sprawling suburbs characterize the expanding peripheries of hundreds of North American cities, creating a multitude of challenges including lengthier commutes for urban workers and the loss of prime agricultural lands along the edge of metropolitan areas.

More than 320 million people live in the region, and they are some of the world’s most affluent and highly mobile populations. North Americans have refashioned the settlement landscape to meet the needs of a modern, postindustrial society. The result is that North America’s population geography reveals a strikingly clustered pattern of large cities interspersed with more sparsely settled zones. Notable concentrations are found on the eastern seaboard between Boston and Washington D.C., along the shores of the Great Lakes, and across the Sunbelt from Florida to California.

The most persistent regional migration trend in North America is westward. For the past two centuries, the thrust is to follow the setting sun. This sustained move to the Interior West has many implications: the demand for water in the arid region continues to grow; the mix of natives and recent migrants creates cultural tensions; and the area’s growing political power and economic presence is redefining its traditionally peripheral role in national affairs. Meanwhile, the proliferation of housing subdivisions threatens nearby wildlife species.

Another trend in North America’s population movement is urban decentralization, in which metropolitan areas sprawl in all directions and suburbs take on many of the characteristics of traditional downtowns. The edge-city lifestyle has also transformed the United States, in particular, into a continent of suburban commuters in which people live in one suburb and work in another. The average daily commute now exceeds 30 miles per person. Another impact of such edge-city sprawl is the rapid loss of surrounding rural land.

**Cultural coherence and diversity:** The tremendous growth in Hispanic and Asian immigrants to North America since 1970 has fundamentally reshaped the present and future cultural geographies of the region.

North America is a region of immigrants. Decisively displacing Native Americans in most portion of the realm, immigrant populations created a new cultural geography of ethnic groups, languages, and religions. Today, about one-fourth of U.S. immigrants arrive from Mexico, and Mexicans make up about 60 percent of the nation’s Hispanic population. The impact of such growing Hispanic immigration is that, today, the United States is the fifth largest Spanish-speaking on Earth.
In percentage terms, Asian newcomers are the fastest growing immigrant group, and they account for almost 4 percent of the population. In fact, more than 40 percent of the nation’s Asian population lives in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. By 2070, Asians may total more than 10 percent of the U.S. population, and almost one American in three will be Hispanic.

Canada’s immigration pattern broadly resembles that of the United States, but with important differences. Most of the first migrants who came from France established well-defined nucleus, then many migrants came from other European countries. Today, about 60 percent of Canada’s recent immigrants are Asians. In Toronto, the city’s 44 percent foreign-born population reveals a slight bias toward European backgrounds, while Vancouver (38 percent foreign-born) is clearly dominated by Asian populations, particularly Chinese.

**Geopolitical framework:** In the post-Cold war era, the global geopolitical role of the United States remains ill-defined and appears to be changing in response to terrorism threats around the world and to the recent conflict in Iraq.

United States and Canada sprang from very different political roots. The U.S. broke cleanly and violently from Great Britain. The American Revolution created a powerful sense of nationalism that sped the process of spatial expansion and produced a political rhetoric around the country’s preordained role of a continental, indeed global power. By contrast, Canada was a country of convenience, born from a peaceful, incremental separation from Britain and then assembled as a collection of distinctive regional societies that only gradually acknowledged their common political destiny.

But once established the two states have coexisted in a close relationship, which could be best described by U.S. President John F. Kennedy in a speech to the Canadian Parliament in 1962: “Geography has made us neighbors, history has made us friends, economics has made us partners and necessity has made us allies.”

Meanwhile, after the highly sensationalized 9/11 “terrorist attack” on America and the consequent U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, the roles of U.S.A. in geopolitics have and are being redefined. (See Geography in the making: The Growing Global Presence of the U.S. Military)

**Economic and social development:** North America remains a dominant player in the global economy, well positioned across the Atlantic from the dynamic European Union (EU) and across the Pacific from developments in East Asia. (See also North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA))

Along with its political clout, North America possesses the world’s most powerful economy and its most affluent population. Its 325 million consume huge quantities of global resources but also produce some of the world’s most sought-after manufactured goods and services.

Globalization links North Americans to every part of the world. Nowhere is that more true than in the Pacific Northwest, where much of the region’s growth since 1980 has been relate to its timely connections to an expanding global economy. Trans-pacific connections have proven particularly pivotal, tying dynamic companies in the region to suppliers and consumers in Japan, South Korea, China, ad Southeast Asia. For example, Microsoft software virtually leaves no computer untouched around the world, Boeing airplanes are bought by dozens of foreign governments and airlines, and Oregon’s lumber and fish harvests end up in faraway Japan.

But these intimate global connections also have a profound downside. The economic slowdown in Asia in 1998, which spread in 2000, hit the Pacific Northwest particularly hard. The good times, fat stock options, and high wages were replaced by layoffs, closed high-tech factories, and silent lumber mills. Microsoft’s sales growth dwindled to a trickle, manufacturing jobs were lost between 2002 and 2004, and state deficits mounted and unemployment rates hit the highest record as Boeing and Oregon’s technology boom cooled.

North Americans compete globally, and the declining percentage of stable, high paying jobs with long-term security and benefits suggests that companies and employees are scrambling to adjust to the
The economies of Canada, the United States, and Mexico formalized their interactions under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect in 1994. This economic alliance has forged the world’s largest trading bloc, a (U.S.) $8 trillion-plus market of 428 million consumers (surpassing the European Union’s 382 million). Between now and its completion date of 2009, NAFTA will integrate its constituent economies through a number of steps. Thousands of individual tariffs, quotas, and import licenses have been or are scheduled to be rolled back to eliminate most trade barriers for agricultural and manufactured goods as well as tertiary and quaternary services. Moreover, restrictions on the flow of investment capital across international borders are being lifted, and regulations concerning foreign ownership of productive facilities continue to be liberalized.

The architects of NAFTA cite the opportunities the maturing pact will bring. Business investment will surge as unimpeded exports flow throughout the vast new marketplace. At the same time, intensified competition will give consumers access to a wider variety of quality products at reduced prices. Canada—which joined NAFTA mainly to safeguard the concessions it received in its 1989 Free Trade Agreement with the United States faced the most skeptical citizenry at the outset, but those doubts evaporated as Canadian exports (and new jobs) under NAFTA have risen substantially since 1993. Trade with the United States, already heightened under the bilateral 1989 agreement, has propelled much of this growth, especially the southward export of goods whose tariffs had been lowered.

This progress notwithstanding, NAFTA’s evolution continues to be criticized. Organized labor has objected to the redistribution and losses of jobs in a number of industries, dislocations which it perceives stem largely from the implementation of the trade agreement. Environmental activists complain that the pact’s architects and component governments have not adequately addressed their concerns. And a number of social scientists and public policy planners argue that NAFTA should be doing much more to reduce regional income disparities and uneven development within its trade area.

As NAFTA realizes its goals, it will require each member country to concentrate on the production of those goods and services for which it has a comparative advantage (in research and development, technological skills, managerial know-how, and the like). As workers move from less productive to more productive industries, the geography of employment will be restructured—a process that would be occurring anyway as the three countries continue to adapt to continental and global economic change.

NAFTA’s success has attracted the intense interest of all the other countries in the Western Hemisphere. Although most of them are involved in their own regional efforts aimed at greater economic integration the great majority desire to become part of an enlarged NAFTA—which triggered its own expansion by inviting Chile to join in 1995 (an initiative so far thwarted by the U.S. Congress). To that end, ambitious plans were launched at summit meetings in the mid-1990s to create the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), a hemisphere-encompassing free-trade zone that would establish a single market of nearly 900 million consumers. If FTAA is implemented by its target date of 2005, it should accelerate the completion of NAFTA as well as NAFTA’s transformation into a much larger supranational organization.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
The worldwide distribution of the U.S. military is changing. These twenty-first-century transformations suggest larger strategic shifts in the country’s global geopolitical objectives, particularly since the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. In addition to its recent challenges in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is in the midst of a major, longer-term overhaul of its military that has profound geographical consequences. Military planners argue that in the future less emphasis should be given to housing large numbers of troops in relatively friendly foreign “hub” settings such as Germany, South Korea, and Japan. For example, military “strategists are in the process of reducing U.S. troop numbers in South Korea by more than 30 percent, a move that will redeploy these forces into more unstable areas elsewhere. Indeed, a growing number of the U.S. military’s 1.5 million active-duty personnel appear headed for more Spartan assignments located near source regions for terrorists and in arenas of potential conflict.

Military strategists identify a huge global “Arc of Instability” where U.S. interests need to be refocused (stretches from South America to Southeast Asia. From the drug- and rebel-filled jungles of Colombia to the terrorist training camps of the Philippines, the region includes much of Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. A growing U.S. military role in places such as northeast Africa, eastern Europe. And Central Asia is anticipated in the next 5 to 10 years to increase the country’s forward geopolitical presence in these potentially unstable settings. Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, for example, once a lonely outpost of the French Foreign Legion was recently home to 1,800 American troops assigned to counterterrorism training and security operations in the region. New American bases in Sierra Leone, Bulgaria, and Uzbekistan may also be in the offing as military planners expand U.S. operations elsewhere.

As recent military experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate, however, there may be practical and strategic limits to the expanded U.S. role. Although some have compared the country’s geopolitical aspirations to those of Ancient Rome or the British Empire, other observers have cautioned that the economic expense and political costs involved with such operations may be very high. One thing is certain, however. The far-flung global distribution of the U.S. military, while it may bring increased influence, will also bring greater risks to the world’s last remaining superpower.