

9/11 tested America's openness to trade and immigration

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One of the biggest temptations for America after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, was to turn inward behind rising barriers to trade and immigration. We mostly resisted on trade, not so much on immigration.

The trauma of 9/11 actually proved to be a modest boost to free trade. After the stunning images of that day, trashing symbols of world trade went out of fashion. For world leaders, it became more urgent than ever to promote peaceful commerce through international cooperation.

Two months after the attacks, then-U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick convinced members of the World Trade Organization meeting in Doha, Qatar, to launch a new round of global trade talks. (OK, I did say the fruits were modest.) In 2002, the U.S. Congress renewed presidential trade promotion authority, which led to the implementation of free trade agreements with more than a dozen other nations, including Morocco, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama are pending.

A decade after the fall of the World Trade Center towers, the volume of U.S. exports is 40 percent higher and imports 27 percent higher than in 2000. Foreign investment has moved ahead even more rapidly. Since 2000, foreign-owned assets in the United States and U.S.-owned assets abroad have both more than doubled in relation to our nation's GDP.

That progress has not come without bumps along the way. In 2006, opposition in Congress scuttled a merger that would have put an Arab-owned company, Dubai Ports World, in charge of managing the operation of several U.S. ports. And in 2007, Congress mandated the scanning of 100 percent of shipping containers entering the United States by 2012, even though numerous studies show that such a requirement is unnecessary and unworkable, and doubts persist it will ever be fully implemented. But these hiccups have been the exception rather than the rule.

As for openness to people, the impact of 9/11 has been almost all negative. The very weekend before the attacks, President George W. Bush was meeting with his counterpart

from Mexico, Vicente Fox, to discuss ways to expand the legal inflow of low-skilled migrant workers from Latin America. The attacks brought an abrupt end to the talks, even though none of the hijackers were from Latin America or entered the U.S. across the Southwest border.

President Bush tried gamely to revive immigration reform, but proposals in 2006 and 2007 died in Congress. Republican opposition to immigration reform only appears to have hardened since then. Now Congress will not even consider expanding visas for foreign-born, U.S.-educated scientists and engineers who could help American companies compete in global markets.

Meanwhile, the federal government ramped up security and visa requirements after 9/11 in many ways that were necessary, but also in ways that only discourage well-meaning foreign tourists, students and business travelers from visiting the U.S.

As a result, while trade and investment flows have been expanding, people flows have stagnated. According to Edward Alden, author of the 2008 book, “The Closing of the American Border,” the U.S. has lost significant market share in global tourism since 2001, causing the loss of hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of jobs in the U.S. tourism industry. Alden concludes, “The United States continues to hurt itself through poorly targeted enforcement measures that discourage foreign students, keep out skilled immigrants, drive away tourists and lead foreign investors to look for friendlier markets.”

On the positive side, Congress did expand the visa waiver program in 2008 to allow easier travel for visitors from an additional seven friendly countries. And while immigration policy and the number of visitors have been stuck in neutral since 9/11, there has been no big step backward, either, despite the reckless demand by some immigration critics to “seal the border.”

America’s openness to the world — to trade, investment, ideas and people — has been a source of strength and influence for decades. That openness was tested by the awful events of September 11th, 2001. The fact that we have remained open to commerce and, more grudgingly, immigration is yet another defeat for al Qaeda.

Daniel Griswold is director of the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute and author of the 2009 book, “Mad about Trade: Why Main Street America Should Embrace Globalization.”