

# The New York Times

## Editorial: A Small and Dangerous Spat

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President Obama has been warning that tit-for-tat protectionism could drive the world into an even worse economic slump than it is already in. He is right. Unfortunately, Congress doesn't seem to be listening.

The \$410 billion spending bill that Mr. Obama signed into law last week cuts off financing for a pilot program that allows Mexican trucks to deliver goods across the United States. ~~The move clearly violates the North American Free Trade Agreement,~~ which promised — starting in 2000 — to open cargo transport throughout the United States, Mexico and Canada to carriers from all three countries. This week, Mexico retaliated, leveling tariffs against \$2.4 billion worth of American imports.

Both the United States and Mexico must be careful. A full-fledged fight could threaten more than \$350 billion in annual commerce between the two countries. That is clearly in nobody's interest.

An arbitration panel ruled in 2001 that the United States was in breach of its Nafta obligations on Mexican trucks. But thanks to the Teamsters union and its allies in Congress, all but a small number of Mexican carriers are restricted to operating within a 25-mile band from the border.

The truck drivers' argument that Mexican trucks are unsafe is spurious — a flimsy cover for protectionism. Data from the Department of Transportation show that Mexican trucks and drivers operating in the United States — along the border and in the pilot program — have a better inspection record, with fewer violations, than their American counterparts.

President Obama has so far shown a worrying ambivalence about trade. He has called for renegotiating Nafta, creating anxiety in both Ottawa and Mexico City — claiming that this can somehow be done without harming trade. While he managed to persuade Congressional Democrats to water down a "Buy American" provision in the fiscal stimulus package, he did not get them to pull it altogether.

We understand the White House did not want to threaten the passage of the spending bill by raising a ruckus over Mexican trucking, a comparatively minor issue. But it is time for Mr. Obama to put some political muscle behind his declared support for open trade.

He can start by persuading Congress to revive the truck pilot program or start a new one. And he must make clear that — sometime soon — all properly inspected Mexican trucks must be able to work throughout the country, as Nafta requires. That would not only solve this trade spat, but it would provide the world with needed reassurance that the United States will stand by its trade agreements in these difficult times.