Regional Security in North America: Some New Ideas

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Let me begin by thanking the U.S. Army War College and George Washington University for inviting me to present my ruminations about a subject of which I do not claim to be an expert but that, as a practitioner of economic diplomacy in the bilateral relationship between Mexico and the U.S., has been in my thoughts for a long time.

I must begin by explaining to the experts on security issues from the traditional points of view on the subject –intelligence, military and police enforcement- that I know very little or nothing at all of these topics or of the ongoing cooperation between the governments of both nations that has been taking place discreetly since 9/11. What I will attempt to do is a brief analysis on the politics and economics of national security in both countries.

I will restrict my comments to what I consider are the security issues of what has been called by some the North American perimeter,1 limited to the U.S. and its immediate neighbors, since the task of looking at the whole hemisphere is beyond my area of professional expertise. I also think geography provides a useful guide in this respect since it poses daunting prospects for the U.S. of effectively controlling the flows of trade and people along more than six thousand miles of borders with Canada and Mexico, while it provides for a far more manageable frontier to the North of Canada and South of Mexico, with Guatemala and Belize. In this respect, securing a North American perimeter around the three countries makes sense as an economic proposition, that is, by using scarce resources more effectively.

1. Two contrasting visions of national security.
In Mexico and in the U.S. the concept of national security has completely different meanings as the result of their history, circumstances and geopolitical contexts. Besides, the definition of national security in the U.S. has suffered a

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radical transformation since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when it ceased to feel impregnable as it had been for more than two hundred years.

It is worth bearing in mind that since the Revolutionary War and the 1812 invasion by England, the U.S. territory has not been threatened by its immediate neighbors or from their territories.\(^2\) However, the very menace of a conspiracy by Germany, Japan and Mexico to invade the U.S., forced a nation that had been reluctant to get involved in World War I.\(^3\) Military experts have expressed the opinion that the U.S. enjoyed the privileged position by having secure and peaceful borders, unlike the European and Asian powers.

Meanwhile, Mexico redefined its own concept of national security after its defeats in 1836 and 1848 wars of Texas and with the U.S., as purely a defensive strategy to maintain the integrity of what was left of its territory. This position had implications in the economic and demographic policies that the country followed from then on. The brief period in which Mexico pursued liberal policies in immigration and trade, between the consolidation of its independence in 1821 and the Texan war, were abandoned and replaced instead with protectionist and anti-immigration policies. The ban on foreigners to own land or real estate along a stretch of 100 kilometers from its borders and 50 kilometers from its coasts, which continues to be in effect today, marks the start of this defensive strategy.

Throughout a good part of the XX century, after the end of the hostilities of the Mexican Revolutionary War in 1921, the borders between Mexico and the U.S. remained relatively free and undefended. A basic asymmetry has been for many years that the U.S. requires visas to all Mexican visitors to its territory while Mexico does not.\(^4\)

All of this has changed radically since 9/11, when the U.S. redefined its national security strategy to aim at the full inviolability of its territory with the intent of blocking new terrorist attack. This implied the need to impose effective barriers and filters to all exchanges with the rest of a world, which a large number of U.S. citizens consider hostile. However, in an open and liberal society like that of the United States, where the essence of its political and economic success rests to a large extent on personal liberty, commercial

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\(^2\) The brief “invasion” of Columbus, New Mexico, by Pancho Villa in 1916 does not count, but what is worth noting is that civil war in Mexico and large numbers of war refugees forced the U.S. to militarily reinforce its Southern border with 75 thousand troops in the second decade of last century.

\(^3\) As far fetched as it seems today, the U.S. entered WW-I after the British decoded a telegram sent by German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the governments of Japan and Mexico inviting both countries to join Germany in invading the U.S. See Barbara Tuchman (1966), *The Zimmermann Telegram*, Scribner.

\(^4\) U.S. tourists do not need visas to enter Mexico. Only those that intend to live in Mexico or work there need the appropriate visas.
freedom and a great physical mobility throughout its territory, absolute security is practically impossible.

These traditions are so strong and unique that the U.S. is one of very few countries that lack a compulsory national identity document issued by the federal government, like the obligatory official ID cards provided by the majority of the governments of the world. In Mexico, a national identity card based on the Matchless Population Registry Code (CURP) was created by the Department of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación). Based on it, the electoral authorities issued distinctive cards to all voters that serve today as the required ID cards.

The new government organizations created in the U.S. to deal with its current and more demanding national security needs face a tough job. The National Intelligence Director must coordinate sixteen federal agencies that gather intelligence throughout the world and analyze enormous amounts of information, to identify and determine potential threats. Meanwhile, Mexico has one agency (Cisen, the Center for Investigation and National Security) that deals mostly with domestic threats to national security stemming from guerrilla and politically extreme groups that pose dangers to the Mexican government and the country’s political stability.

The U.S. also created the Office of Homeland Security that now concentrates quasi-police forces and functions that were scattered in various agencies, including customs, the secret service, immigration and naturalization, the coast guard, and transportation security, to mention just a few of them. The main mission of Homeland Security is to keep the nation’s territory safe of unwanted visitors and substances associated with the threat of terrorist attack.

Meanwhile, Mexico defines its national security in a totally different way. To illustrate these divergences it suffices to look at the institutional design of how similar functions are organized south of the border. This task was further complicated by the functional reorganization made during the government of Vicente Fox, which, as I will discuss later, is severely flawed.

The Department of the Interior lost the control of the federal police forces and prisons when the Public Security department was created, but partially retained the management of intelligence (Cisen) and the full control of migration. This split was not successful, as the exponential growth in organized crime and in the power of the drug cartels ascertains.

Domestic intelligence, as defined above, had a long and successful tradition in Mexico, always closely associated with political control and the use of special forces. In fulfilling their mission, domestic intelligence operatives did not endear themselves with the human rights community but the fact remains that Mexico did not have a threatening guerrilla movement as serious as most other Latin American countries from the 1960s to the 1980s.
Among the operational functions of the Cisen is to study and infiltrate subversive and anti-systemic groups, and to advise the authorities on how to neutralize them. However, president Fox did not follow up this counsel with any actions to disable these groups, and the result was a considerable loss of control of dangerous political and criminal gangs, as well as of subversive and drug trafficking activities.

This situation led to an exponential increase in violence, and the partial or complete loss of control in parts of the national territory along the Mexico-U.S. border and in the states of Oaxaca, Michoacán, Guerrero and Chiapas. Today, we do not know to what extent these failures in the country’s national security apparatus are due to a flawed institutional design or to the lack of resolve by the previous administration to apply the laws of the land with unwavering resolve, or to both.

The main consequences were that the Mexican State and its citizens became hostages of the violence imposed by organized crime and subversive clusters. This situation, besides placing the country in a state of extreme vulnerability, puts it in a clear collision course with the U.S. because of the growing perception overseas that Mexico is an unreliable ally and an anarchic nation, incapable of providing an effective cooperation to improve the region’s security.

2. Mexico’s definition of national security.

In order to better appreciate the contrast in the outlook on national security in both countries, it is useful to look at its official description the Cisen. National security is defined by this agency as “the actions destined in an immediate and direct manner to sustain the integrity, stability and permanence of the Mexican State such as:

? The protection of the...nation from the threats and risks confronted by our country;

? The preservation of its national sovereignty and independence, and the defense of its territory;

? The maintenance of the constitutional order and the strengthening of the democratic institutions of its government;

? Upholding the unity of the parts that form the federation as indicated by article 43 of the Constitution (which enumerates the states of the union and the Federal District where Mexico City is located);

? The legitimate defense of the Mexican State vis-à-vis other States or subjects of international law;

? The preservation of a democracy based on the economic, social and political development of the country and its inhabitants.”

The Mexican government perceives the potential threats to the “integrity, stability and permanence” of the nation from within and from abroad, but does
not single out who poses such threats in its definitions and basic objectives. This issue is dealt with only in its operational agenda, unlike the U.S. that explicitly states the “need to avoid terrorist attacks” as its essential mission.

Thus, after 9/11 the Mexican authorities included the fight against terrorism in their operational national security procedures. This addition permits a closer cooperation to make sure that Mexico avoids being a transit route to potential anti-U.S. terrorists. Closer teamwork stemming from these efforts can also contribute to neutralize the political support for anti-immigration attitudes and policies in the U.S. There is the problem, however, that such close collaboration is, by its very nature, discreet and little known by the public at large or even by high ranking officials and legislators not directly involved with national security. There is also the political problem that a large segment of the Mexican population, stirred by the ideology of radical political movements, opposes any cooperation with the U.S., especially on national security issues, and supports the goals and tactics of terrorist organizations and leaders.5

Just as the U.S. government needs the cooperation of its neighbors to stem the terrorist threat, the Mexican authorities need the support of the U.S. to include in their common regional security agenda the issues that should worry both countries, but that are of a particular and immediate concern to Mexico:

? Fight organized crime and drug trafficking more effectively in Mexico’s territory. These activities pose serious problems to the sovereignty, national security and public health of both countries.

? It is urgent to put an end to anti-systemic movements like the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), which took hostage the city of Oaxaca for more than six months and have done terrible damage, burning down part of it, including valuable architectonic jewels. This should be a priority, as the APPO has the support of guerrilla movements, and should be recognized by the U.S. as part of the international terrorist movement, so they can enter its intelligence and national security radars. Both countries could then work together to find out and sever APPO’s external financial and political sources of support, as well as their supply of smuggled weapons and to identify its probable links with the drug cartels.6

? The pressing need to denounce and punish the numerous violations to the laws and the violent threats posed by ex-Presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his allies, in the low-intensity coup d’etat that they have undertaken since loosing the election last July. Recruiting the support of the U.S.’ national security and intelligence organizations would

5 In the frequent street rallies organized by the former presidential candidate of the PRD Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his supporters, the name of Osama Bin Laden is frequently mentioned and invariably cheered by the crowd, just as references to President Bush and the U.S. are booed.

6 On December 4 the government of Felipe Calderón detained and sent to a high security jail, four key leaders of the APPO, including its head, Flavio Sosa, pending their trial on local and federal charges, including sedition, which carry potential prison sentences of 15 years.
allow Mexico, just as in the previous point, to gather information on the sources of foreign financial and political support for this subversive movement. There have also been disclosures that a high-ranking official in Mexico City’s police force, closely associated with its new Major, has close connections to drug cartels.

An agenda like this would complete the existing set of priorities in pursuing an intelligent and comprehensive regional security plan, more effective in fighting not only the terrorist danger but also other movements that pose serious threats to a broader definition of security for the North American region.

A key but frequently overlooked element of the national security agenda is related to the economic competitiveness of the area, which was one of the foundations behind the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that now ties Canada, Mexico and the U.S. in a commercial and political institution that, in turn, could be widened to include other aspects crucial to the region.

Competitiveness in Mexico has been paralyzed, as was to be expected, as the result of the suspension and even backtracking of the structural reform agenda that was supposed to accompany the implementation of NAFTA, and that is indispensable to increase the efficiency of its economy.

Besides the derailed reforms, another element that explains the lack of dynamism in the competitiveness of Mexican workers is the poor physical and institutional infrastructure that prevails in the productive environment of the country. The means of communication and transport are inefficient or very expensive because of lack of competition. Public services –personal security, electricity, water and sewage, the court system, and so on- are insufficient, have an awful quality, are very costly and suffer of an excessive red-tape.

Under these circumstances creating jobs in Mexico is extremely expensive. During the six years of the Fox administration, from 2000 to 2006, only 442 thousand jobs were created, on average, every year in the “protected” sector of the economy –that in which taxes are paid and workers are covered with benefits- while 1.2 million new workers joined the labor market each year.

Those that do not find work, have to look for it in the streets, in the so-called underground economy, or migrating to the U.S. where it is estimated that a Mexican worker triples its productivity by the simple fact of crossing the border, and despite the serious barriers imposed by a language and customs that are unfamiliar and even hostile to most of them.
According to a recent study, it is estimated that each year 800 thousand people enter the U.S. illegally and 80% of them are Mexican, which then join a community of around 12 million illegal aliens that already live in the U.S.\footnote{Immigration and America’s Future: A New Chapter, (2006) a report of an independent task force chaired by Spencer Abraham and Lee Hamilton, and directed by Doris Meissner. The Migration Policy Institute, the Manhattan Institute and the Wilson International Center for Scholars.}

This study states that:

“While the overwhelming majority of migrants entering the United States do not represent a threat to national security, the borders must be the front line for security. In the post-9/11 environment, Americans are particularly concerned about terrorists crossing a permeable border or fraudulently gaining admittance to the country at legal ports of entry. In addition, increases in smuggling, dangerous border crossing patterns that have led to tragic migrant deaths and vigilantism all pose risks to migrants and border communities alike.”

The sober and thoughtful analysis and recommendations of a study like this unfortunately are not shared by many others. Some academic and political circles have reached the conclusion that it would be desirable to force Mexico, by any means, to take drastic measures to impede its citizens from reaching the border with the U.S., and that the illegal emigration of Mexicans is part of a great conspiracy of its government to recover the territories that were taken by the U.S. after the Mexico-U.S. war.

Beyond wild flights of the imagination like this, it is clear that there are mounting pressures on the U.S. government to “do something” with respect to its borders. In the case of migration from Mexico, though, the only long-term solution is that the country attains much faster rates of economic growth that create not only the needed jobs to accommodate the new entrants to the labor market, but starts absorbing back those that joined the underground economy or the economic diaspora. Such a feat was accomplished by countries like Ireland, Spain and Portugal that for decades exported millions of citizens to work overseas, many of which are now back in their own countries.

To reach such a favorable situation and restore a dynamic process of economic development, Mexico needs to return to the reformist path that it abandoned more than a decade ago, and adopt the appropriate public policies to achieve much faster growth in its productivity.

**4. The Role of NAFTA in Improving Mexico’s Competitiveness.**

Although it is clear that Mexico has the sole responsibility of reaching a faster, sustained and more inclusive process of economic development, a greater supporting role can be crafted for its NAFTA partners. Canada and the U.S.
would benefit very much directly and indirectly, as it would lead to a more competitive trading block, better able to confront the imposing challenges of China, India and other nations that are improving their competitiveness fast.

For those of us who had some responsibility in getting NAFTA approved at the beginning of the 1990s, it was clear why our three nations were pursuing a free trade arrangement and not a common market or a political union like Europe, and that the massive transfers of resources that took place towards the less developed countries joining the EU, were unlikely in North America.

The reason is simple. In our case, most of the resources would come from the U.S., which is approximately seven times larger in economic size than Canada and Mexico combined. Such resources would be classified as “foreign aid” and administered by the U.S. Congress that frequently attaches political conditions that make such aid unacceptable for the recipient nations.

This situation has not changed but the pressing need to improve national security opens, in my judgment, new possibilities to channel resources from the U.S., within the NAFTA framework, to develop the infrastructure in Mexico’s side of the border, with the ostensible purpose of building projects related to the improvement of the region’s security and of fighting more effectively organized crime and the drug trafficking cartels.

Such works, which could include important investments in roads, ports, water-management and railroads, would be clearly associated with better security conditions along the Mexico-U.S. border, but would also be of great help in raising the competitiveness of Mexico by helping to lower its productive costs.

If the U.S. government would, for instance, substantially increase the capital base of the Nadbank – North American Development Bank -, an institution that was created precisely to support the infrastructure along the U.S.-Mexico border to facilitate a better regional integration, it could represent an important contribution to channel resources for Mexico’s growth in acceptable conditions.

Another key element to raising competitiveness in the Mexican economy is the indispensable restoration of the rule of law throughout the country, but particularly in regions in which organized crime operates now with impunity. In this area the possibilities of closer cooperation between Mexico and the U.S. are huge, given the clear link between drug traffic and other illicit activities, and the smuggling of people and weapons across the border.8

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8 To see a gory, albeit somewhat exaggerated account of the horrors occurring along the border, see A Line in the Sand: Confronting the Threat at the Southwest Border, prepared by the Majority Staff of the House Committee on Homeland Security.
For the effective restoration of the rule of law to take place fast and soon, it must include not only well focused intelligence actions but also enhanced capabilities of tracking the illegal traffic of substances and people, which requires much closer cooperation of the authorities of both countries.

Unlike ex-President Fox who paid no attention at imposing the rule of law in Mexico, President Felipe Calderón, a lawyer by training, has defined the restoration of the rule of law as a priority since it was lost completely in several regions of the nation, including parts of the border areas, and partially in the rest of the country. Given the dismal conditions prevailing in this regard, much closer cooperation between Mexican and U.S. authorities is called for.

If both nations do not act soon in a closer mutual effort as outlined here, the political pressures will continue to mount in the U.S., pressing its government to act unilaterally in ill-advised and ineffective measures, like the building of the wall along the border approved by Congress and signed into law by President Bush, despite his strong reservations, with the purpose of appearing to be “doing something” about illegal immigration.

5. Mexico’s National Security System and the Outline for Reform.
In Mexico’s old political system dominated by the PRI, the Department of the Interior was in charge of political control, and had sole access to privileged information and was the recipient and source of all intelligence activities. In the absence of the President, it ruled the government and the country. Its might was enormous, and its duties rather simple to carry out: since all the threads of power were in the hands of the President as head of State, of government and of the hegemonic political party. There were neither balancing elements nor power sharing. The secretary of the Interior was the executive arm of this vertical power structure and discipline was unquestioned and absolute.

The landscape started changing as opposition forces strengthened. The PAN (the center-right National Action Party in power since 2000) and the left began to manage more vocally social and political disagreements until then ignored. Although in appearance they represented minority points of view, it became a necessity to open political spaces and institutionalize them. Electoral reform became indispensable, and the job naturally fell on Interior. However, the political opening was negotiated from a position of force and Interior kept its jurisdiction over the full array of instruments of political control – including managing Congress, and state and local governments whose autonomy was purely nominal –, and national security besides dealing with the opposition.

He had the peculiar idea that he wanted to “keep the social peace” rather than applying the rule of law. By this he meant avoiding at all costs the legitimate use the public force even when confronting blatant violations of the laws. The predictable results of this confusion were a systematic deterioration of public security and a rampant increase in crime and radical challenges to the authority and legitimacy of the federal government.
In 1994 there was a new twist for which the electoral reforms of 1989 and 1993 were the precedent. The system was moving inexorably towards democracy but there was no consensus as to the route to get there. The leftist PRD remained at the sidelines of the negotiations and did not support any of the changes proposed. The long-term pact of the government was made with the PAN. The appearance of the EZLN guerrilla in January of 1994, showed the cracks in the system and the priority became to agree with the opposition parties to salvage the presidential July elections.

Presidents Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) and Fox followed the same logic. The first, adopted the electoral reform of 1997 as his key political priority, and a consensus had to be reached by any means. The jobs of political control and national security took the back seat among other reasons because the tensions between Zedillo and his party were very strong. In addition, the victory of the PRD’s Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as governor of Mexico City, until then a district managed directly by the federal authorities, imposed the need to create a new federal police since the control of Mexico City’s police forces, the second armed body in the country after the army, would no longer be in the hands of the federal government.

President Fox went even further. The Cisen became a public and transparent organization, which is not the way in which intelligence activities can be carried out effectively, and he created the position of Director for National Intelligence in the President’s office, outside of the control of Interior, thus completely scattering its political control responsibilities.

His secretary of the Interior, Santiago Creel backed this transformation since he believed that “democratic governance” was exclusively circumscribed to the relationship with the opposition. He was the main promoter of the idea that any use of the public force was “repression,” since he did not want to “soil his hands.” As of that moment, the secretary of the Interior lost all ascendancy over his peers in the cabinet and the control over the state and local governments was also lost. This was reinforced by the adoption of automatic formulas for revenue sharing. Without the purse and the political control, the federal government became toothless vis-à-vis state and local governments and the Congress.

The results were disastrous. Instead of a close coordination and clear authority, the so-called “national security cabinet” became a boxing ring among

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10 After causing the worst financial crisis in Mexico’s history in his first 19 days in office, Zedillo concluded that the only way in which he could salvage a positive role in history would be by ensuring that the opposition won the Presidential elections of 2000, thus becoming the champion of Mexico’s “new democracy.”
the secretaries of the Interior, Public Security, the Attorney General and the armed forces.

Creel’s idea was that Interior would evolve to become a prime minister’s office, and that the political control would fall in a new entity with that mission. None of these fantastic ideas occurred as changes became trapped by politics but in the process, national security fell into no-man’s-land. The results were shocking. The entities in charge of pieces of the national security apparatus became increasingly inefficient as organized crime and radical social and political movements operated freely, breaking laws with complete impunity. The collapse of the system is obvious and has been reflected in the staggering growth of the criminal activities.

To even assume that any progress could be made in the direction in which Fox and Creel wanted to move, was patently absurd and simply shows that they never understood the most elementary notions of politics, national security or governance. The conditions to move to a parliamentary type of government in Mexico, and thus to the figure of a prime minister, is simply absurd. However, things cannot be maintained in their current dysfunctional situation.

Now it is vital to reform the system and return the responsibilities for intelligence and national security to the Department of the Interior. The route to be taken is very clear:

? Return all intelligence and national security functions and operations to the direct control of the secretary of the Interior.

? Merge all federal police forces into one corporation under the authority of the secretary of the Interior, who should also head and coordinate the national security cabinet.

The priorities of Interior must be determined by the political and social circumstances. Organized crime and the drug cartels, in particular, represent the greatest and growing challenge to national security. The tensions and political conflicts, as exemplified by the situation in Oaxaca, demand an effective use of the following instruments:

? Solid timely, and accurate intelligence;

? The measured but decisive use of the public force when needed;

? Going after the criminals and those who violate the laws, who must be judged, sentenced and jailed;

? Political negotiations when necessary, but never as the result of blackmail.

The need to re-establish the capacity of the federal authorities to govern cannot occur without, first, restoring the public sector’s monopoly and use of the public force for its legitimate purposes. The new secretary of the Interior cannot be bashful about using the police forces and the army when required, and the
dreadful confusion between the legitimate and necessary use of force with “repression” must be eradicated for good.

If the countries of North America do not act with imagination, talent and speed to create a truly regional security strategy that can shield it from terrorist dangers, lack of competitiveness and economic stagnation, it is just a matter of time before more serious troubles occur through our common borders in the form of unstoppable migratory flows to the U.S. and new terrorist incidents.

An intelligent solution must be found to regularize the enormous number of people living illegally in the U.S. that already accounts for more than 4% of its total population. Such a large group of people at the margins of society and the law could also pose a fertile ground for the growth of dangerous groups, like the Central American gangs, but could conceivably shelter terrorist cells too. This, and the reversal in the directions of the flows of people that start returning to their countries of origin, can only happen if those nations start growing faster and creating the necessary jobs.

Fast and more inclusive growth in Mexico is also needed to stem the allure of the populist tide in the region’s politics that already controls several countries in the Americas, and that came dangerously close to gaining power in Mexico, a circumstance that would have led to a reversal of the policies that represent the country’s only hope for fast, sustained and stable economic growth, and that would have resulted in massive new outflows of people to the U.S..

The window of opportunity to carry out many of these ideas is narrow, given the electoral calendar in the U.S. and the need that the new government of Mexico of Felipe Calderón has to launch strong and imaginative proposals to return the country to a proper reformist path, and to mend a badly tattered situation regarding public insecurity, organized crime and foreign relations that it inherited.