

# Mexico's Northern Border Safe and Smart?

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Pedro Valherra/Cuartoscuro

The border, taken from Tijuana, Baja California.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Mexico's relationship with the United States changed for the worse in several ways given the continuing U.S. economic recession<sup>1</sup> and its change in national security priorities. On the one hand, we have the

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protraction of the economic recession until today, the end of 2002, with a triple impact on Mexico: a substantial reduction of our exports with the resulting closure of maquila plants and

massive unemployment; reduction of income from tourism; and a probable contraction of the amount of hard currency sent home by legal and illegal immigrants given the reduction of con-

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sumption, the constriction of the U.S. labor market and the implementation of more severe immigration policies. On the other hand, the Fox administration's tenuous initiatives to try to come to some kind of migratory agreement with the United States have come to nothing, at least in the medium term, given that today the U.S. priority is, in the first place, to exercise anti-terrorist border control that would extend to drug traffickers and organized crime in general through the general formula of "a secure, smart border."

Border security is understood as reinforcing the border patrol with more personnel, air and land transport equipment, detection equipment, the possible use of the National Guard and greater exchange of information and anti-terrorist collaboration with Mexican and Canadian police and military. A "smart" border is fundamentally based on cutting-edge technology, such as the laser visa system for legal migrants, systematic computer searches for possible terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, etc.

The job on the border is both colossal and impossible with the human and technical means currently assigned to it, but particularly due to the magnitude of traffic in goods and people every year.<sup>2</sup> Mexico's border, however, is much more difficult to penetrate than Canada's: according to the head of Canadian intelligence himself, the majority of the world's terrorist groups have set up shop in Canada in search of a safe haven, establishing operational bases and trying to infiltrate the United States.<sup>3</sup> Given its old traditions of asylum and a pro-migrant policy, Canada is host to numerous foreign communities of different nationalities, in-

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cluding those from Arab Muslim countries.

Now, what could the negative effects for our country be given this panorama? What should be done given our enormous, multi-faceted vulnerability (in the spheres of trade, investment and food security, among others) in the face of the United States' new position? Some repercussions of the situation post-9/11 are natural or not intentional on the part of the United States, such as the contraction of the employment rate, private investment and consumption in general, which make for less demand for Mexican export products, tourism services, migrant labor and productive and portfolio investment. Nevertheless, some consequences are the result of a clear political will on the part of government or the private sector: more migratory control, greater pressure on the anti-terrorist and anti-drug fight, phytosanitary and tariff barriers on Mexican agricultural exports, obstacles to land cargo transportation, dumping of U.S. goods into our market and pressure to increase privatization of the electricity and oil industries, among other possible conflicts.

Mexican foreign policy of "cooperation at all costs" with the United States, practiced for the previous two administrations and during the current administration of President Fox, although with slight variations, has not produced positive results for the Mexican nation and state.<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to go

into a detailed analysis of the damage done by the kind of trade—and de facto geo-political and geo-economic-integration—that the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada has meant (de-industrialization, destructuring of the commercial and agricultural sector, unemployment and mass poverty, greater concentration of income and wealth, growing professional and occasional crime, etc.). Nor do I want to attribute to NAFTA the sole responsibility of these problems, given that they are socio-political phenomena that existed before the treaty, which, nevertheless, did undoubtedly contribute to deepening and broadening them. Neither do I propose to substitute the foreign policy of cooperation with one of confrontation or conflict with the great power, or suppose that it is possible to stop the process of globalization, which for Mexico is, in fact, a regionalization.

My focus is, first of all, to situate the new characteristics of U.S. national security policy since 9/11 to try to avoid belated, naive surprises and to adopt a preventive and not merely reactive and impotent attitude about the different decisions and current and future actions of our neighbor to the north.

Secondly, I would like to make some short- and long-term alternative proposals for Mexican foreign policy. It should be pointed out, however, that, given space limitations, both will be merely outlined.

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A September 2002 official White House publication, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” points to several ways of dealing with the entire world (divided in the document into allies, friends, partners and enemies) that will be stepped up, particularly with Mexico. First of all is unilateralism as the main form of international action, completely outside of the multilateralism represented by the United Nations system and the regional economic and military organizations and the bilateralism represented in different accords or treaties.<sup>5</sup>

In the second place, the document claims another “right” for the United States: “preemptive” actions in “terrorist” or “enemy” countries, as opposed to reprisals or punishment,<sup>6</sup> given that the actions will be taken before any enemy act, based on the total certainty that the latter will attack, making it very important to strike the first blow. This is something similar to the balance of nuclear terror and the strategic value of a first strike during the Cold War, although later it was recognized this strategy guaranteed not victory but mutual nuclear destruction and a worldwide catastrophe.

In the third place, the strategy lays claim to the ever-present realism and pragmatism in world power politics, but in the midst of today’s anti-terrorist war, there have been recent examples of pacts with countries previously

considered hostile and now catalogued as friends or even allies (Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan).<sup>7</sup> Above all, it is relevant to point out that the regimes of these countries are a perfect paradigm of the negation of democracy, human rights, equality, freedom and free trade, the supposed values and world objectives to be propagated by the new U.S. national security strategy.

The fourth aspect of this strategy is that it upholds the idea that the United States is the largest and only existing power and, therefore will not allow any other power or alliance of powers and countries to challenge its role as indisputable hegemonic leader of the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> It could be argued that all of this is nothing new, particularly the fourth element, since from the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States aspired to maintaining absolute, unipolar military supremacy, as well as the use of realism, unilateralism and preemptive operations as guidelines for its foreign policy.

Undoubtedly this is true. However, what before were trends are now models that are being legalized or legitimized for the future given the non-existence of any counterweight such as existed during the Soviet era.

Given this by no means encouraging binational and international pano-

rama, it seems that those in government and different sectors of Mexican society want to rethink foreign policy vis-à-vis our largest trade and geopolitical partner. Different public statements —some sectoral and others global— reflect a certain hopelessness, annoyance or alarm about the national and binational status quo. Among the sectoral statements are those of different peasant and growers’ organizations that have put forward the urgent need to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement’s agricultural chapter, since it provides for the almost total opening of the economy to U.S. agricultural products in early 2003, which would eliminate thousands of peasant families from the market, with the resulting increase in unemployment, drug trafficking, crime, poverty and migration to the cities and the United States. Another example is the National Chamber of Manufacturers (Canacintra) and Mexico’s richest man, billionaire Carlos Slim, who both agree on the urgent need to reactivate the domestic market through increased public spending and incentives to productive investment that would create massive numbers of jobs to deal with some of these problems. The legislative branch will have an enormous responsibility regarding this option during its discussion of the 2003 federal budget and the monies earmarked for the different ministries.

Another broader option emphasizes the need to revive the old —and until now limited— policy of diversifying our foreign relations (on matters of trade, investment, technology, fuel sources, diplomacy and the military) both with the old continent, today unified in the European Union, and with the countries of the Pacific Ba-

sin, particularly Japan. Another option is to turn toward the nations of Latin America, especially Brazil because of its sub-regional influence and because it shares common problems with Mexico such as servicing an enormous public debt. If both nations made a concerted, conditioned effort to pay it, they could transform their enormous financial vulnerability into a shared vulnerability for both debtor and creditor nations.

Another proposal with a different geographical projection emphasizes the importance and urgency of seeking a closer relationship with Canada on common issues (terrorism, drug trafficking, trade) vis-à-vis the United States in order to be able to better negotiate the terms of the actions to be taken to deal with these tri-national problems. This would mean that the Mexican gov-

ernment would have to abandon the illusory and sterile strategy of achieving a "special" relationship with the world's greatest power.<sup>9</sup>

Any of these strategies, none of which are mutually exclusive but rather complement each other (although they should be put in order of importance), would undoubtedly require the leadership ability and political will of President Vicente Fox, but as a statesman and not a mere six-year occupant of the presidency, together with the united will of the legislative branch and the state's institutions.

It would also demand political audacity and strategic planning and, of course, the participation of the greatest possible number of sectors and social actors interested in a change of this magnitude in the external links with the United States and the

domestic links among the nation, the administration and the state. Externally it would be necessary for a truly safer and smarter border; internally it would be necessary for fostering democratic change, not only alternation in the federal administration; a change that would strengthen the legitimacy of state institutions vis-à-vis the nation and would make it possible to begin to resolve the central national problems and recuperate the spaces of our beleaguered national sovereignty.

In other words, today, in the midst of the process of globalization, we cannot put off, first, thinking globally; second, acting globally to give globalization another direction and socio-economic content; and third, transforming the nation's critical political and economic situation and the institutional weakness of the Mexican state. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Even prior to the attacks, there were indications of impending recession. See Elaine Levine, "Crónica de una recesión largamente anunciada, que fue repentinamente detonada por el atentado terrorista del 11 de septiembre," José Luis Valdés Ugalde and Diego Valadés, comps., *Globalidad y conflicto: Estados Unidos y la crisis de septiembre* (Mexico City: CISAN-IJJ-UNAM, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> According to official U.S. figures, in 1998, 3.5 million trucks and freight cars, 75 million automobiles and 254 million people crossed the border at 37 different ports of entry. José Luis Piñeyro, "El narcotráfico y la seguridad nacional en México: cambios, críticas y propuestas," *Revista de Administración Pública* 98 (Mexico City), 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Ward Pitfield D. Elcock, "Perspectiva general de seguridad pública y seguridad nacional," *Revista de Administración Pública* 101 (Mexico City), 2000.

<sup>4</sup> See José Luis Piñeyro, "La seguridad nacional con Salinas," *Foro Internacional* 138 (Mexico City), 1994, and "La seguridad nacional con Zedillo," *Foro Internacional* 166 (Mexico City), 2001.

<sup>5</sup> "While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country." The White House, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, September 2002), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion about preemptive actions and reprisals, see Richard Price, "¿Es apropiado responder con ataques militares?" and Alejandro Dávila Flores, "Smart Borders y seguridad nacional después del 11 de septiembre: ¿tomando 'decisiones inteligentes?'" Cristina Rosas, comp., *Cuando el destino nos al-*

*cance...terrorismo, democracia y seguridad* (Mexico City: UNAM/Australian University/Editorial Quimera, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Cristina Rosas, "¿Cuánto cambió el mundo después del 11 de septiembre?" Cristina Rosas, comp., op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> The document states categorically, "Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States." The White House, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> See the final session of the conference "Estudios de América del Norte: experiencias y perspectivas," organized by the Mexican College, the Northern Border College, the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Monterrey Technological Institute of Higher Learning in Mexico City, 24-25 October 2002.