

Security and Intelligence in US-Mexico Relations¹

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Parameters of security and intelligence relations.

The relationship between Mexico and the United States has been defined by the countries' shared border, their economic interaction (which has been growing since the signing of NAFTA), and by their common geopolitical arena.

In terms of security, the relationship has been defined by like-minded priorities and interests; however, these factors have not necessarily led to a formal alliance between the two countries nor a joint strategy in the face of potential threats. This characteristic of the relationship is evidenced by the absence of defense agreements and the lack of joint military exercises.

This dynamic can be understood and justified when we consider the lack of external threats that would require a joint defense strategy for a conventional war against outside aggressors. The reality of the situation renders such an alliance for the United States with their neighbors to the south unnecessary, and has allowed Mexico to preserve a nationalist military doctrine, without needing to become involved in outside military operations or even, as of yet, having its military participate in international peacekeeping operations. Thus, the need to share military intelligence between the two countries has traditionally been minimal and has not implied structural conformity or intelligence mechanisms that allow for joint operations.

However, there are matters of security where threats have led to growing cooperation between the two countries' institutions with regards to intelligence. In recent decades, the clearest example has been drug trafficking, and in a broader sense organized crime as well. In both of these areas, the countries' bodies of law enforcement and their respective drug enforcement agencies (AFI and DEA) have maintained a permanent flow of information, even on an operational level in terms of carrying out intercepts, detentions, confiscations, seizures and monitoring. In fact, since 1990 Mexico has formally allowed the permanent presence of DEA agent within its borders as liaisons for sharing information on drugs.

New security challenges.

The intensification of terrorism in 2001 resulted in one of the most important changes with regards to the doctrine and security strategies of the United States. One of the initial consequences of 9/11 was the reinforcement of border patrol along the southern border, something immediately manifested in the long lines to enter the country, both for people and for merchandise. To this date, the speed at which the lines are processed has yet to return to the same level as before September of 2001.

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The southern border of the United States registers the country's largest number of documented entries. In 2002, 348 million people legally crossed the border with Mexico, representing 75% of all land entries into the country. Also, more than 200 billion dollars of merchandise was transported across the same border, representing more than two thirds of the total trade between the two countries. This situation automatically placed the border shared with Mexico as a priority on the United States' security agenda.³

The characterization of these new threats did not necessarily imply modifications in all the issues on the agenda that define the United States' relationship with Mexico. Although explicit references were made to the possibility that at some point terrorists could attempt to enter the country through Mexico, it was clearly stated at different levels of the administration that Mexicans who emigrate to the United States for economic reasons or to be reunited with family members, even those who cross the border illegally, do not represent a security threat to the United States. As a result, new measures of border security were not necessarily aimed at deterring this influx.

This movement of people poses an indirect challenge in terms of security issues. In this new environment of threats, the presence of 10 million undocumented immigrants in the United States—at least 5 million of whom are Mexicans—creates an interesting challenge. However, the issue has not merited special attention on their security agenda something reflected in the absence of any attempt to regularize undocumented immigrants within its territory⁴.

What all this points to is that the main attempts at collaboration between the two countries are centered on intelligence partnerships designed to stop the undesired transit of individuals connected to certain activities, especially terrorism and organized crime. The new security challenges have not required increased levels of military cooperation, and at an operational level, the countries' shared border has become the main challenge in terms of bilateral cooperation.

New scenarios of cooperation.

In spite of political differences between the two countries regarding global issues, as was the case with Mexico's position—shared by Canada—against supporting military operations in Iraq without authorization from the United Nations Security Council, their relationship has become stronger on a bilateral level since 9/11. Specifically, the greatest progress has been achieved in the field of intelligence.

In March of 2002, Mexico and the United States endorsed a Mexico-U.S. Border Alliance (the U.S. and Canada signed a similar agreement that same year) consisting of a plan of action for working in three prioritized areas: protecting the border's infrastructure, ensuring safe movement of people, and ensuring a safe flow of goods.

The movement of people and goods across Mexico's northern border is an essential

³ It should be noted that although there are 55 formal border crossings between the two countries 91% of the movement of people and 96% of the movement of merchandise takes place at only 12 ports of entry, a situation that facilitates and simplifies security tasks.

⁴ It is estimated that in 2003, approximately 350,000 Mexicans managed to cross the border without documentation and establish permanent residence in the United States. Additionally, it is estimated that another 390,000 undocumented Mexicans entered the country as temporary workers with no intention of staying.

component of the economy and development of both countries, and of everyday life in the communities situated on either side of the border. Considering the dynamics of the situation, security concerns should not ignore the need for agile and efficient border crossings for both people and merchandise.

The border, in its current situation, can only become efficient and safe under an integrated plan of shared responsibility. Within this framework, both governments agreed upon the creation of *smart borders* as a medium and long-term goal, proposing an increase in levels of security for high-risk targets while at the same time making the transit of low-risk people and merchandise easier and more efficient by means of sophisticated systems of control and verification, based on the use of up-to-date technology.

New challenges in matters of intelligence

The characteristics of the threats that comprise the new security agenda have transformed intelligence into one of the most important tools. It is extremely difficult to fight terrorism and organized crime without systematic intelligence that is appropriately managed, features efficient mechanisms of communication, and has the ability to respond quickly when facing the tactical and strategic adjustments of criminal organizations.

Bilateral cooperation in this respect requires the compatibility of information systems, a close, organized relationship between the systems' operatives, and a balance between what each side gives and receives. Traditionally, there have been three problems in terms of strengthening this relationship: a tendency on the part of U.S. agencies to require information without offering anything in exchange, a lack of regularization on the part of Mexican agents regarding how information is managed, and an established distrust on the part of both sides, which results from the two aforementioned problems.

Current challenges signal that, with Mexico, intelligence work is focused on civilian agencies, notably the Center for Investigation and National Security, although with increasing participation from other institutions, especially those agencies responsible for migration and customs.

1) Exchange of intelligence related to prioritized objectives.

The fight against terrorism calls for mechanisms of bilateral cooperation to ensure constant, permanent communication in the pursuit of prioritized objectives, which have been agreed upon previously by both sides. This implies not only opportune detection of the movements of persons who have attracted special attention, but also the ability to exchange information immediately, as well as the output of precise, timely information so that operatives, especially those on the border, are able to carry out their operations.

This task is complicated by the need for central bodies of intelligence to coordinate with other institutions within the government apparatus, whose information systems must look out for the activities of those persons marked as priorities according to the analyses of risks. In the case of Mexico, for example, the information systems of the National Institute of Migration, Mexican Customs and Civil Aviation should be coordinated with the country's central intelligence apparatus so that these subsystems are able to effectively feed into the overall integrated system and appropriately fulfill their functions, both within the country and in terms of external issues.

In the case of the United States, the system of organization has become extremely complex. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which encompasses 22 agencies linked to security issues, has led to the restructuring of intelligence systems, a

process which has yet to be completed and affects coordination with Mexican agencies.

It is important to emphasize that this endeavor can not be limited to the border. The transnational nature of the threats requires coordination of intelligence actions all over the world. This dynamic makes difficult to work with precise security parameters based on territorial frontiers.

2) Protection of critical infrastructure.

In 2002, within the context of the Mexico-U.S. Border Alliance, a bilateral group for the protection of critical infrastructure was created. Although the group is centered on the countries' shared border and specific related objectives such as the protection of ports of entry, hydraulic infrastructure, and highway access, it tends to reach beyond this scope and affect areas such as telecommunications and the energy sector—areas that have called for a more integrated focus. The group's efforts concentrate on diagnosis and prevention with regards to events that could affect installations, procedures and processes in the border zone. Its basic purpose is based on the identification and exchange of opportune information.

3) Information about the movement of people.

One of the essential components of the fight against terrorism and organized crime is detecting the movement of people who enter and exit the country, crossing the shared border. In this real the coordination and administration of systems of registration and the management of the central intelligence agencies' prioritized objectives proves to be fundamental. In Mexico, the Integrated System for Immigration Operations (SIOM) was started in 2003 and aims at maintaining a safe, automatic registry of all people who enter and exit the country by way of airports and seaports. Currently, SIOM operates in Mexico's five main airports, where 85% of the country's arrivals and departures by way of air take place. In 2005, it is expected that all of Mexico's international airports will have implemented this system.⁵

4) Information about the flow of merchandise.

One concern that has received special attention with regards to joint border operations is the safe movement of merchandise, an area where it is especially important to increase levels of security without hindering a flow of merchandise that now results in more than 200 billion dollars annually. Mexican Customs works in conjunction with its counterparts in the Department of Homeland Security—including programs such as FAST (Fast and Secure Trade) and API (Advanced Passenger Information)—and coordinates activities within the framework of the bio-terrorism program and other specific programs designed to increase the safety of merchandise, while at the same time making passage more efficient.

Perspectives of bilateral cooperation with regards to intelligence.

⁵ The SIOM currently operates in five airports: Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico DF, Guadalajara and Los Cabos, and the seaports in Cozumel, Mazatlán and Ensenada. In 2005 the airports of Monterrey, Silao, Hermosillo, Cozumel and Mazatlán, will be added to the system, this coverage will reach 92% of all movement of passengers in international flights. Another four seaports will be also integrated to the system: Acapulco, Zihuatanejo, Mérida and Manzanillo.

a) Defining agendas. The work of intelligence agencies is an extraction of the administration's analyses of risks. Because of this, intelligence is intrinsically linked to the policies, the objectives and the strategies of national security. In the case of the relationship between Mexico and the United States, it has been difficult to define a joint agenda because of the lack of systematic exercises to determine the basic objectives, threats and main strategic elements that would define a common agenda.

This situation applies not only to Mexico, but also to the relationship that currently exists between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, countries that share a geopolitical environment, an economic space, and most certainly security concerns as well. Defining a common agenda has been complicated by the way in which the United States proposes its security strategy, which is of a global nature, and within which Mexico and Canada are but another component.

In this context, it is particularly important to consider the low level of joint reflection by the militaries of these three countries as to what threats they could be presented with, the best way to prepare themselves for acting against these threats, and, if it were ever the case, what joint military operations would be required.

This situation has not hindered progress in bilateral cooperation related to specific tasks and objectives, although it should be said that similar advances have not been achieved within a broader security plan. The people responsible for these issues in the United States should adapt their vision to the plans and priorities of Mexico and Canada (after all, this is what *cooperation* is considered to be), without having to incorporate all the concerns of these neighbors and economic partners in their entirety. A change in their way of thinking would surely prove to be beneficial for this cooperation.

b) Compatible systems. One of the most important components of intelligence collaboration is system compatibility. Once compatibility is achieved with regards to the countries' interests and concerns (it continues to be difficult for Mexico and the United States to reach a border agreement because of a lack of progress on immigration issues), it is crucial to work towards the compatibility of information systems. In other words, not only is it necessary for individuals responsible at political and operative levels to be on the same wavelength, but also for systems to possess efficient mechanisms of transmission and reception so that information can be immediately integrated into the system, for purposes of verification and processing.

Under these circumstances, one of the issues that has been suggested as a priority—and one that still remains in its initial phases—is cooperation in cyber security. Considering that most strategic information is stored in and sent over electronic networks, this poses a high security risk. In November of 2004, it was decided at the highest levels to create a bilateral Cyber Security subdivision within the group for protection of critical infrastructure with the objective of creating mechanisms that allow for an agile exchange of information and ensuring the ability to react to cybernetic systems emergencies that would affect both countries. The proposal has been made, but there is still a long road left to be traveled.

c) Use of technology. At the border, technology plays an increasingly important role as a backup for previous registers of people and merchandise, allowing for a much more efficient management of potential risks. Mexico and the United States are both concerned with implementing biometric identification systems in order to better certify the identity of people who enter and exit their territory. Certain problems are posed within this framework, such as the ability of people from the United States to enter Mexico without a passport. This suggests weaknesses in the system that have yet to be resolved.

The US VISIT program, which was designed to register foreigners who enter and exit the United States, is based on a biometric identification system comparable to the one Mexico is currently developing. The prospect of creating compatible technology would exponentially benefit the exchange and processing of information. There is a certain level of agreement between the two governments that this issue should be a priority; however, as of yet the U.S. government has not proposed any collaborative plan to ensure the parallel advances of these systems, something especially lamentable considering the disparity of the countries' resources. Despite the unprecedented security budget of the U.S., no resources have been assigned for bilateral collaboration, creating a systemic obstacle toward advancing cooperation between the countries.

d) Institutional coordination. Institutional coordination has proven to be an especially delicate issue in the sphere of intelligence. Agencies tend not to share information unless a series of conditions are met, some of which may include identifying clear-cut objectives that justify the exchange, the existence of personal relationships between agencies and operatives, and the perception on both sides that there is a balance between what they give and what they receive.

In addition to the previous points, it is important to consider the complexity of interagency coordination in both countries. The distrust that exists towards the institutions of other countries is also present among agencies within the same country. This means that in order to achieve a truly efficient system for exchanging information, it is necessary to take two big steps: improving coordination between agencies within the country as well as in conjunction with counterparts in other countries. Important progress has been made toward this end, but it is still not enough. Structural changes of intelligence systems, which have yet to be completed in the United States, also affect plans of bilateral cooperation.

An efficient system for the exchange of information must transcend situational changes and be able to draw on its own human and financial resources, demonstrating the ability to review and adapt its risk analyses in order to respond to priorities of common interest. This is possible to achieve only by strengthening formal mechanisms, while still allowing a certain amount of liberty when faced with political fluctuations. Each time supervising agencies adequately fulfill their functions, these mechanisms should be operating in a constant and permanent manner.