

# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3856 | FEBRUARY 20, 2013

## U.S.–Mexico Border: Tighter Border Security Requires Mexico’s Cooperation

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As the debate over immigration reform heats up, the topic of border security—especially on the southwest border with Mexico—looms larger. Washington policymakers ask: How many miles of fence, how many Border Patrol agents, how many billions of tax dollars will be enough to finally “secure” the border?

There is no easy answer. Airtight border security is more an abstract concept than a practical goal. It is difficult to envision a system of airport-like security or 100 percent “operational control” of 2,000 miles of often rugged and inhospitable terrain.

Ultimately, an effective border security policy requires a reliable security partner in Mexico. Thankfully, the objectives of Mexico’s new government are to

engineer a more secure, more prosperous, and more rule-of-law-oriented future.

**Mexico: The Essential Partner.** Under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the U.S. has already developed a considerable range of policy tools for working with Mexico. These range from the Merida Initiative and a 21st-century border management plan to the establishment of Border Enforcement Security Task Force teams, all of which work closely with Mexican counterparts.

The U.S. also shares highly sensitive intelligence with Mexican authorities, who are just as concerned as their American counterparts about terrorism and transnational criminal organizations. Further, the U.S. has improved military-to-military cooperation without trying to “militarize” the fight against transnational crime. U.S. Northern Command has assumed an active role in aggressively seeking to partner with Mexico’s armed forces.

A deepening of cooperation could put additional U.S. trainers in Mexico and deliver more cooperation in intelligence and operations planning but without any military “boots on the ground.” In short, the current level of cooperation between the two

parties is unprecedented and will likely continue to grow.

**An Expanding U.S.–Mexican Agenda.** The Mexican government has additional projects on the drawing board that include a gendarme force that is able to police rural areas and, potentially, a border patrol. Mexico also looks to stem the flow of Central Americans across its southern border, many of whom have the U.S. as their intended destination.

Both the U.S. and Mexico are concerned about the capacity of criminal organizations to weaken certain Central American nations to the point of “state failure.” Both sides share a common goal of dismantling the criminal conveyor belts that thrive off illegal flows of people or drugs to the U.S.

As Congress works through these issues, it will need continued assurances that Mexico will play its part as a responsible neighbor. Congress therefore should work to strengthen incentives that speed the legal movements of peoples and goods from abroad while deterring illegal movements. This is a daunting task. If projections hold, for example, Mexico could surpass Canada as the U.S.’s top trading partner over the next decade. Integrated, cross-border supply chains continue to put as much as

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3856>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

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40 percent of American content into Mexican-made exports.

To aid this growth, more needs to be done to enhance programs for pre-screened travelers and pre-clearance for trusted shippers, putting additional accountability and responsibility in the hands of Mexican authorities. Additionally, the U.S. must decide where to allocate scarce resources at vital sectors along the border. It must decide whether the focus is to be on relatively open spaces or on established crossing points that many argue remain vulnerable to crafty smugglers of persons and drugs.

**What the U.S. Should Do.** As the second Obama Administration, Congress, and the American people look at critical and interconnected issues of immigration reform and border security, they should also take into consideration the need to do the following:

- **Develop a comprehensive U.S.–Mexico anti-crime strategy.** The Obama Administration and Congress should work to develop a broad master plan for

U.S.–Mexico relations that coordinates law enforcement, judicial, and military assets to target transnational criminal organizations, gangs, human traffickers, terrorists, and other 21st-century threats to shared security. It should also develop effective criteria to measure progress and enhanced security.

- **Continue modernization of the southwest border.** The Administration and Congress should increase public–private partnerships to build smarter border infrastructure that speeds legal movements while preventing illicit movements. They should also work to enhance the deployment of key technologies, such as cameras and sensors, to aid the Border Patrol in identifying and halting illegal crossing and potential threats.
- **Foster U.S.–Mexico bilateral border security and immigration accords.** The U.S. should explore with Mexico specific agreements, protocols, and parallel laws

that draw the two governments closer together in order to regularize and expedite legal movements of people and goods while increasing cross-border disincentives and obstacles to illegal activities, especially illegal migration.

**Mexico as Part of the Solution.**

It is important to remember that in a world of complex and shifting security threats, America’s borders with Mexico and Canada are the U.S. homeland’s last line of defense, not its first.

With a stable, democratic, and more prosperous Mexico on America’s southern flank, much is possible. While Mexico is part of America’s immigration and border security woes, it should also be made a part of the solution.

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