

## U.S.-Mexico Homeland Defense: *A Compatible Interface*

by Victor E. Renuart, Jr., and Biff Baker

### Key Points

The United States and Mexico share a common history shaped by military incursions during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The bond between the American and Mexican people, however, has continued to grow closer over time despite occasional negative rhetoric from politicians in Washington, DC, and Mexico City. At local and state levels, relations solidified through the closely knit fabric of our border towns, intermarriage between families on each side of the border, and the development of infrastructure (to include water, wastewater, and gas and electricity utilities) that serves communities to the north and south. At the national level, our relationship became closer due to economic growth resulting from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which now accounts for almost \$1 billion (U.S. dollars) in trade per day between the two countries.

The events of 9/11 helped political leaders realize that an attack on one NAFTA partner could have significant impact upon all trading partners. Trade decreased among all three NAFTA nations due to security concerns, which brought together our elected officials to discuss areas of mutual concern in defense and security. Mexican military support in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina helped build a

new sense of trust and friendship between our people; similarly, the Merida Initiative is assisting our neighbor in defeating the drug threat, and has further helped to build trust between our countries.

Hence, the term *compatible interface* in the title of this paper refers to the fact that the United States and Mexico have complementary areas of concern in each of our four instruments of national power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic), which have been shaped by events that uniquely impact upon North American neighbors. Hence, expanded cooperation between Mexican counterparts and the U.S. Northern Command and our interagency community will improve the security and prosperity of the citizens of both our nations.

This paper responds to a previous Strategic Forum (no. 243, July 2009) entitled *U.S.-Mexico Defense Relations: An Incompatible Interface* by Craig Deare. Some of the assertions and conclusions within Dr. Deare's paper were flawed due to an outdated U.S.-Mexico paradigm that preceded the 9/11 attacks and recent counter-drug operations in Mexico. If his work had been published prior to the establishment of U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), it would have been well received, but times have changed. Because of our collective

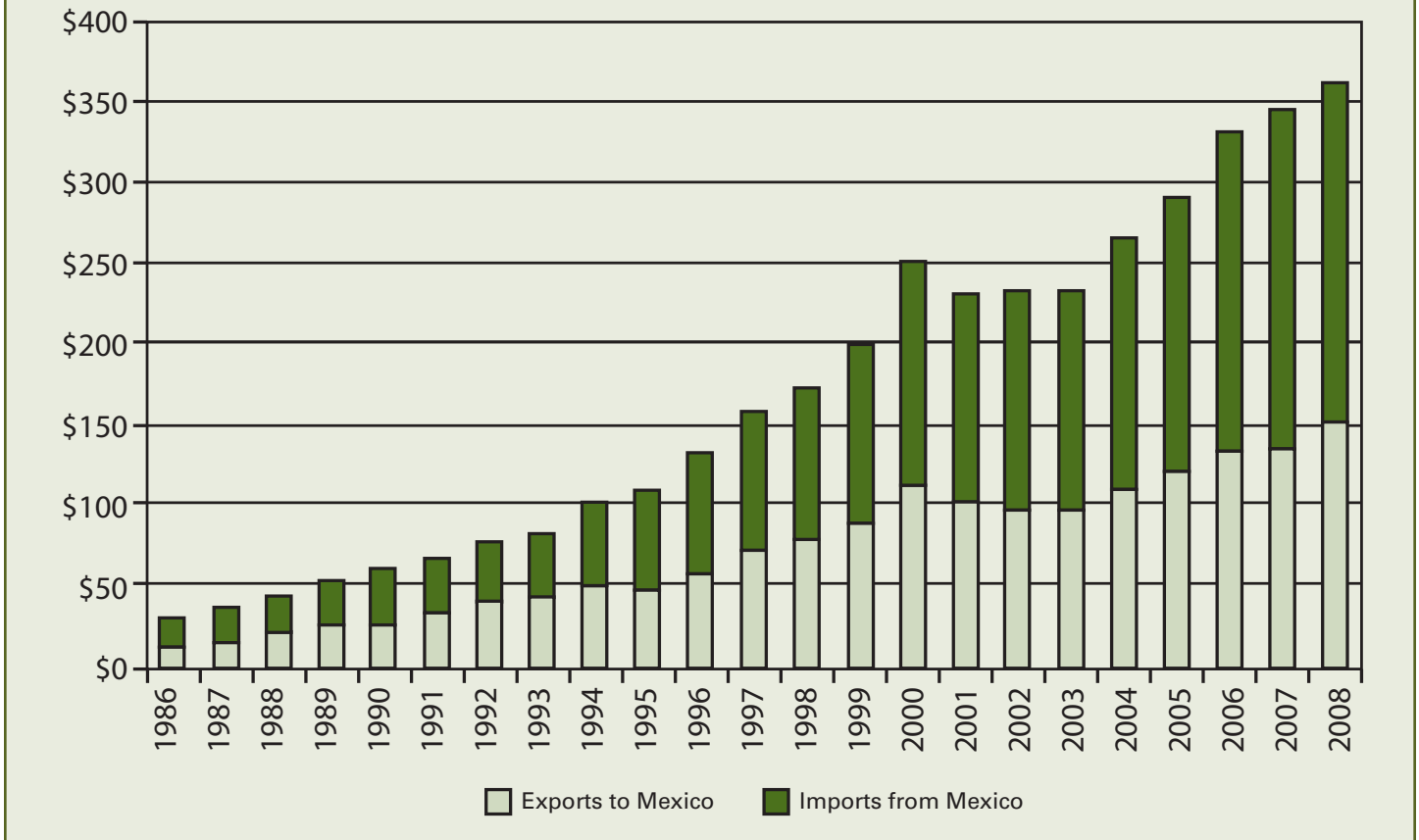
experiences over the past 6 years, we find implausible the notion that USNORTHCOM is not staffed or experienced enough to support Mexico's security cooperation needs. Hence, *U.S.-Mexico Homeland Defense: A Compatible Interface* is intended to set the record straight by pointing out the numerous areas of cooperation between Mexico and the United States since the establishment of USNORTHCOM.

The term *compatible interface* in the title of this paper refers to the fact that the United States and Mexico have complementary areas of concern in each of our four instruments of national power: diplomatic, information, military, and economic. A firm understanding of where we were, and where we are, in these elements of power gives the reader a better picture of the strong relationship between Mexico and the United States.

### Diplomacy and Information

During the first 100 years of U.S.-Mexican relations, diplomacy and information-sharing suffered setbacks due to armed conflicts between the nascent powers. School children who study history on both sides of our borders are familiar with the early interludes between our countries:

U.S. Exports to and Imports from Mexico (US\$ billions)



- 1836: Texas gained independence from Mexico.
- May 1846: Congress declared war on Mexico, which was ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848).
- April to November 1914: The United States occupied Veracruz due to the Tampico Affair.
- March 1916 to February 1917: The United States retaliated against the Francisco “Pancho” Villa raids.

Diplomacy and misinformation appeared to remain in a continuous state of conflict, in part due to accusations thrown across the border that typically served the needs of U.S. and Mexican politicians who sought reelection. In contrast, diplo-

matic relationships between Mexico City and Washington did not inhibit the win-win relationships among families and local governments in our border communities. Formally, relationships between the governments of our two nations remained distant in the last century;<sup>1</sup> informally, however, our ties have grown stronger over the past 150 years. Despite the distance between various political leaders and occasional negative rhetoric used in election campaigns north and south of the border, the people of the United States and Mexico married, nurtured extended families, developed trade, and collaborated on many social and economic issues. In short, while our politicians saw a glass half-empty, the citizens in our border communities saw the U.S.-Mexican

relationship as a glass half-full, with much of the fruit-bearing diplomacy occurring at local levels.

## Economic

The United States and Mexico have separate and distinct national centers of gravity, but from a bilateral perspective, the North American economy, trade, and related critical infrastructures are shared centers of gravity that must be defended to preserve our way of life. Over the past century, collaboration and economic prosperity grew due to the initiatives of small businesses, corporations, and local governments. In addition, border communities developed common water, wastewater, and electric and gas utilities that shared costs, which benefited citizens from both nations. These growing economic relationships were further enhanced and formalized when Mexico, the United States, and

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Canada implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which eliminated tariffs and many nontariff barriers, resulting in current trade between the United States and Mexico of almost \$1 billion per day.

The increasing integration of the Mexican, American, and Canadian economies represents a model of mutually beneficial trade. In contrast to the gloom-and-doom debates held in 1993, NAFTA's implementation has been beneficial to each nation's economy. While maintaining distinct monetary, fiscal, economic, and social policies and practices tailored to each nation's particular needs and economic structure, our countries have managed to forge an open marketplace where goods, services, and capital can move freely. To preserve that economic freedom and prosperity, our homeland defense and security initiatives must be planned and coordinated continentally.

As shown in the figure, security measures and concerns about further terrorist attacks resulted in a short-term recession that adversely impacted our economies. This short-term decline in trade started in 2001 and continued through 2003, with substantial recovery in 2005 and 2006. These trade figures make clear that an attack on one nation affects not only the defense and security of that nation, but also the economic well-being of trading partners. Temporarily closing the shared border to legal trade after 9/11 had dramatic consequences for both of our economies; hence, both nations must plan to ensure this does not happen again. Specific examples of economic interdependency include:

- Oil: Ninety percent of Mexican oil exports go to the United States.
- Natural gas: The Mexican Government Petroleum Company operates 5,700 miles of natural gas pipelines that include 12 active connections to the U.S. pipeline system.
- Coal: The United States exports coal to Mexico for electricity generation and steel production.
- Electricity: Mexico imports from the United States and vice versa, depending on the region and time of year.
- Manufactured goods: The majority of U.S. exports to Mexico consist of manufac-

tured goods (such as computers and electrical equipment).

In recent years, almost 85 percent of Mexico's exports have gone to the United States, making Mexican economic success dependent on the balance between trade and security. U.S. economic success is also dependent on this balance. Continued prosperity depends on reliable homeland defense and security, which can only be achieved through

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greater coordination and information-sharing among military partners as well as the law enforcement and interagency community. Since USNORTHCOM has over 50 different Federal agency representatives in or near its headquarters every day, the command is ideally situated to reach out to our border partners for homeland defense-in-depth, as well as cooperative civil support initiatives.

## **Military**

Prior to 1940, politicians on both sides of the border acknowledged the conflicts of 1836, 1846, 1914, and 1916. At times politicians ignored their neighbors, and at other times they fanned the flames of former conflicts in political speeches. However, since 1940, there have been five influential events in the U.S.-Mexican defense relationship that have fostered increased security cooperation. In addition to partnering in World War II, developments include the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, Hurricane Katrina, and the election

of President Felipe Calderón and his counter-drug initiatives.

**Partnering in World War II.** The Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor was one of the defining moments in U.S. history leading to a declaration of war against the Axis powers. Canada had been at war with Germany since September 1939 and, showing solidarity with the United States, immediately declared war against Japan. Mexico immediately broke off relationships with the Axis powers in 1941. Then, due to the sinking of the oil tanker *Portero de Llano* and numerous submarine attacks on Mexican ships throughout 1942, Mexico declared war against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The war led to greater trade between our nations, with Mexican oil fueling the U.S. war machine. Due to a common threat, historical animosities were set aside, which led to enhanced military cooperation for the mutual defense of North America.

This new level of cooperation resulted in the training of Mexican fighter pilots in the United States, and the creation of a Mexican P-47 Thunderbolt fighter squadron called the "Aztec Eagles." The 201<sup>st</sup> Mexican Fighter Squadron, Mexican Expeditionary Air Force (*Fuerza Aérea Expedicionaria Mexicana*) pilots flew close air support missions over U.S. ground forces in the Philippines. U.S.-Mexican joint and combined operations during World War II contributed to the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 and ensured survival of our nations. However, as the memory of a common enemy grew distant, the strong military and diplomatic ties forged during World War II decreased with each passing year as well.

**9/11 Terrorist Attacks.** A continental view of homeland defense and security once again became important after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which renewed the perspective that U.S. and Mexican armed forces have defense and security "connections" with areas of mutual interest. For instance, the United States and Mexico quickly crafted and implemented a "Smart Border Plan" in March 2002 that enhanced border security, while simultaneously facilitating transit of people and goods across the border. In addition, the Homeland Security Act was passed in November 2002, incorporating the

Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Border Patrol, Customs, and other agencies into the Department of Homeland Security, which streamlined coordination with our neighbors.

After 9/11, the defense organizations inside Mexico did not change their structure or mission. The Mexican armed forces, including the navy, army, and air force, are subordinate to the President of the Republic for internal security and exterior defense of the federation. In addition, the Mexican navy (*Secretaria de Marina-Armada de Mexico*, or SEMAR) and Mexican army and air force (*Secretaria de la defena nacional*, or SEDENA) assist in civil defense efforts throughout their nation.

But as a consequence of 9/11, U.S. Northern Command was created in 2002, with the missions of homeland defense and providing military assistance to civil authorities. Although the organization and missions of USNORTHCOM do not exactly mirror the Mexican armed forces, they are complementary. For the first time in U.S. history, a geographic combatant commander was tasked to plan for the homeland defense of the United States from a multidomain and multinational perspective, which mandated focused outreach not only to our northern neighbors, but also to our neighbors in Mexico and The Bahamas.

### ***Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America.***

Trilateral cooperation has grown stronger since March 23, 2005, when the elected leaders of Mexico, Canada, and the United States announced a cooperative venture called the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). During this meeting, all three North American leaders described the security and prosperity of our nations as mutually dependent and complementary. They observed that over the preceding decade, their nations had taken important steps to expand economic opportunities for their people, creating the most vibrant and dynamic trade relationship in the world. In addition, to protect North America from external threats, prevent and respond to threats within North America, and streamline legitimate cross-border trade and travel, our three national leaders committed to:

- implement common border security strategies
- enhance infrastructure protection
- implement a common approach to emergency response
- improve aviation and maritime security
- enhance intelligence partnerships
- combat transnational threats
- implement a border facilitation strategy.

Although SPP was not specifically focused on the military, the initiative opened discussions among key inter-agency planners and decisionmakers from the nations. In addition, the focus on these seven critical goals created a nexus among USNORTHCOM, the Mexican military, and our interagency partners.

***Hurricane Katrina.*** Just 5 months after agreeing to the SPP initiative, Hurricane Katrina formed over The Bahamas, crossed southern Florida, and made landfall in southeast Louisiana as a category 3 storm on the morning of August 29, 2005. The storm surge caused loss of life and property damage in New Orleans and surrounding areas after the levee system failed.

The U.S. National Response System was focused first upon local, then state, and lastly Federal responses. However, the damage during Hurricane Katrina was so widespread that the nascent Department of Homeland Security requested assistance from the military. In addition, offers of assistance were accepted from both Canada and Mexico. Americans were grateful for the Canadian navy and coast guard ships, as well as SEDENA convoys and a SEMAR ship laden with food, supplies, and personnel who assisted the Hurricane Katrina relief effort. The symbolic journey by Mexico's military into the disaster area marked the beginning of a new age of cooperation between our nations.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Election of President Calderón.***

Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa was elected President of Mexico and assumed office in December 2006 for a 6-year term. After his election, President Calderón increased the level of cooperation and interaction with his SPP and NAFTA counterparts in Canada and the United States. President Calderón promised to improve security, thereby enhancing prosperity for the Mexican people. Since

assuming office, he has initiated numerous government reforms, and his administration has worked toward the elimination of the drug trafficking organizations within Mexico.

Just a month after assuming the presidency, Mexican authorities captured drug cartel leader Pedro Díaz Parada and announced his extradition to the United States. This action, combined with ongoing SPP activities, significantly enhanced the spirit of cooperation between the nations. In addition, President Calderón published a national strategy directing greater cooperation on matters of mutual interest with Mexico's neighbors, which makes his election a pivotal moment in U.S.-Mexico relations.

## **Paradigm Shifts**

The 9/11 terrorist attacks helped political leaders realize that an attack on one NAFTA partner could have significant impact upon all trading partners, since the oceans no longer insulate North America from defense and security threats. The Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America helped senior level administrators focus upon cooperation in areas of mutual concern that can decrease costs and increase benefits for people on both sides of the border. Hurricane Katrina helped people on

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both sides of the border view one another as friends who may need a helping hand, instead of as historical adversaries. Finally, the election of President Calderón brought U.S.-Mexican cooperation to a new level, simply because he recognized that diplomacy, information, defense, economics, and security are all interrelated. His emphasis on

constructive dialogue, rather than confrontational diatribes, has enhanced cooperation.

## A Glass Half Full

The designation of the Commander of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) as the dual-hatted Commander of USNORTHCOM provided the benefit of almost five decades of binational military cooperation and experience. Similarly, the Canada-U.S. Permanent Joint Board on Defense and the Canada-U.S. Military Cooperation Committee, which have continuously met since the 1940s, have provided superb models of cooperation and have contributed to a unique view on bilateral partnerships.

In contrast, the former U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Working Group (Bi-WG) dissolved after only 2 years, in part due to the departure of Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, and partly because the process, meetings, and outcomes were not formalized between the U.S. and Mexican militaries. The absence of a dedicated geographic combatant command relegated the Bi-WG initiative to an additional duty for already overworked Pentagon action officers.

With the assistance of our Office of Defense Coordination (ODC) in Mexico City, USNORTHCOM initiated outreach efforts to SEMAR and SEDENA in 2003. Several senior-level meetings led to a positive focus on the future, rather than a negative focus on the distant past. In 2005, just 2 years after our first meetings, the trinational SPP initiative was implemented, and only 5 months later, SEDENA and SEMAR contributed to post-hurricane relief that cemented the spirit of cooperation between U.S. and Mexican leaders.

In the summer of 2007, USNORTHCOM co-hosted a Senior Executive Dialogue with the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at the National Defense University, which opened candid dialogue among USNORTHCOM leaders, Mexican elected officials, and senior military leaders in a nonattribution environment. Trust and respect were enhanced among the senior U.S. and Mexican participants based on an open dialogue that focused on areas of common concern rather than flowery platitudes. Just a few months later, USNORTHCOM hosted an interagency confer-

ence for participants from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to discuss pandemic influenza; USNORTHCOM served as a catalyst for this trinational meeting, which helped move interagency and international planning and coordination forward. Additional H1N1/pandemic influenza conferences were organized and working groups met during 2008, which paid significant dividends during the 2009 outbreak of the H1N1 virus.

Increased trust by the government of Mexico is further evidenced by Federal Civil Protection System officials' willingness to engage in frank discussions with USNORTHCOM regarding emergency preparedness capabilities and collaboration with the command, in conjunction with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, on projects to provide hazardous material equipment and training to several Mexican border cities. This follows the first acceptance of Department of Defense humanitarian assistance by the government of Mexico in October 2008, when 108,000 personal protective ensembles were employed during the spring 2009 H1N1 response.

Teaming with others depends upon building trust-filled relationships. Hence, our cooperation was greatly enhanced by the assignment of a SEMAR foreign liaison officer to USNORTHCOM in 2007 and the assignment of a SEDENA officer in 2009. Both officers have helped to open communications and enhanced information-sharing between USNORTHCOM and the Mexican military. Their professionalism and personable leadership styles have also contributed to higher levels of trust with their U.S. counterparts, which have assisted greatly when responding to natural disasters on both sides of our shared border.

In the aforementioned Strategic Forum, Dr. Deare argued that there were five significant obstacles that Mexico must overcome to improve links with its U.S. counterparts:

- the continued existence of two service secretaries rather than a unified defense ministry
- inadequate budgeting for the military realities of the country
- lack of properly trained civilian leaders to exercise effective policy control over the two secretariats

- widespread mistrust of the armed forces by other federal agencies
- domestic political realities.

USNORTHCOM's experiences in working with both SEMAR and SEDENA do not support this claim.

Security cooperation with SEMAR is facilitated by Fleet Forces Command, 2<sup>d</sup> Fleet and 3<sup>d</sup> Fleet, and Marine Forces North; and security cooperation with SEDENA is facilitated by U.S. Army North and Air Forces Northern. The Commander, USNORTHCOM, works with the two service secretaries rather

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than a unified defense ministry, and the level of cooperation has never been better.

Obviously, budgets can impact any military organization, but President Calderón has reallocated resources to support military actions against drug trafficking organizations. In addition, the U.S. Government has enacted legislation for the Merida Initiative, which will assist our neighbors in defeating this threat. Could funding be better? Yes—there is always a need for more training, better equipment, and better wages to improve retention; however, this has not been a major impediment.

The NORAD and USNORTHCOM staffs include U.S. and Canadian officers who were directly involved in or previously deployed to Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, as well as those who formerly supported Plan Colombia. So the assertion that *only* U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) is specially situated to assist the Mexican military is a specious one. If one used similar faulty logic, USSOUTHCOM should have developed the counterinsurgency plans in Iraq and Afghanistan instead of U.S. Central Command due to its experience in Colombia. The reality is that USNORTHCOM

and USSOUTHCOM share in the strategic interest of reducing illicit trafficking in our hemisphere, with each offering well-integrated contributions.

An alleged absence of properly trained civilian leaders has not been an issue in the military-to-military relationships among USNORTHCOM, SEMAR, and SEDENA. The interface between ODC-Mexico's civilian and military employees with their Mexican counterparts has been professional, congenial, and productive. Although Mexico does not have equivalent layers of civilian defense secretaries, under secretaries, and assistant secretaries, this has not negatively impacted USNORTHCOM-Mexican military relations. In fact, SEMAR and SEDENA have discovered that the singular focus of a geographic combatant commander can result in more focused dialogue and quicker responses than attempting to navigate the Pentagon maze. The leadership of both SEDENA and SEMAR specifically highlight these close personal and professional relationships in every interaction they have with the Department of Defense.

Dr. Deare argued that USSOUTHCOM has greater cultural awareness of Latin America, but cultural awareness of the Southern Cone or the Andean region does not make one an expert in Mexico. U.S. Foreign Area Officers with experience in Latin America and assigned to USNORTHCOM correctly identify that Mexico, as a North American country, has greater ties to the United States and Canada than it does to the Caribbean and Central and South America, since geography and economics often drive defense and security initiatives.

During our numerous interagency planning meetings focused upon the H1N1 crisis, forest fires, and other natural disasters, we have witnessed quite the opposite of Dr. Deare's alleged widespread mistrust of the Mexican armed forces by other Mexican federal agencies. Perhaps his observation was true at some time in Mexico's past. Numerous polls, as well as personal experience, have found that the military is one of Mexico's strongest and most respected institutions. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission has documented alleged cases of abuse by the military in their fight against drug cartels, but the secretaries of SEMAR and SEDENA have made firm commitments

to ensure responsibility and accountability at all levels. In addition, USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM have partnered on several region-wide initiatives to provide training assistance as requested.

Dr. Deare's only argument that may have merit is about "political realities" affecting U.S. assistance to Mexican military and agency partners. The Mexican constitution is a political restraint upon security cooperation and security assistance because article 76 requires Mexican senate approval for "the departure of national troops beyond the borders of the country, the passage of foreign troops through the national territory, and the sojourn of squadrons of other powers for more than one month in Mexican waters." Although this article is at times interpreted as *never* permitting foreign troops within Mexican national territory, it does permit troops with Mexican senate approval. Like some politicians in the United States, Mexican senators will not approve military assistance inside Mexico if they perceive repercussions at the polls. However, attitudes are changing; for example, the Mexican senate approved SEMAR's participation in the recent UNITAS maritime exercise.

*Compatible interface* refers to the fact that the United States and Mexico have complementary areas of concern in each of the four instruments of national power. Since political realities can inhibit cooperation within the Mexican national territory, it simply makes sense to expand cooperation with USNORTHCOM and our interagency community on the northern side of the border, for the security and prosperity of the citizens from both nations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patrick M. Cronin, ed., "The Americas: Securing the Three Borders," in *Global Strategic Assessment 2009: America's Security Role in a Changing World* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2009), 351.

<sup>2</sup> Biff Baker, "Neighbors Helping Neighbors: Instruments of National Power Define U.S.-Mexico Relations," *Agora Magazine* 1, nos. 2 and 3 (July 2008).

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