



AVOIDING CONFLICT? UNITED STATES AND MEXICO FUTURE SECURITY AND DEFENSE SCENARIOS

Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano, Ph.D.

Professor, Universidad Iberoamericana, AC, Mexico City

Richard J. Kilroy Jr., Ph.D.

Nonresident Scholar, Center for the United States and Mexico, Baker Institute;
Associate Professor, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC

August 2020

© 2020 by Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Wherever feasible, papers are reviewed by outside experts before they are released. However, the research and views expressed in this paper are those of the individual researcher(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Baker Institute.

Cover image courtesy of Tech. Sgt. Thomas J. Doscher (U.S. Northern Command).

Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano, Ph.D.

Richard J. Kilroy Jr., Ph.D.

“Avoiding Conflict? United States and Mexico Future Security and Defense Scenarios”

<https://doi.org/10.25613/0ycd-da23>

Introduction

The United States and Mexico have a complicated past, a turbulent present, and an uncertain future. Both are facing challenges from issues such as trade, migration, border security, illegal trafficking in persons, drugs, and arms, and now the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the Trump administration implemented a mandatory expulsion program for migrants entering the country illegally to “protect the public health” of Americans.¹ The expulsion only sent them to Mexico, not their country of origin, exacerbating the public health crisis for Mexicans and others in migrant shelters south of the border.² This policy and the other official responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in each country are reshaping public debate and policy priorities in world affairs and the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Mexico.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and the rise of powerful drug trafficking organizations in Mexico in the late 2000s, both countries appeared to be moving toward a convergence of security interests, creating new institutional processes for cooperation within a regional framework that included Canada.³ The United States’ primary focus was on the threat of terrorism, while Mexico was focused on organized crime and violence. Due to a shared border and the concern over the nexus of crime, terrorism, and drugs,⁴ both countries had shared interests and therefore developed a number of programs and institutional processes to increase security cooperation for both national security and intelligence (with an emphasis on public safety) and national defense.

With the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016, the concurrent rise of nationalism in Mexico, and the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president of Mexico in 2018, identity politics appear to have “trumped” other variables, evincing a divergence of views on defense and national security issues. Both countries now view each other as a threat, with Trump focused on “building a wall” to keep out Mexican migrants who he views as “rapists” and “murderers,” threatening U.S. national security.⁵ Mexicans have expressed concerns over their country’s defenses due to Trump’s threats to send the U.S. military into Mexico to take care of the “bad hombres” that the Mexican military is “too afraid” to confront.⁶ Trump’s decision to dispatch up to 4,000 U.S. National Guard forces to the border in April 2018 and another 6,000 active-duty service members in November 2018 did not help that perception.⁷

Objective of this Essay

As a result of this changing political landscape between the United States and Mexico, the future of national security and defense cooperation in North America is uncertain. Earlier efforts aimed at fostering security cooperation against shared threats, creating a convergence of defense and security interests, appear at risk. New perceptions of each other as a threat reveal a divergence of security interests between the two countries. The purpose of this essay is to look at the key drivers impacting national security and defense relations between the United States and Mexico and to offer four possible scenarios for the future, along with policy recommendations to support the avoidance of conflict.

Signs of Change in Defense and Security Policies

The focus of this policy paper is on the security situation as it developed between the United States and Mexico within the 2015-2020 time frame, given the geopolitical context and both internal and external factors impacting both countries. Institutional structures, budgets, security challenges and threat perceptions (including transnational organized crime, terrorism, pandemics, drugs and arms trafficking, immigration, etc.), and current operations (including intelligence sharing) are included for analysis.

The U.S.-Mexico relationship experienced a dramatic change from convergence (2001-2016) to divergence (2017 to present) with the arrival of Trump to the White House in January 2017. Paradoxically, with the presidency of López Obrador beginning in December 2018, there is currently a difficult relationship between the two political leaders with uncertain outcomes.⁸ Since the U.S.-Mexico security relationship has an asymmetric dynamic and the United States still retains its status as a superpower within the international system, the United States and Mexico will experience tremendous challenges in the next 15-20 years.

In 2016, Trump's presidential campaign characterized Mexico and other countries as part of the problem facing the United States in terms of employment, migration, internal security, and global power projection. This was an omen of new and difficult times in the bilateral relationship with Mexico. In this sense, the executive order "Border Security and Enforcement Improvements," issued on January 25, 2017, shortly after Trump took office, was intended to be the broadest and deepest policy statement on the issue of immigration.⁹ It was built on the basis of three objectives: to establish security for the American people, to maintain territorial integrity, and to enforce immigration laws. This plan aimed to curb the undocumented population growth (within the United States) and to put new limits on legal immigration from all regions of the world, starting with Mexico (but also encompassing Latin America and the Caribbean). It included strengthening migratory controls and sanctions (internal and external) and improving ports of entry: maritime, air, and land. A critical point in the executive order even stated, "The purpose of this order is to direct executive departments and agencies to deploy all legal resources to secure the southern border and prevent further illegal immigration into the United States, as well as rapidly repatriate illegal beings."¹⁰

In places like Tijuana, Mexico, there is already a large population of people from Haiti, Africa, Cuba, and Central America, among other countries and regions. There is also a growing Muslim community, comprised of individuals who either did not receive asylum upon attempting to enter the United States or were deported and now live in that region of Mexico. On the other hand, there is also a lurking presence of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, a criminal group in Mexico with extensive reach and power. New Generation's expansion in the last six years has been meteoric, not only in Jalisco or Nayarit, but across all of Mexico. It has expanded its power from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic and from western Mexico up to the border with the United States.¹¹

Trump's organized crime policy calls for greater pressure on Mexican authorities if they do not stop this expansion. He has even threatened a military response on Mexican soil to defend the U.S. border. Trump has also created policies that aim to staunch the spread of transnational organized crime that don't necessarily rely on the U.S. military.¹² For example, the executive order "Transnational Criminal Organizations" is linked to migration directives, because it assumes that criminal networks enter the United States illegally.¹³ The secretary of state, the secretary of homeland security, the attorney general, the director of national intelligence, and the head of the Drug Enforcement Agency, among others, participated in drafting this directive, without fully considering the need to combat criminal organizations that already exist in the United States.

What is clearly visible is the hostility towards undocumented immigrants and the terrible humanitarian crisis that is already underway with the announcement of anti-immigrant and security measures for populations on both sides of the border. The Trump administration has typically ignored other national security threats, even when intelligence agencies have suggested that there are other more serious threats than the "crisis" at the border.¹⁴ Trump's policies have been reactive and politicized for electoral purposes, such as sending active-duty U.S. military forces to the southern border during the November midterm elections to protect against a Central American caravan of migrants traveling through Mexico on their way to the United States.¹⁵ This was done despite previous communication between the two leaders of a new "understanding."

A signal of a potential change in U.S.-Mexico security relations first emerged in June 2015, when Trump announced his intention to run for president. In a campaign speech, Trump used inflammatory rhetoric toward Mexico and Mexicans, calling both a threat to U.S. security interests due to organized crime, migration, and corruption, even stating that Mexico is sending "rapists" into the United States.¹⁶ Since then, Trump has increased this rhetoric toward Mexico, putting pressure on Mexico's political leaders to respond. Unfortunately, López Obrador's new "National Plan for Peace and Security 2018-2024"¹⁷ is not a comprehensive strategy for dealing with threats and vulnerabilities such as organized crime, U.S. drug consumption, or corruption, real issues for Mexico that do impact security relations with the United States. Instead, during his first month in office, López Obrador's main goal in foreign affairs was to avoid a personal confrontation with Trump. It therefore appears that López Obrador's administration intends to extend, as much as possible, the "honeymoon" with Trump to avoid conflict. This is risky since the policies of both countries will only postpone a crisis until it potentially explodes.

Today, parts of the Mexican military view the United States as a continuing threat to its sovereignty and territory. While the Mexican Navy and Marines are more progressive and routinely cooperate with the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard in counterdrug missions, the Mexican Army remains strongly nationalistic and distrustful of its northern neighbor. When the Mexican Army conducts training exercises and classroom instruction in its military schools, the threat portrayed is not Cuba or Guatemala, but the United States and the potential of a U.S.-led invasion of Mexico.¹⁸ These concerns were heightened in 2002 when the United States formed a new combatant command, the U.S. Northern Command

(NORTHCOM), as a result of the 9/11 attacks. The new patch designed for NORTHCOM depicted an eagle spread over all North America (including Canada). Previously Mexico and Canada were not assigned to an area of operational responsibility of a combatant command (such as U.S. Southern Command, which has responsibility for U.S. military operations in most of the Western Hemisphere). However, after the 9/11 attacks and the formation of the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, the U.S. military recognized the need for having a military combatant command that could provide the homeland defense mission in support of DHS's homeland security mission.

The new U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) was established at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colorado, along with the existing North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Established in 1958, NORAD is a joint Canadian-U.S. command, with the mission of providing for the defense of the North American airspace. The United States sought to include the Mexican military in the new USNORTHCOM organization by inviting liaison officers to the new command headquarters in 2002. The Mexican Army initially declined, while the navy accepted the offer to increase maritime cooperation with the United States in the Caribbean and Pacific. As another signal of change to support convergence, the Mexican Army eventually did send liaison personnel to USNORTHCOM. There have been discussions about expanding the mission of NORAD to extend beyond air and space defense and to include land and sea cooperation, which would include Mexico. However, as of 2020, the Mexican military has not been integrated into the command structure of NORAD, as the Canadian military has been since the 1950s.¹⁹

There are several reasons why the Mexican military will likely never become fully integrated into the USNORTHCOM/NORAD command structure. First, Canada is also a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which means that Canada and the United States have a number of standardization agreements that address issues of command and control, integration of forces, logistics, and standardization of weapons systems and communication. Second, language is a key factor in the integration of military operations between countries, particularly in NORAD, which requires integration of air defense missions, command, and control, etc. Third, Mexican nationalism and identity issues over sovereignty have impacted its ability to accept foreign military forces in its own country, limiting operational considerations for the exchange and interoperability of forces at the strategic/NORAD level. That said, there have been exchanges of information and informal cooperation at the operational and tactical level between the Mexican and U.S. Armed Forces, including intelligence and information sharing.²⁰

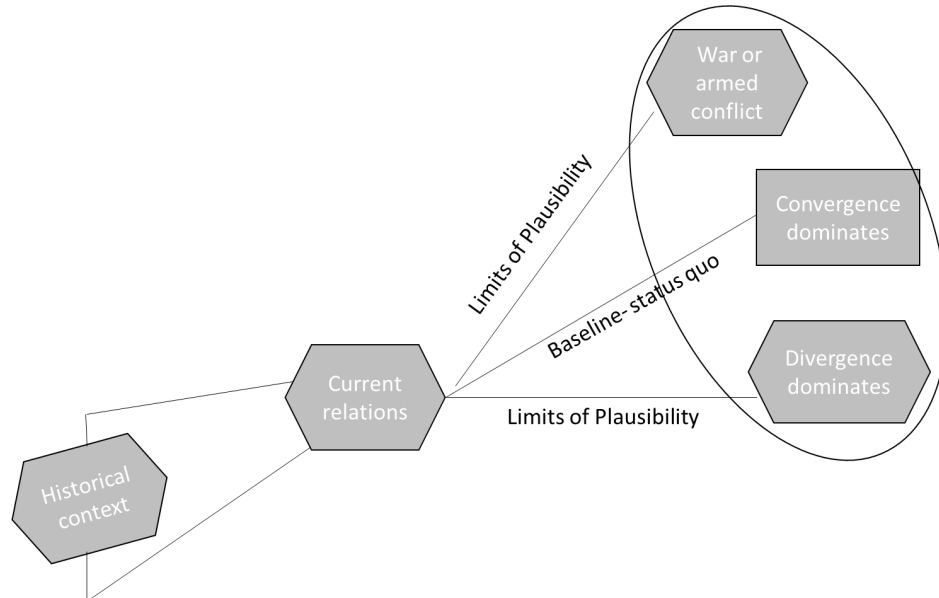
Analytical Methodology

This paper determines key indicators and drivers of outcomes, producing possible future scenarios regarding national security and defense relations between Mexico and the United States. The methodology employs various structured analytical techniques (SATs), which intelligence analysts use to make strategic forecasts while avoiding several cognitive biases that can impact the intelligence community's (IC) ability to assess threats. The use of SATs became a required part of intelligence analyst training throughout the IC after the end of the Cold War and later due to the events of 9/11.²¹ This paper utilizes two of the SATs developed by Heuer and Pherson²²—argument mapping and analysis of competing hypotheses (ACH)—to test the scenarios.

The time frame for this study is 15-20 years. Empirical evidence is assembled to support the indicators used in this methodology. This paper uses the Palo Alto Research Center Technologies' ACH²³ computer model (based on Heuer and Pherson's SAT), to assess four scenarios for the future of U.S.- Mexico security relations and to evaluate the evidence behind the indicators. This analytical tool is an open-source computer software program that allows comparison of the four scenarios as hypotheses, using a set of indicators (evidence) determined by the previous analysis. Each item listed as evidence is also categorized as having high, medium, or low credibility and relevance.

Using the ACH software and coding terms for each of the four scenarios/hypotheses against each of the drivers or evidence, criteria such as consistent (C); highly consistent (CC); inconsistent (I), highly inconsistent (II), or neutral (-), are used to develop a numerical score for each hypothesis. The value of using ACH is not to determine the most likely scenario, but rather to determine the least likely scenario based on the statistical values generated by the computer model (Table 1). As a result of this analysis, the baseline or status quo hypothesis is the least unlikely of the four scenarios analyzed. In addition to using the ACH program, this paper also uses a structured analytical technique known as argument mapping.²⁴ This is applied to the other three scenarios to provide additional analysis to test these hypotheses. Argument mapping further allows contentions to be raised for each scenario, along with objections to the contentions to determine viability (Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3). Figure 1 depicts the cone of plausibility for the four different scenarios presented in this paper.

Figure 1. Cone of Plausibility.



Source: Authors.

Four Scenarios/Hypotheses

Baseline Future

The baseline future for U.S.-Mexico security relations is that despite the political changes occurring in both, it is likely (55-80% probability) that traditional bilateral security relationships will continue.²⁵ In other words, institutions and interests will likely trump identity politics, although the erosion of trust between the two countries will make security cooperation more difficult. Cross-border security cooperation will likely continue to focus on drug, human, and arms trafficking, and the Mérida Initiative²⁶ (although it may have a different name) will likely continue to provide military aid and training of Mexico's security forces (although perhaps in a more limited capacity). The building of a border wall is unlikely to significantly impede the sharing of law enforcement information or military cooperation between the two countries. While the baseline future is a trajectory, it does recognize that both countries do face significant domestic challenges that create a level of vulnerability for the leadership in each nation.

At stake is the construction of the North American "neighborhood;" the protection of shared interests ranging from commerce to the land border; access to an exclusive economic zone; telecommunications, air, and satellite security; and ports, customs, and strategic facilities. Mexico, as the southern flank of a superpower, holds a strategic position within the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and Central America in terms of trade, energy, maritime and air security, cultural relations, and best practices in a regional, hemispheric, and global context. All of this must be part of the ongoing dialogue

in North America that should be pursued through diplomacy, information sharing, and military cooperation by both Mexico and the United States. Statesmanship is key in pursuing these security concerns due to the deepening of vulnerabilities that increase insecurity in the region.

Key drivers or indicators for this baseline future include: U.S. and Mexican congressional representatives acting to counterbalance the executive powers in decision-making and demanding information based on evidence from both the White House and the Mexican National Palace;²⁷ popular support in both countries for immigration reform to reduce the flow of undocumented immigrants across the border (including Central American migrants transiting through Mexico to the United States); and institutional collaboration by the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, and intelligence agencies of each country to foster information sharing and cooperation, reducing threats and alleviating security challenges.

Alternative Future 1—Divergence Dominates

One of the scenarios offered as an alternative future is based on the assumption that the current geopolitical context is not an aberration but the new normal. This scenario assumes that both countries' threat perceptions are shaped more by enmity rather than amity towards each other, and security and defense interests therefore diverge at the highest level of power. Based on our analysis using the ACH and framework foresight model, the “divergence dominates” scenario is assessed to be unlikely (20-45% probability).²⁸

Trump's elevation of the border security issue to a “crisis” and the closure of the federal government in December 2018 due to his insistence on getting funding for a border wall, is a viewpoint that is not broadly shared in the United States, by either the public or by most members of Congress.²⁹ The elevated rhetoric toward Mexico and the demand for a border wall to prevent undocumented immigration has even had a negative effect on many Americans, creating increased concern about the status of undocumented workers in the United States, particularly those under consideration for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.³⁰

Key drivers for this scenario include: Trump being reelected for a second term; López Obrador's successor continuing his policies; U.S. immigration policy becoming more draconian and directed at Mexicans living in the United States; and Mexico's economy or internal security situation imploding, sending more migrants to the U.S. border and overwhelming the border security measures in place.

Alternative Future 2—Military Conflict

The other alternative future is an extreme variant on the first, including the possibility of open conflict between the United States and Mexico. This would go beyond a trade war, becoming an actual military confrontation. In the extreme case of a U.S. military intervention in Mexico, the White House would need congressional approval. However, many representatives are very cautious due to the great number of investments they have in states along the U.S.-Mexico border. This means that even in this scenario, the U.S. Congress would play a crucial role in foreign policy and national security.

That said, Mexico has been significantly impacted by recent violence, and the nation's insecurity continues to grow. Throughout its history, Mexico has experienced turbulence (from the Mexican War of Independence to the Mexican Revolution and even to democratization in the 21st century), which has led to a lack of consensus when it comes to the construction of its institutions and laws. Insecurity is an example. It is the result of many internal disagreements and limitations regarding respect for the rule of law and the common good. Thus, in the palaces of power or in the basements of secrecy, order, norms, and laws have been broken, in addition to the transnational variables discussed in this paper. Even if Mexico is not a failed state, it is losing states to the increasing control of drug trafficking organizations (Michoacán, Guerrero, and Tamaulipas, for example). Institutions such as the federal police and judiciary have been impacted by this daily violation of the law for more than a century and a half. Insecurity continues to grow little by little every day and has already reached places such as Mexico City, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Baja California Sur. Progressively, Mexico becomes ungovernable and vulnerable to drug trafficking and gang influence, which creates a possibility for conflict between the United States and Mexico. Therefore, while the overall assessment of the "military conflict" scenario is that such a development is very unlikely (5-20% probability based on the 2015 ICD 203 Analytical Standards), the possibility of a military intervention by the United States into Mexico cannot be completely ruled out.³¹

Key drivers or indicators for this scenario include: geopolitical changes outside the domain of North America increasing tensions regionally and globally; a catastrophic terrorist attack taking place in the United States linked to either terrorist groups or drug trafficking organizations operating out of Mexico; and Mexico's economy or internal security situation imploding, sending more migrants to the border and overwhelming the border security measures in place.

Preferred Future—Convergence Dominates

The preferred scenario is a normative argument, or how security relations should develop, recognizing the roles played by variables of interests, institutions, and national identity in shaping a new regional security complex in North America (primarily between the United States and Mexico, but also including Canada as a regional actor). This scenario builds on the authors' previous work in examining the salience of the regional security complex (RSCT) theory, as developed by Buzan and Waever, in North America.³² This scenario

addresses the ability of both the U.S. and Mexico to reach “common ground” to develop a consensual security policy toward Central America and the Caribbean.

The preferred future envisions a convergence of security interests dominating, which would support the emergence of a North American security complex. This is a neo-constructivist argument based on the idea of creating a new security relationship between countries within North America, where states do not seek security by building walls but by building bridges, expanding security cooperation and respecting each other’s sovereignty. In this scenario, Mexico, Canada, and the United States’ security would be so interconnected that linkages across many sectors (including political, societal, economic, environmental, and military) would evince a level of cooperation and shared interests. This would be reflected in institutional processes that could withstand political changes while still recognizing each country’s unique identity. To this end, significant efforts would be made to improve dialogue and trust in military-to-military relations between the three countries, despite the current rhetoric coming out of the White House.³³

Key drivers or indicators of this future include: new or current political leadership in both countries that seeks to diffuse tensions; a new trade and development agreement that would expand trade and economic cooperation between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada;³⁴ comprehensive immigration reform that would allow a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented workers in the United States; and a new understanding of sovereignty that shows mutual respect and promotes security cooperation.

Leading Indicators and Analysis

The leading indicators in this study are those identified as “evidence” (E) in the ACH model. All four of the hypotheses are tested against a series of indicators posed as evidence of future developments. The use of strategic foresight analysis offered by the National Intelligence Council³⁵ is an example of how the use of evidence (based on analysis of likely events) provides a baseline for these indicators. The indicators also reflect additional variables including national identity, interests, institutions, and threat perceptions. In Table 1, using the ACH process and assessing indicators as evidence across the four scenarios offered in this chapter, “Hypothesis 1–Traditional Security Relations or Status Quo” is determined to be the least unlikely scenario to occur (-7.121 is the highest coefficient) within the time frame of the study (the next 15-20 years). In intelligence work, this is often presented as the “bottom-line up front” and would normally be included in the introduction. As a policy paper, however, the incorporation of analytical tools (structured analytical techniques, such as argument mapping and analysis of competing hypotheses) used in the intelligence community are presented as research findings consistent with strategic forecasting literature. These are provided as indicators rather than pieces of specific empirical evidence in order to test the four hypotheses offered in this paper and to help determine policy recommendations.

Avoiding Conflict? United States and Mexico Future Security and Defense Scenarios

Table 1. Analysis of Competing Hypotheses.

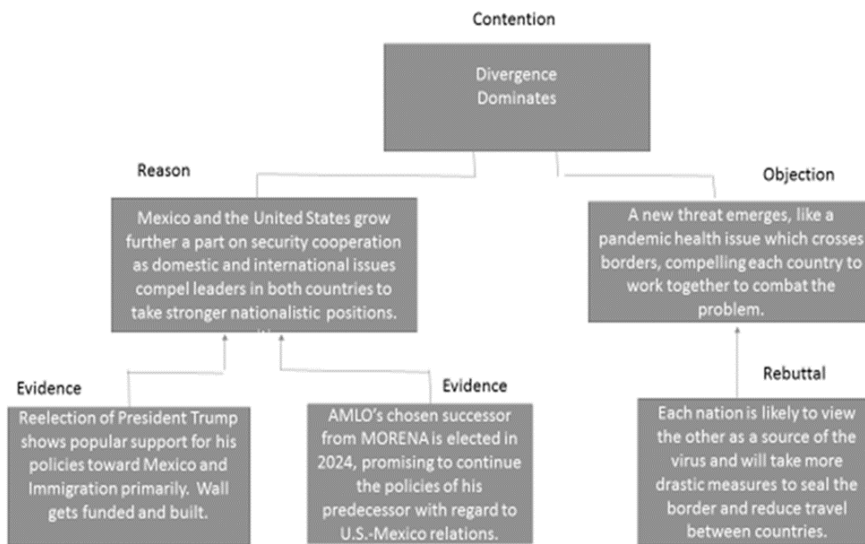
	WEIGHTED INCONSISTENCY SCORE			BASELINE: Traditional security relations maintained	ALTERNATIVE I: Divergence dominates	ALTERNATIVE II: Military conflict	PREFERRED: Convergence dominates
				-7.121	-9.656	-19.312	-8.828
	ENTER EVIDENCE	CREDIBILITY	REVELANCE	H:1	H:2	H:3	H:4
E13	Both Mexico and the United States develop new understandings of sovereignty which show mutual respect and promote security cooperation.	LOW	HIGH	C	I	II	CC
E12	Comprehensive immigration reform allows a path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented workers in the United States.	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	N	I	II	C
E11	A new NAFTA agreement is reached, expanding trade and economic cooperation between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.	HIGH	MEDIUM	CC	I	II	C
E10	New political leadership in both countries seek to diffuse tensions.	HIGH	HIGH	C	I	II	CC
E9	Mexico's economy or internal security situation implodes, sending more migrants to the U.S. border, overwhelming border.	LOW	HIGH	I	C	CC	II
E8	U.S. immigration policy becomes more draconian, directed at Mexicans living in the United States.	LOW	MEDIUM	II	CC	CC	II
E7	A catastrophic terrorist attack takes place in the United States linked to either terrorist groups or drug trafficking organization operatives out of Mexico.	LOW	MEDIUM	i	C	CC	II
E6	Geopolitical changes outside the domain of North America increases tensions regionally.	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	I	C	C	I
E5	López Obrador's successor continues his policies.	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	I	C	C	I
E4	Trump being reelected for a second term.	HIGH	HIGH	I	C	C	I
E3	Institutional support by the armed forces and law enforcement agencies as well as intelligence agencies in fostering information sharing and cooperation to reduce threats and alleviate security challenges.	MEDIUM	HIGH	CC	I	II	C
E2	Popular support in both countries for comprehensive immigration reform that will reduce the flow of undocumented immigrants across the border.	HIGH	MEDIUM	C	I	II	CC
E1	Continued U.S. and Mexican congressional support for bilateral security cooperation.	HIGH	MEDIUM	C	I	II	C

Source: Authors.

In Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, using argument mapping, the other three scenarios presented in this paper (“divergence dominates,” “military conflict,” and “convergence dominates”) are evaluated. The main argument for each scenario is offered as a contention. It is followed with a reason that supports the contention and an objection. Evidence is offered to support the reason, while a rebuttal is offered to the objection. The purpose of this SAT is to test a hypothesis through the use of logical reasoning.³⁶ Since the focus of this paper is on strategic

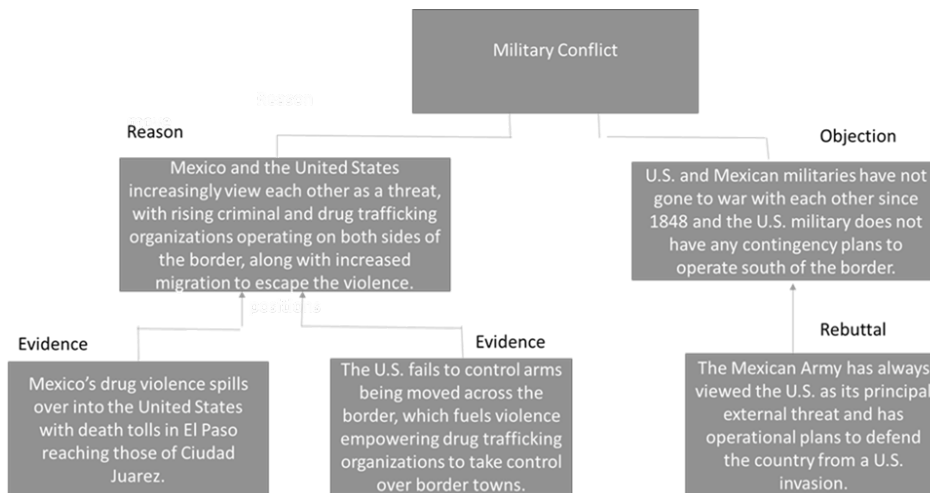
forecasting and future foresight, much like the evidence in the ACH model, the evidence in these cases would also be considered key indicators of future events that would support the contention or the objection. The value of using an argument map is that it can provide insight on how policy choices can shape events and possibly prevent future conflict.

Figure 2.1. Argument Mapping. Alternative Future 1.



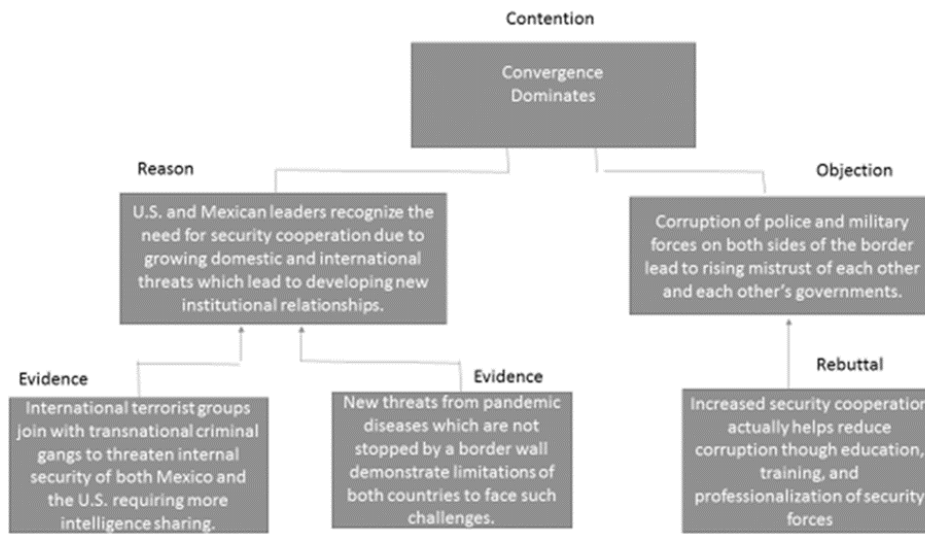
Source: Authors.

Figure 2.2. Argument Mapping. Alternative Future 2.



Source: Authors.

Figure 2.3. Argument Mapping. Alternative Future 3.



Source: Authors.

Policy Recommendations

This section looks at the relationship between the preferred future scenario and the alternative scenarios and assesses the criteria necessary to create the conditions upon which the preferred scenario could develop. An example would be the policies put in place after 9/11 (2001) and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (2005), which facilitated security and defense cooperation between the United States and Mexico in the areas of disaster response and emergency management. This section also includes the means by which states “operationalize” security through institution formation and shared interests as well as the strategies available to increase dialogue and engagement. This might involve extending security cooperation across borders through programs like the Integrated Border Enforcement Teams between the United States and Canada and the Mérida Initiative between the United States and Mexico. The challenge becomes how national identity and differing threat perceptions impact the ability of states to develop convergent security goals and objectives.

The convergence of security interests and the formation of new institutions after 9/11 came as a result of both Canada and Mexico realizing the threat perception in the United States had changed significantly, due to the U.S. feeling extremely vulnerable to future terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda.³⁷ Fifteen years later, without another major terrorist attack in the United States, the threat perception was again changing in the United States. Presidential candidate Donald Trump was able to capitalize on the sentiment of many American voters to claim that the economic and criminal threats posed by undocumented migrants and organized criminal groups from Mexico were the primary security challenges facing the United States. His campaign also centered on the idea of building a wall as a necessary

policy to remedy the situation.³⁸ Additionally, this context was supported by a systematic increase in violence and insecurity throughout Mexico since the announcement of a “Drug War” by President Felipe Calderón on December 11, 2006 up to the end of Enrique Peña Nieto’s government on November 30, 2018.

For the preferred future of convergence dominating the security and defense relations between the United States and Mexico, several events would need to occur. The primary one would be for the Trump administration to tone down the rhetoric toward Mexico and Mexican migrants and to recognize their significant contributions to the U.S. economy.³⁹ A renegotiated trade agreement (like the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which went into effect on July 1, 2020) that enhances the economic and identity interests of both countries, would help change the narrative coming out of the White House. It would also empower the López Obrador administration to turn to a more positive note, which could lead to increased security cooperation rather than confrontation.

Another policy recommendation would be a continued commitment by the United States and Mexico to reimagine the security cooperation begun under the Mérida Initiative and even strengthen it by developing a joint security policy related to Central America. The United States developed the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) as a policy separate from Mérida to address the growing drug and crime problems in the region.⁴⁰ Due to the large numbers of Central American migrants now creating national security challenges for Mexico and the United States, both countries have a vested interest in working to ameliorate the worsening economic and public safety issues in Central America. If the United States wants Mexico to take a more active role in preventing large migrant caravans from Central America from transiting through Mexico on their way to the United States, it needs to provide the means to assist Mexico with its immigration control (instead of building a wall on Mexico’s southern border as a solution) and promote economic development and social justice in the region. Both countries could share in the joint processing of migrants before they reach the U.S. border. This would be similar to what Canada and the United States do now with requiring airline passengers to be processed at TSA checkpoints in Canadian airports, preventing potential threats from reaching the United States.

Additionally, on the U.S.-Mexico border, new institutional structures and processes could facilitate a convergence of security interests. For example, the Integrated Border Enforcement Teams that exist between the United States and Canada provide a means for border patrol agents, members of law enforcement, and customs and immigration officials from both countries to work together to confront the threat of illegal drugs, arms, and human trafficking. These teams, along with the Integrated Maritime Security Operations and the Border Enforcement Security Task Force, provide institutional mechanisms that create “joint or shared jurisdiction,” allowing both countries to pursue mutual security interests.⁴¹

In terms of defense cooperation, Mexico’s participation as a member of a reconfigured North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), which would include institutional instruments to share information on maritime and air domains, could possibly support a

convergence of national security and defense policies. Such efforts have taken place in the past, as evidenced by a joint Mexico, Canada, and U.S. Air Force exercise in 2017, called AMALGAM EAGLE 17. According to the NORAD Public Affairs Office, “The main objectives of this exercise series were to exercise and refine procedures for monitoring, tracking and coordinating responses, as well as develop and use a communication process at strategic, operational and tactical levels regarding an illicit aircraft transiting U.S.-Mexico airspace, while demonstrating mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty.”⁴² There have also been ongoing military exchanges between USNORTHCOM’s Fifth Army and the Mexican Army through the Fifth Army Inter-American Relations Program. The program was meant to facilitate communication, transparency, and cooperation in order to “enhance army-to-army relations, increase interoperability and exchange ideas on how to improve our efforts to confront common threats of strategic implication, working towards a stronger defense of North America.”⁴³ While both programs did occur under the previous presidential administration in Mexico, a renewed commitment to these military exchanges by López Obrador and Trump could provide a policy signal that supports the convergence scenario.

In the context of a new international security environment, which includes threats from nation states (including China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran),⁴⁴ non-state actors (such as members of radical fundamentalist groups, cyberterrorists, and transnational criminal organizations), and environmental or health situations (such as natural disasters due to climate change, pandemics, etc.), it’s feasible that an increase in regional cooperation will emerge in order to reduce vulnerabilities and risks to both Mexico and the United States. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 brought the militaries of the United States, Mexico, and Canada together in unprecedented ways to assist with disaster response in the Gulf of Mexico. Such cooperation came because of policy initiatives generated by the leaders of all three countries earlier that year in Waco, Texas, which led to the development of the Security, Prosperity Partnership for North America.⁴⁵

Moreover, some of the new policies promoted by López Obrador promote investment in economic and social development, not just in military cooperation and policies. In the end, a profound radical transformation in U.S.-Mexico relations would have to include a significant reduction in the number of migrants from Mexico and Central America to the United States. This would involve a number of domestic policy changes in Mexico, including cooperation with the U.S. on reducing Central American migrant flows into Mexico, better distribution of wealth, radical efforts against corruption, enforcement of the rule of law, and a significant diminishment of impunity. Policies that support such outcomes can have a dramatic impact on reducing tensions between the United States and Mexico and would support a further convergence, rather than a divergence of interests.

Covid-19 and the Potential Alteration of the Scenarios

The research and analysis for this paper was conducted prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, which is now exposing vulnerabilities in health systems, the economy, social development, and consumer protection at the global, regional and bilateral levels. Prior to the pandemic, neither the U.S. nor Mexico prioritized pandemic preparedness as part of their national security systems. Even though specialists, scientists, and policy actors in both countries recommended including a pandemic prevention system, neither Trump nor López Obrador included this in their strategic priorities.

Since the declaration of the pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization, the governments of Mexico and the United States have had over-politicized responses. The different decision-making processes in each country have corresponded more to a catalog of good wishes than to the creation of informed public policy. This is crucial since the pandemic has the potential to destroy life, health systems, the economy, transportation, tourism, human mobility, and, of course, security. Certainly, the coronavirus has exacerbated vulnerabilities on both sides of the border in health systems, social security, human security, economic development, unemployment insurance, etc. It is also testing the global and regional economy, particularly the production and supply chains of North American partners. Likewise, it is also testing the labor base and the economic interdependence of each nation, and this will have implications for the competitiveness and disputes between the United States and China, a situation worthy of analysis on its own accord.

For now, Trump and López Obrador are not making decisions based on information from the scientific community, and because of this, it is estimated that the virus will spread quickly across the border. At the global level, populist governments—left or right—drive public policy closer to electoral preferences than to long-term strategies like the prevention of conflict and the security of the majority, as in Germany and South Korea. At the time this paper was completed (August 2020), the United States was the country with the highest number of Covid-19 cases (over 4.6 million) and deaths (155,000) in the world. Given the deep interdependence between Mexico and the U.S., it is estimated that Mexico will also experience a high number of cases and deaths, despite efforts to restrict travel across the border.⁴⁶

The current crisis is itself a breeding ground for hybrid threats that add to the national security concerns produced by the pandemic. These include climate change, organized crime, terrorism, and the potential advancement of hostile states, mainly against the United States. In Mexico, as the number of cases increases, poverty is rising rapidly—by an estimated 76.5%. This will ultimately increase insecurity and violence in Mexico, which is, at least in part, the source of the tension between Mexico and the United States.⁴⁷

The pandemic has also exposed the inability of both countries (as well as the global community) to confront the threat alone. Walls cannot prevent the spread of the virus, which border communities, like Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, have known for

years. Public health officials in both communities have worked together to address such issues at the state and local levels, recognizing a mutual interdependency. This concept could be expanded to a federal level with different leadership in both countries.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson once said, “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.”⁴⁹ Yet, as most great statesmen know, the “past is prologue,” and the current administrations in both the United States and Mexico are setting the stage for the future relations of these two countries. Regarding security, however, James Madison is known to have said, “the means of security can only be regulated by the means and danger of attack.”⁵⁰

For the preferred future scenario (“convergence dominates”) to occur, several policy recommendations are offered in this paper to reduce “the means and danger of attack” by relieving possible tensions between Mexico and the United States. These would support the convergence of security interests by building institutions and supporting shared interests, yet also recognizing the importance that national identity plays in security and defense relations between Mexico and the United States.

This paper has sought to maintain a realist perspective in assessing how such a convergence of security interests could occur over time, given the historical, cultural, and even geographic divides in North America. However, there is room for a constructivist viewpoint which envisions more of what Robert Pastor has called, “the North American idea,” where the United States and Mexico (along with Canada) evince the existence of a North American security complex, working together to confront threats and to build institutions, based on shared interests but sensitive to national identity.⁵¹ Such a scenario does, however, depend on the ability of an informed citizenry in democratic societies to elect leaders who can “rise to the office” and provide disciplined and enlightened leadership, avoiding the pitfalls of identity politics based on populism and strident nationalism that historically have increased the likelihood of conflict over cooperation.

Endnotes

¹ Maya Averbuch, “With Coronavirus spreading, Mexico vowed to empty detention centers – but migrants thrust into chaos and danger,” *The Intercept*, May 12, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/11/coronavirus-migrants-mexico/>.

² Ibid.

³ However, there was resistance despite the fact of direct dialogue between the Mexican Minister of Interior Santiago Creel and the Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge. The Mexican armed forces were particularly skeptical of the U.S. Northern Command (one of the author’s personal observations).

⁴ Tamara Makarenko, “The Crime–Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism,” *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (February 2004): 129–145.

⁵ Z. Byron Wolf, “Trump basically called Mexicans rapists again,” *CNN*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/06/politics/trump-mexico-rapists/index.html>.

⁶ Associated Press, “Trump threatens Mexico over 'bad hombres',” *Politico*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-threatens-mexico-over-bad-hombres-234524>. These views were echoed by Mexican college students when asked what security issue concerns them the most. Over half the class replied “a U.S. invasion.” (Personal observation of the authors in Mexico City, January 2018). Informally, similar expressions were shared repeatedly by members of the Mexican Army throughout 2017 and the first half of 2018.

⁷ Noel King, “National Guard Troops Sent To The U.S.-Mexico Border,” *NPR*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/10/601072264/national-guard-troops-sent-to-the-u-s-mexico-border>; Manuela Tobais, “How many troops has Donald Trump sent to the U.S. border so far?” *Politifact*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2018/nov/15/eric-swallow/how-many-troops-has-donald-trump-sent-us-border/>.

⁸ López Obrador’s national strategy on security and peace doesn’t address the sources of organized crime such as U.S. drug consumption, gun sales, illicit money, etc. In his view, these issues do not exist in public policy documents. Nevertheless, they are some of the sources of this threat. For practical purposes, his government is postponing this problem to the next crisis.

⁹ White House, “Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements,” January 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/25/executive-order-border-security-and-immigration-enforcement-improvements>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tomás Martínez, “Jalisco Nueva Generación: un epicentro del narco local-global,” in *Seguridad y Justicia en Jalisco Escenarios y Propuestas*, ed. M. Moloeznik & A. Rodríguez (Guadalajara: COECYTJAL, 2018), 437.

¹² When Trump ordered the Department of Defense to send active-duty military troops to the U.S.-Mexico border in 2018, there was an internal debate within the U.S. Congress about whether such use of the military domestically was constitutional or in violation of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878. See: Astrid Galvan, “This federal law limits what US troops deployed at the border can do,” *Military Times*, October 31, 2018,

<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/10/31/federal-law-limits-what-us-troops-deployed-at-the-border-can-do/>.

¹³ White House, “Presidential Executive Order on Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking,” February 9, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/09/presidential-executive-order-enforcing-federal-law-respect-transnational>.

¹⁴ This was evidenced in January 2019 when the heads of the U.S. intelligence agencies briefed members of Congress, providing their “World-wide Threat Assessment,” which did not mention the “crisis” at the border as the most serious a threat to national security (as it has been portrayed by the Trump administration). See: Philip Ewing, “Trump Faults Spy Bosses As Break Widens Between What They Advise And What He Does,” *NPR*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/30/689938744/trump-faults-spy-bosses-as-break-widens-between-what-they-advise-and-what-he-does>.

¹⁵ Greg Jaffe and Dan Lamothe, “Former generals worry that Trump’s border mission uses troops as a political tool,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-election-eve-border-mission-puts-the-military-in-partisan-crosshairs/2018/11/02/880dd048-deb5-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb_story.html.

¹⁶ “Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

¹⁷ Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024*, 2018, <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Plan-Nacional-de-Paz-y-Seguridad.pdf>.

¹⁸ Observations of one of the authors who served as an exchange officer to the Mexican War College (Escuela Superior de Guerra) in San Jeronimo, Mexico in the 1990s. When the United States relocated the U.S. Army’s 1st Armored Division from Germany to Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas in 2005, Mexican military officers intimated that they thought this would be the invasion force to reoccupy Mexico. (Personal discussions of the authors with members of the Mexican military in 2009).

¹⁹ Christian Leuprecht, Joel J. Sokolsky, and Thomas Hughes, *North American Strategic Defense in the 21st Century* (Cham, SZ: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

²⁰ This was discussed at the NORAD & USNORTHCOM academic conference in Colorado Springs in December 2017, and it is discussed informally in the Mexican Armed Forces (one of the author’s personal observations).

²¹ The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) initially released Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203 Analytical Standards in June 2007. It was updated in 2015. The document mentions the need for members of the IC to use analytical tradecraft, including structured analytical techniques to improve intelligence analysis and to avoid biases. It also mandated that intelligence products produced by the IC include the use of confidence levels or degrees of likelihood in their assessments. This was intended to avoid the use of terms like “slam dunk” when informing policy makers of potential threats.

²² Richards Heuer, Jr. and Randy Pherson, *Structured Analytical Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2015).

²³ Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) Technologies, Analysis of Competing Hypotheses 2.0, 2006, <http://www2.parc.com/istl/projects/ach/ach.html>.

²⁴ Heuer and Pherson, *Structured Analytical Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*.

²⁵ These terms and percentages are based on the ODNI ICD 203 Analytical Standards. This document was produced by the ODNI to apply standardized language across the 17 intelligence community agencies when producing intelligence assessments. The criteria used to determine probability are: almost no chance (1-5%); very unlikely (5-20%); unlikely (20-45%); roughly even chance (45-55%); likely (55-80%); very likely (80-95%); and almost certain (95-99%).

²⁶ The Mérida Initiative began under the George W. Bush administration in 2007 as a means of providing primarily military support to Mexican President Felipe Calderón's fight against transnational criminal organizations. There are other components to Mérida, which also include: supporting judicial reform; institutionalizing the rule of law and human rights; and creating a 21st century U.S.-Mexico border. See: Clare Ribando Seelke, "Mexico: Evolution of the Merida Initiative 2007-2020," *Congressional Research Service*, March 11, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10578.pdf>.

²⁷ The Mexican president historically operated out of Los Pinos (the presidential palace). This changed with the arrival of López Obrador who chose to move his offices into the National Palace and open up Los Pinos to the public. See: Kevin Sieff, "Mexico's president has turned the presidential mansion into a museum," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/12/01/mexicos-president-has-turned-presidential-mansion-into-museum/?utm_term=.f9a72bc1302a.

²⁸ These numbers are based on ICD 203 language. See: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *ICD 203: Analytical Standards*, January 2, 2015, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ Jennifer De Pinto, "Views on southern border wall have been consistent since Trump became president," *CBS News*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/views-on-southern-border-wall-have-been-consistent-since-trump-became-president/>.

³⁰ Frank Newport, "Americans Oppose Border Walls, Favor Dealing With DACA," *Gallup*, June 20, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/235775/americans-oppose-border-walls-favor-dealing-daca.aspx>.

³¹ The authors do have a disagreement on this point. While Kilroy sees such a scenario as very unlikely, Rodriguez believes it should be considered likely. In keeping with Taleb's (2007) argument, both authors agree that the contemporary situation and the increased rhetoric of identity politics could make such an errant data point, "a black swan event," which most would not have seen coming and thus should be considered. See: Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

³² Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 44. The RSCT is a product of the Copenhagen School of International Relations, posited by Barry Buzon and Ole Waever. The theory basically states that threats to a regional security complex exist when "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another."

³³ Anecdotal evidence based on discussions with members of the Pentagon and the White House regarding a possible military intervention in Mexico at the NORAD & USNORTHCOM academic conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado in December 2017.

³⁴ The Canadian Press, "The United States seals the deal on USMCA, says trade agreement can take effect on July 1," April 24, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/usmca-trade-into-effect-july-one-1.5544883>. A new regional trade agreement between the United States,

Mexico, and Canada (the USMCA) to replace NAFTA was signed on October 1, 2018 by President Trump, President Peña Nieto, and Prime Minister Trudeau. It was ratified by all three countries' legislative branches in April 2020 and went into effect on July 1, 2020.

³⁵ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: Director of National Intelligence, 2012); National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, D.C.: Director of National Intelligence, 2017).

³⁶ Heuer and Pherson, *Structured Analytical Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, 193.

³⁷ This sentiment was summed up by a Canadian military official who stated, "When you see your neighbor's house on fire, you can choose to ignore it and just hope it doesn't spread to yours, or you can grab a hose and help them put the fire out." (Comments made at a trilateral security conference in Kingston, Ontario, Canada in June 2009).

³⁸ Wolf, "Trump basically called Mexicans rapists again."

³⁹ This became evident when Covid-19 threatened the U.S. food supply chain, particularly the meat packing industry, which is dependent on migrant workers, many of whom are undocumented from Mexico. Trump went as far as determining these as "essential industries" (not essential workers) to the U.S. economy, requiring migrant workers to continue to work at these plants despite the high infection rates. See: Taylor Telford, Kimberly Kindy, and Jacob Bogage, "Trump orders meat plants to stay open in pandemic," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/28/trump-meat-plants-dpa/>.

⁴⁰ "Examining the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)," *Wilson Center*, n.d., <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/examining-the-central-america-regional-security-initiative-carsi>.

⁴¹ Richard J. Kilroy, Jr., Abelardo Rodriguez, and Todd Hataley, *North American Regional Security: A Trilateral Framework?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012) 178.

⁴² NORAD and USNORTHCOM Public Affairs, "NORAD, USNORTHCOM and the Mexican Air Force successfully accomplish objectives in AMALGAM EAGLE 18," July 17, 2017, <https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/Press-Releases/Article/1574827/norad-usnorthcom-and-the-mexican-air-force-successfully-accomplish-objectives-i/>.

⁴³ Wynn Hoke, "Inter-American relations program benefit Mexico, U.S. militaries," NORAD and USNORTHCOM Public Affairs, August 5, 2016, <https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/Article/924830/inter-american-relations-program-benefit-mexico-us-militaries/>.

⁴⁴ Mexico under López Obrador does not consider China and Russia as threats, whereas the United States does. López Obrador has taken a cautious approach to Beijing and Moscow.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2005), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2005/69843.htm>.

⁴⁶ Johns Hopkins University, "COVID-19 Dashboard," Center for Systems Science and Engineering, August 2, 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

⁴⁷ "La COVID-19 podría llevar a la pobreza hasta a 95.2 millones de personas, alertó un estudio de la Universidad Iberoamericana," *Sinembargo.mx*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.efinf.com/clipviewer/files/1e85131b2f0cc5a23045ca10dcf4e75a.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Personal conversation of the authors with public health officials in both Mexico and the United States, as part of a series of conferences organized by the authors to address North American regional security in San Antonio, Texas in 2008 and Washington, D.C. in 2010,

working with U.S. Northern Command, Canadian and Mexican Embassies, and the Wilson Center.

⁴⁹ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to John Adams, Monticello. August 1, 1816," Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/dreams-future-quotation#note-0>.

⁵⁰ James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, Federalist 41, 1788 (New York: Mentor Books 1961 edition,) 257.

⁵¹ Robert Pastor, *The North American Idea: A Vision of a Continental Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).