



Merchant ships pass through Miraflores Locks, Panama Canal

# A Prescription for Protecting the Southern Approach

**P**rotecting the United States from attack is a core mission of the Department of Defense (DOD). Historically, the Armed Forces provided a shield against conventional threats at sea and through an integrated air defense system developed during the Cold War. As the events of September 11, 2001, demonstrated, however, the Nation must confront nonstate adversaries who target the United States and its interests at home and abroad.

The 2005 *Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support* directs an active, layered defense that seamlessly integrates military capabilities within the United States, in the geographic approaches to its territory, in the forward regions of the world, and through space and cyberspace. In other words, it is *defense-in-depth*.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge of asymmetrical threats led DOD to create U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) in 2002 to protect the homeland. Charged with coordinating security cooperation with Canada and Mexico, this command must detect potential threats, dissuade adversaries, and defeat direct attacks.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, USNORTHCOM supports civil authorities within the continental United States, Alaska, and U.S. territorial waters. The command plays a leading role in improving threat awareness and guarding the geographic approaches to protect the Nation at a safe distance.<sup>3</sup> To the north, east, and west, the framework for a coordinated defense of land, sea, and air domains with Canada is highly developed. To the south,

however, DOD faces formidable hurdles to organizing a layered defense.

Planning for a coordinated defense to the south often defies conventional strategic thinking. Although all states there, with the possible exception of Cuba, are trying to stamp out the triple menace of drugs, corruption, and violence, which also threatens the United States, there are serious resource scarcities, and most security problems require multilateral responses.

Mexico is the key nation in the southern sector. Its full cooperation is vital but doubtful. While collaborating successfully on many law enforcement and security issues, the country is reluctant to integrate into a defense arrangement. The weight of history with Washington and an inward-looking concept of national security preclude close cooperation. The United States cannot protect its southern approach alone, however, and Mexico must somehow play a role. This article offers a different organizing construct based on integrated cooperation with and among nations in the Caribbean Basin and Mexico and finds positive consequences for U.S. thinking about the region.

## Geographic Approaches

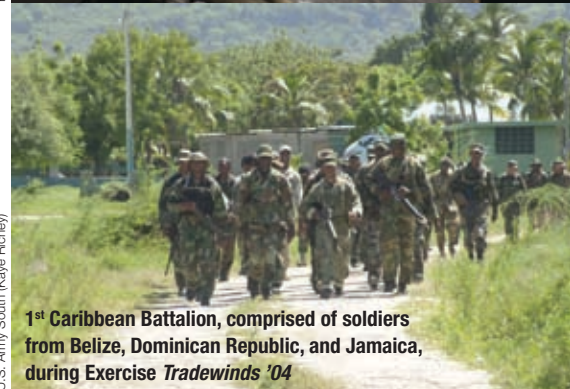
To the east and west out to 500 nautical miles in a predominantly maritime domain, the Navy and Coast Guard are refining and expanding capabilities for early-warning, air-sea-subsurface coordination and interception at a safe distance. Defense of the northern approach builds on a mature security relationship with Canada and exploits its depth of

By JOHN A. COPE



U.S. Coastguardsmen arrive at U.S. Naval Station Guantanamo Bay

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Atlantic (Erin D. Reeds)



1<sup>st</sup> Caribbean Battalion, comprised of soldiers from Belize, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica, during Exercise Tradewinds '04

U.S. Army South (Kaye Richey)

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at least 2,000 miles. The well-established North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), collocated with USNORTHCOM, coordinates airspace warning and response while a new Bi-National Planning Group, which may be integrated into NORAD, guides preparations for contiguous land and maritime domains. The Canadian government recently formed a single operational military headquarters, Canada Command, to manage its armed forces' response to domestic emergencies and crises and to expedite defense collaboration with the United States.

Strategic cooperation on these three approaches benefits from several factors. The high comfort level found in U.S.-Canadian relations is most important. Both nations appreciate the global terrorist threat. Both have strong traditions of national and integrated defense planning and binational cooperation, although actual executive decisionmaking has never been tested by crisis. With common North Atlantic Treaty Organization experience, army and navy forces operate together with relative ease. Finally, both countries benefit from spatial depth in these approaches, which provides early warning and response time far from the U.S. and Canadian homelands.

The southern geographic approach to a distance roughly equal to the depth of Canada encompasses Mexico, the Caribbean archipelago, the mainland in Central America, and northern South America. This is a zone marked today by relatively weak democratic governance; violent crime; public forces unable to police their sovereign territory fully, resulting in porous borders, coastlines, and ungoverned spaces; and serious transnational problems (such as smuggling, weather, and environment) that threaten these countries as well as the United States. There are two main land, sea, and air corridors that originate in northern South America and run northwest to the United States.

The eastern corridor, primarily maritime and air, centers on the Caribbean archipelago and includes Cuba and the Bahamas. Its western counterpart, which also has a significant maritime dimension, links land and air routes across the Central American isthmus and into Mexico. Nations in both corridors face violent urban youth gangs and well-established, thriving criminal networks that traffic and smuggle commodities north and south. The most successful networks have handled narcotics for years, annually moving between

250 and 300 metric tons of cocaine north. A new problem is the potential collaboration among gangs, criminal networks, and terrorist organizations with global reach.

alliances and internalizes the role of its military. There is an emphasis on civic action in the countryside, security of vital installations such as sea and air ports, disaster relief, and some law enforcement and antidrug operations.

*the United States cannot protect its southern approach alone, and Mexico must somehow play a role*

**Relations with Mexico**

The United States and Mexico differ in many ways but have a land and sea frontier of over 2,000 miles. Mexico has come to know American military and economic power over the past 200 years, which it remembers with a national museum dedicated to foreign armed interventions. To borrow from William Faulkner, the past isn't dead in Mexico; it isn't even past.<sup>4</sup> Americans, on the other hand, until recently barely looked south and then focused on either a shared borderland or famous tourist sites, not on the country itself. Since 9/11, understanding and finding ways to work with Mexico, with its complexities and contradictions, have become matters of national security.

The regional trend toward political and economic convergence in the early 1990s, epitomized by the North American Free Trade Agreement, ended a long period of inertia and distrust and called for forced serious bilateral contact. The defense relationship that emerged is nonstandard and minimalist for the United States, characterized by few military-to-military contacts and low levels of military sales and assistance.<sup>5</sup> As a country that professes to have no enemies and adheres to a policy of nonintervention, Mexico shuns strategic

The country's longstanding sensitivities about sovereignty, respect, and the appearance of subordination can be seen with every thorny issue involving North Americans.

Over the last 10 years, both Mexico City and Washington have worked to overcome suspicions and to become open, pragmatic partners in security relations. At the national level, Mexican and U.S. law enforcement, immigration, and other agencies collaborate regularly in border administration, intelligence, and information-sharing on transnational crime networks and terrorism. In an unprecedented show of support in September 2005, the Mexican army and navy unexpectedly provided immediate assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Defense-to-defense contact, however, has progressed slowly, consistent with the Mexican government's policy goals and legal constraints. Organizational asymmetries in these relations often complicate cooperation. Three examples are instructive:

- Unlike DOD, Mexico's military is organized into two departments under the leadership of two cabinet-rank uniformed officers: the Secretary of National Defense, who is responsible for the army and air force, and the



Mexican marines and U.S. Sailors remove Hurricane Katrina debris in Mississippi

U.S. Navy (Chris Gethings)

Secretary of the Navy. The senior position, the Secretary of National Defense, is the counterpart not only of the U.S. Secretary of Defense but also the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretaries and Chiefs of Staff of the Army and the Air Force.

■ The Secretariat of National Defense engages the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. There is no natural entry point into Mexico's defense establishment for a U.S. combatant command. Decisionmaking on military policy and operations is closed and controlled from Mexico City.

■ The United States and Mexico do not share a common threat perception to national security. Washington concentrates on external adversaries, particularly terrorists. International criminal networks are a secondary concern. Mexico does not feel threatened in the same way; its focus is on dangers and challenges inside the country, such as domestic crime, drug and arms trafficking, and natural disasters. International terrorist activity is a secondary concern. This divergence of priorities also exists in Central American and Caribbean countries.

Complicating bilateral defense relations is Mexico's stereotype as "anti-national security." The government has not adapted the nationalistic tendencies that once served the country well to today's geopolitical and economic realities. Politicians are struggling to develop a framework for identifying and addressing the nation's security concerns. Many considerations are in opposition, such as traditional isolation versus cooperative efforts to secure its southern approach; the primacy of policy principles (sovereignty and nonintervention) over national interests; and safety of migrants before the concerns of international security cooperation.

There are two competing schools of thought on defense. The passive, standard approach advocates remaining isolated, doing what is politically acceptable to appease Washington, and acting as a "doorstep defense" of the border. The active approach argues that Mexico should think and act innovatively in expanding its security agenda, cooperating with neighbors, and improving the military's capacity to protect the approaches to the country.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the next government will be less stereotypical.

The weight of history, nationalism, and concerns about subordination makes bilateral defense cooperation with Mexico, comparable

to Canadian standards, difficult to envision. Good faith that the Mexican government will come around on defense arrangements misses the reality that, as Alan Riding noted, "underlying tensions [with the United States] are kept alive by Mexico's expectation that it will be treated unfairly. Its worst fears are confirmed with sufficient regularity for relations to remain clouded with suspicion and distrust."<sup>7</sup> Domestic calls in the United States to "fix the broken border," the rise of Minutemen organizations in several states, the Secure Border Initiative, and, most recently, passage in the House of Representative of the Sensenbrenner Bill, making illegal immigration a criminal offense, reinforce Mexico's fear that it will be subordinated in defense relations.<sup>8</sup>

### The Challenge

While today's defense relationship with Mexico is friendly, correct, and developing, protection of the southern approach to U.S. territory cannot be anchored on one country, particularly one that is reluctant to engage as a partner in defense against terrorists. Is there another organizing construct, unique to the southern flank, that includes Mexico and can accomplish the mission? Embedded in this question are three issues that bear directly on how the United States might answer the challenge: the definition of the *southern approach*, differences in threat perceptions, and the condition of defense and police cooperation within the zone.

*Southern Approach.* To improve early warning of threats and maximize space and time considerations at least equivalent to the distances in the other three approaches (up to 2,000 miles), the design of this defense-in-depth must encompass the Caribbean Sea and its border areas, including Mexico, the Central American and Caribbean nations, Colombia, and Venezuela. It is important that this sector be viewed as a geostrategic whole rather than a collection of bilateral relationships. A holistic view draws attention to important considerations, such as lines of communication used by criminal networks, geography's influence on sea and air control, and the nature of political relationships. This view also facilitates the integration of operations by the Coast Guard and other U.S. agencies. This definition of the southern approach reflects the legacy of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan and his emphasis on the zone's role in securing U.S. interests and the "Battle of the Caribbean" in World War II, which were buried by the Cold

War's East-West mindset. For over 50 years, the Defense Department has divided operational responsibility for this geographic zone between at least two combatant commands.<sup>9</sup>

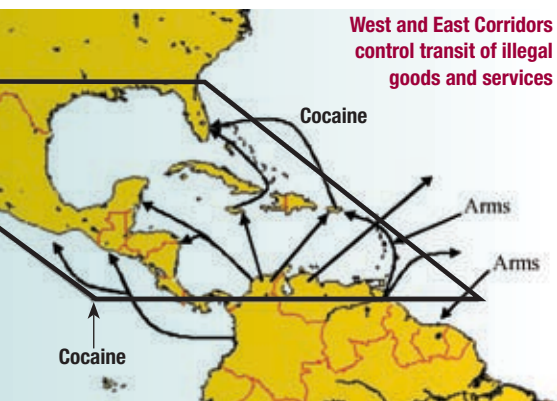
*Threat Perceptions.* Since 9/11, Washington has tried to achieve a common threat picture in the region based on international terrorism. While neighbors are willing to share terrorist-related information and adopt new transportation security procedures, they have resisted adopting the U.S. perspective. Their immediate concerns include persistent domestic violence and activities of criminal networks, particularly in Mexico. This impasse can be overcome by accepting and acting on the correlation between the two threat perceptions. Proceeds from transnational crime are known to support terrorist organizations, and their members exploit the lines of flow used by traffickers. If countries in the zone improve public safety and the capacity to control, diminish, and, ideally, end the scourge of trafficking and smuggling networks, U.S. vulnerability to terrorists eager to take advantage of ungoverned space and local instability decreases. This avenue to the United States becomes unreliable and hard to use. Protecting the southern approach against terrorists is predicated on greater attention to the fight against drug trafficking and other forms of transnational crime.

*Defense and Police Cooperation.* Central American and Caribbean nations are taking hold of their security challenges and increasing their cooperation. Military rivalries between and among neighbors are largely over, even though a few border disputes remain unresolved. Subregional political and economic linkages under the Central American Free Trade Agreement, the Caribbean Community, and Mexico's Plan Puebla-Panama (to develop economic infrastructure along the isthmus) have forced civilian and military leaders to recognize that countries cannot answer today's challenges alone. Neighbors have to strengthen their ability to work together in multiple areas. Mechanisms for military cooperation, such as the Conference of Central American Armed Forces (CFAC) and the Eastern Caribbean Regional Security System (RSS), link some countries in subregions, but not all. An association of Caribbean chiefs of police performs a similar role. Mexico and Guatemala have signed several accords that promote border integration. The Departments of Defense and Homeland Security play a low-key role in nurturing home-grown efforts to address

disaster response, peacekeeping, and other security challenges, as well as in encouraging the expansion of interstate cooperation within and outside subregions. While much remains to be done to protect Central American and Caribbean nations, the steady growth of their security cooperation is creating building blocks in the defense of the southern approach to U.S. territory.

**A Prescription**

An American “Maginot Line” spanning the southern frontier may be attractive to some, but it is simply not an option. Early warning and defense must commence at a safe distance from the homeland. The United States cannot conduct such a defense alone, although it has tried in the past. Thus far, defense-to-defense relations have focused only on Mexico, which, to avoid U.S. domination, has rejected integration into U.S. Northern Command’s and NORAD’s operational struc-



ture and planning regime. To ensure a strong defense and to involve Mexico, DOD should visualize the mission differently.

First, though, we must be clear as to why the United States wants to engage Mexico. There are two primary reasons. The first deals with coordinating response preparations for shared disasters (consequence management) in the general area of the U.S.-Mexico border. This concern involves a separate set of actors and considerations, which has its own dynamic. Mexican military support after Hurricane Katrina is a building block. The second reason is protection of the southern approach.

Instead of trying to integrate Mexico into the U.S. scheme, the alternative concept sees the United States working with neighboring states to address shared concerns. In this concept, Washington encourages and participates in the development of a Caribbean Basin Security Partnership. This provides the legal

basis for a separate and “locally owned” land, maritime, and air surveillance and response system covering both geographic corridors and the Caribbean Sea. A notional “Mexico–Caribbean Basin Surveillance System,” based in and led by Mexico and staffed by the military, police, and intelligence officers from participating countries, would collaborate closely with NORAD as an equal command and with other U.S. information-oriented entities.

This organizing construct brings together four elements not currently in DOD thinking about protecting the southern geographic approach to the homeland:

- The United States must comprehend its vulnerability in terms of a united geopolitical zone that encompasses the Caribbean Sea and its border areas rather than focusing on Mexico.

- There must be recognition of the direct correlation between countering entrenched and vibrant trafficking and smuggling networks and other forms of transnational crime and countering terrorists in organizing the defense of this sector. The center of gravity will remain drugs from Colombia.

- Central American and Caribbean confidence-building initiatives must be used as conceptual building blocks that foster bilateral and multilateral military and police cooperation. Neighbors have made considerable progress in the area of disaster preparedness. DOD also has sponsored programs that have reinforced the mindset and ability to cooperate regionally.

- It must be appreciated that states in the circum-Caribbean would prefer an active, layered defense of their geographic approaches over today’s “doorstep” thinking. Mexico’s geographic approaches, for instance, are particularly vulnerable. This strategic concept never developed because neighbors were not trusted. A zero-sum competitive mindset made defense-in-depth unimaginable. Secondly, nations lacked sufficient military resources. This mindset is fading. Today, it is possible to envision a series of interdependent homeland (*la patria*) defenses in the eastern and western corridors.

The mission of the proposed Mexico–Caribbean Basin Surveillance System is to assist member states in two ways: exercising control over their maritime and air domains and coordinating interdictions of illicit goods, services, and people transiting north or south. Governments are responsible for

what occurs in their territory, including control of the land domain. The combined headquarters, located in Mexico, would have planning and operational functions. Planning would encompass assessing the cohesion and interoperability of national civil and military radar surveillance systems, recommending ways to tighten seams and fill gaps in maritime and air coverage to improve integration, standardizing procedures across the zone, and making interstate coordination more efficient and effective. The operational function would rapidly assess and share information and orchestrate, as required, the response of one or more countries, perhaps through the CFAC and RSS. The headquarters also works closely with agencies in Colombia and the United States, including NORAD, the Joint Interagency Task Force–South in Key West, and the Coast Guard.

**Consequences**

The above prescription offers a realistic and timely concept for protecting the southern approach to U.S. territory, but the concept will take time to expound to neighbors and stand up. The trends toward increased Central American military and Caribbean police cooperation and successful CFAC efforts to organize a Central American disaster response capability, with U.S. support, are encouraging steps in this direction. Preparations for the 2007 World Cricket Cup, which will be held in seven Caribbean countries, offer an excellent opportunity to introduce infrastructure and cooperative procedures for the future. The U.S. Government already has assisted with funding for computers that can link with the International Criminal Police Organization and national police intelligence agencies. Both Central American and Caribbean security collaborations have been home grown, and the low-key and focused U.S. approach to assisting them has been effective.

The Department of Defense recognizes that implementation of its global strategy will need time and funding to transform thinking, introduce new technologies, and train and equip forces. It projects a 10-year timeframe and devotes a section of the document to improving “international partnership capacity and defense-to-defense relations.” The prescription is in line with the DOD position that “homeland defense will be substantially strengthened through the cooperation and assistance of allies. In turn, our allies can better protect their homelands if we help



U.S. Navy security detachment transiting Panama Canal

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (David A. Levy)

them build capacity for homeland defense and civil support.”<sup>10</sup>

DOD could take three actions in the near term to help create the necessary atmosphere to move the prescription forward:

*Relations with Mexico.* DOD placed Mexico in USNORTHCOM’s area of responsibility for good reasons. In particular, this placement facilitates planning for consequence management along the U.S.-Mexico border. Supporting efforts to work with countries in the area of Mexico, the Caribbean archipelago, the mainland in Central America, and northern South America, however, is the purview of U.S. Southern Command, which is precluded from direct engagement with Mexico. A

better arrangement would be the original approach of keeping Mexico unassigned, making it the responsibility of the Joint Staff. That would please both Mexico’s secretary of national defense and secretary of the navy since they see the Joint Staff as their preferred interlocutor. The Joint Staff, with Mexico’s understanding, would work through either combatant command as required.

*Airspace Management.* The Air Force recently initiated a program to create an integrated air defense system throughout Latin America, similar to the program started in Eastern Europe after the Cold War. The goals are to modernize airspace management and improve safety through a continuous air picture, updated with real-time flight track and flight plan data using civil and military resources, and to increase regional cooperation and interoperability. If given a higher priority and dedicated resources, this timely initiative could make a significant contribution to the creation of the Mexico–Caribbean Basin Surveillance System.

*Secure Communication.* An important element in furthering bilateral and multilateral security cooperation is interoperable means

for protected communication. A major step in this direction is U.S. Southern Command’s multinational information-sharing systems. In particular, the Cooperating Nation Information Exchange System uses computers on a protected network to enable two-way exchange on sea and air radar tracks between selected operations centers and the Joint

Interagency Task Force–South. The Mexican navy already participates in this counterdrug-related system.

The lament is often heard that the United States does not have a security strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean. Just as frequently, neighbors in those regions complain that Americans do not consider their security concerns. The prescription presented here does both but in an unconventional way, recognizing that interdependence already exists between the United States, Mexico, and the other countries in the zone. The central idea is that a Mexico reluctant to embrace

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U.S.–Canadian security arrangements is a weak part of a layered defense of the U.S. southern flank. However, a Mexico that has a leading role in its *own* layered defense, in collaboration with Latin American and Caribbean states facing similar challenges, can be a strong force in executing a defense-in-depth. The right collaboration can be a powerful tool in achieving optimal solutions. To the extent that the concept of a Mexico–Caribbean Basin Surveillance System can be created over time, the United States will be increasingly safe. Americans will not be secure until their southern neighbors are secure. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Full capacity to implement the strategy is to be developed over a 10-year period.

<sup>2</sup> The strategy says that, even though DOD is concerned with homeland defense, the primary mission of the Department of Homeland Security is to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States

and that the Attorney General and the Department of Justice lead the Nation’s law enforcement effort to detect, prevent, and investigate terrorist activity within the country.

<sup>3</sup> In geographic scope, the continental United States has 5,525 miles of land border with Canada and 1,989 miles with Mexico. The maritime frontier includes roughly 95,000 miles of shoreline. As an example of the volume of commerce that transits the approaches, on the order of 7,500 foreign ships enter U.S. ports every year to off-load approximately 6 million truck-size cargo containers onto U.S. docks. See U.S. Coast Guard, *Maritime Strategy for Homeland Security* (Washington, DC: U.S. Coast Guard, December 2002), 7, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Weiner, “Mexico City Journal: Of Gringos and Old Grudges: This Land Is Their Land,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Of Mexico’s military services, the navy (*Marina*) is the most active, working primarily with the U.S. Coast Guard to block narcotics and other smuggling activities. It has purchased numerous U.S. excess defense articles. *Marina* has contact with the Joint Interagency Task Force–South in Key West on narcotics issues and with USNORTHCOM.

<sup>6</sup> Raúl Benítez-Manuat, *Mexico and the New Challenges of Hemispheric Security* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2004); Oscar Rocha, “Mexico–U.S. Defense Relations,” address delivered to “The Caribbean Sea and Its Border Areas in U.S. Homeland Defense,” a workshop at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, DC, August 16, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 317.

<sup>8</sup> As an example, in late 2005, the United States halted military assistance, such as counterterrorism equipment and training, because of a dispute over whether U.S. citizens should be exempted from prosecution by the International Criminal Court. To evade sanctions under U.S. law, countries have the option of signing an immunity agreement to shield Americans from the court’s jurisdiction. Mexico has no plans to do this.

<sup>9</sup> During the Cold War, responsibility for the Caribbean Sea and its border areas was divided between U.S. Atlantic Command and U.S. Southern Command. Mexico was one of three unassigned countries (with Canada and the Soviet Union) and the responsibility of the Joint Staff. For a different set of strategic reasons, the zone now is divided between U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Northern Command.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Defense, *Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support* (Washington, DC, June 2005), 33–34.