

# Overhauling Homeland Security

BY LEONARDO CURZIO

Leonardo Curzio is a researcher at the Center for Research on North America at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Obama's arrival at the White House means a qualitative change in the security paradigm of the previous Bush administration. On the international plane, the new secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, has already established that the unilateralism that narrowed the hegemonic power's possibilities for having more friends and allies internationally is on the way out. On the domestic security front, the first policy lines drawn by the new secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, also imply a change vis-à-vis the previous paradigm. Clearly, the new administration cannot change the existing strategic context. Nor can it ensure that the actors with the capability and will to injure US interests will disappear simply because a charismatic, popular president has taken office.

The United States needs to maintain the concerted effort of all its security agencies at all levels of government to prevent a terrorist attack on its territory and guarantee that terrorist cells are not harboured or bred within its borders. The impact of September 11, 2001 will not disappear just because the Democrats are now in the White House and have a comfortable majority in Congress.

## SECURITY MYOPIA

However, the threat of terrorism is not the only security issue that the United States faces. The experience of the Bush administration provides an important lesson for those who will occupy top security posts, and that is that exclusively concentrating on only one security issue can have the undesired result of allowing other lesser threats or vulnerabilities to grow because no systematic measures are taken to contain them.

The security agenda does not end with the fight against terrorism, although that fight may be emblematic. Domestic security agencies in a country as powerful as the United States must take into account the existence of other threats—

A new paradigm will have to emerge, one that preserves the right of Americans to purchase and own weapons but also guarantees that those weapons will not be used to arm criminal organizations that threaten their neighbours and cause death and desolation along the border itself.

some with enormous destructive potential—such as natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina and its devastating effects in the state of Louisiana changed the security paradigm of the United States: it made it more receptive to the fact that the existence of one huge threat does not imply the disappearance of others. The country has begun to see how its vulnerability does not depend solely on the deliberate action of extremist groups with the express will to do it harm. The security paradigm is evolving, then, toward a full understanding of what a natural disaster can cause. The same is true of other threats such as human or animal epi-

demics, which can become very delicate issues if they reach a certain size. Biosecurity, as a concept, must be made more visible as a national concern, as must greenhouse gas emissions and their impact on global warming; both must become genuine national concerns on the global risks agenda.

In recent years, one of the fundamental domestic security strategy points was securing land and sea borders. The priority placed on the fight against terrorism had a devastating effect on US relations with its neighbours. Holdups in trade and slow functioning of borders and customs were the dominant concern in the years immediately following the 2001 terrorist attacks. However, the level of integration of the NAFTA economies has forced the governments to harmonize their security concerns (including the need to strictly control goods and individuals) with the functioning of an open economy and the dynamism of a border with millions of legitimate daily crossings. The domestic security agenda has had to fit in with the economic priorities of the region, and, through technology and the use of more reliable procedures, facilitate the movement of goods and persons.

## A NEW APPROACH TO BORDER AND IMMIGRATION ISSUES

One of the most damaging effects of 9/11 for US labour markets and Mexican interests was the conscious, deliberate, and systematic criminalization of illegal immigrants. In many US political and media circles, illegal workers were cavalierly equated with potential terrorists. The argument repeated in the media and even in Congress was that if the border and immigration system was so porous as to allow six million illegal workers, the majority Mexican, to reside in the United States, who could guarantee that an al-Qaeda cell could not slip in with them? Despite the fact that in all these years, no one has been able to prove that any

illegal workers were terrorists, the anti-Mexican propaganda has shaped the public's perceptions.

Secretary Napolitano was governor of Arizona and is very well versed in migration and border issues. In one of her first statements during her confirmation hearings, she emphasized the need to change the paradigm criminalizing illegal workers as a matter of national security and to advance an agenda that promotes the rule of law and in which US employers who hire illegal workers are punished. In this way, Napolitano managed to conceptually and practically de-escalate a national security conflict and turn it into a matter of labour and immigration law, which, it should be noted, is a significant step forward.

### THE FIGHT AGAINST DRUG AND ARMS TRAFFICKING

Another issue put on the back burner for many years because of the emphasis on the war on terror was the fight against drugs. The same could be said about arms trafficking. These two phenomena together have had a devastating effect on the stability of Mexico. The combined effect of maintaining extremely high levels of consumption in the United States and its widespread permissiveness regarding legal and illegal weapons sales has meant that the Mexico-US border has become highly explosive territory. It is true that there are no terrorists, but well-funded and heavily armed criminal organizations have scandalously increased their capability to challenge and corrupt the Mexican state. The criminals' firepower today is reflected in the more than 5,000 deaths they caused in 2008. It is widely documented that most of the weapons in the hands of these criminal organizations operating in Mexico have come from the United States. According to estimates of the Chamber of Deputies Justice Commission, in 2008, 668,000 firearms entered Mexico through our common border.

Clearly, the new US administration's conception of security will have to include this issue as a regional vulnerability whose main effects are felt in

## US domestic security must also evolve toward harmonizing its security interests and priorities with international law and the global justice principles that the international system aspires to.


Mexico but also affects the United States. A new paradigm will have to emerge, one that preserves the right of Americans to purchase and own weapons but also guarantees that those weapons will not be used to arm criminal organizations that threaten their neighbours and cause death and desolation along the border itself.

It is equally important that the US administration recognize that the high rates of drug use within its borders are sustaining the criminal organizations in Mexico by providing them with enormous sums of money (as much as US\$17 billion a year according to government sources) to corrupt officials and boost their strength daily. The administration must turn that recognition into a systematic effort based on co-responsibility. The trend established in the so-called Merida Initiative, which situates the fight against drugs in the sphere of co-responsibility, is a methodological and political step forward in this regard. In the long run, it will bear fruit for Mexico's—and therefore the United States'—stability and security.

### A SPHERE OF SHARED INTERESTS

As a result, the domestic security of the United States must evolve from a clearly sovereignty-based vision, in which one state affirms its power and puts its security priorities before those of other coun-

tries—and regardless of those other countries—to a vision in which shared responsibility is not only a matter of good political will, but also a matter of creating a genuine sphere of shared interests with its neighbours and allies. US domestic security must also evolve toward harmonizing its security interests and priorities with international law and the global justice principles that the international system aspires to. The last article that Bush administration Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff published in the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs* (2009) about the tension between US security priorities and international law must be the last will and testament of a security paradigm that is becoming a threat to the international system.

The United States is the most important country in the world. Consequently, it must assume the role of leader of the international system, not that of a country that becomes an obstacle to the aspirations of humanity in the spheres of justice or the environment. US security priorities must be compatible with the fundamental human values expressed in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is in large part an extension of the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson. Because the founding values of the United States are the values of modernity, a republic based on obeying the law cannot maintain that the violation of human rights, inside or outside its borders, is defensible without falling into a grave philosophical contradiction, a contradiction that not only is a moral problem, but that has direct effects on the erosion of the United States' historical legitimacy. As a result, the United States' domestic security priorities must be compatible with the fundamental values of the republic and the international system that in large part it helped build. 

For more information on *Canada Watch* and the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, visit [www.yorku.ca/robarts](http://www.yorku.ca/robarts)