The Mexico-U.S. relationship is perhaps the most complex and wide-range relationship between any two countries. Throughout the years the priorities in the bilateral agenda have changed. In the nineties, for instance, trade and drug trafficking were the two prevailing ones. However at the turn of the century, both the Mexican and the U.S. governments gave migration the priority it deserves in the bilateral agenda. President Fox had a clear position regarding the importance of reaching a migratory pact with the U.S. right from the beginning of his presidency. The issue was at the top of the agenda for nearly a year. During that time, Presidents Bush and Fox met and signed declarations that indicated there was an authentic possibility that a migration agreement could become a reality.

Although the new U.S. administration was acceptant of the issue of migration and that both sides displayed a great deal of interest in it, the terrible events of September 11 drastically changed the priorities in the U.S. agenda. National security became the main topic in the relations between the United States and the rest of the world. September 11th created unprecedented challenges for U.S. border security and for its two neighbors.

The fight against international terrorism and the search to prevent any threat to national security have permeated the agenda at all levels. Even though migration is still clearly a crucial issue between the United States and México, today it seems impossible to deal with this issue without taking into account security considerations.

The interest generated by the topic of migration was not the result of a new dynamic in the migration current. As a matter of fact, the flow of people has been a silent but increasing phenomenon. Mexican migration to the United States, and the presence of nearly nine million Mexican-born people who live in this country is a reality that has been taking place gradually, throughout many decades and is derived from our common history, our geographic vicinity and a strong, deep network of social and family relations. This explains and sustains these flows until today.

Moreover, Mexican migrants, as well as many others, come to the United States driven not only by the lack of opportunities for a better life in their home countries, but also in response to the magnet represented by the U.S. labor market demand for low-skilled and low-wage workers. In other words, Mexican migration is the labor supply that meets the demand in the U.S. market.

The increasing Mexican migration to the United States has had an important impact on both economies. In the case of Mexico, Studies suggest that Mexico contributes more to the U.S. labor force than any other foreign country. They help keeping down inflation, by providing the U.S. Economy with the labor supply needed. Furthermore, Mexican migrants buy goods, pay for services and also pay taxes. Already at the
end of the nineties, the National Academy of Sciences issued a report that concluded, among other things, that an immigrant pays an estimated $80,000 more in taxes over a lifetime than he or she receives in government benefits.

The contribution of Mexican workers to the American economy will be needed in the foreseeable future, due to U.S. demographic factors as well as the constant economic interdependence of both economies.

Nearly ten years after the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, there are many changes that must be taken into account. Economic, cultural and social bonds have further tightened in the region. Mexico and Canada are among the U.S. largest trading partners. Our markets today are much more integrated than ever before, and the trends show that it will only be more so in the future.

Yet, despite these realities, Mexico and the U.S. have not yet agreed on how to tackle the problem of the undocumented Mexicans seeking jobs or family reunification in the U.S. The unilateral approach of border-control strategy and deterrence implemented by the U.S. government, through different operations designed to apprehend undocumented border crossers, has not produced the expected results.

The unauthorized flow of people has not receded and the U.S. government’s policy to cope with undocumented migration from Mexico has spawned an underworld of sophisticated organizations of human smugglers, document fraud and other criminal activities. Forced to cross through high risk areas in the deserts, rivers and canals there has been a significant increase of migrant’s deaths in the past six years. These factors have disrupted the border communities’ coexistence.

The Mexican government has a strong commitment to protect the lives of migrants who try to cross the border. This is the reason why the Beta Groups exist. Their origins go back to 1989, and they are meant to safeguard the person and property of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. While it is true that, given their knowledge of the local dynamics, local police forces participate in the Beta Groups, these remain an unarmed force that provides food, lodging, protection, and legal representation to aliens, regardless of their legal status. These groups in no way aim to foster undocumented crossings. However, we do everything that is in our hands to prevent the loss of lives.

The strategies designed for this objective have solely a humanitarian purpose. Mexican authorities are certainly not encouraging the population to migrate to the United States. But Mexican migration to the United States is a reality; thus, we cannot close our eyes to it. Although we are now working closely with the U.S. border patrol in programs like the Border Safety Initiative to prevent further deaths, mainly in the Arizona-Sonora Desert region, a comprehensive migration agreement that allows for a legal, safe and orderly migration could do much more in this regard.

The real solution to the consequences of the unauthorized flow of people at the border is related to the comprehensive approach that both governments should adopt regarding the issue of migration of Mexicans to the U.S. This pending element of the bilateral agenda is clearly linked to the question of economic convergence, already address in the Partnership for Prosperity Initiative.

**Migration and security**

In the current context of increased security concerns, the regularization of undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. would allow for the identification of a large segment of people already settled in the country that do not represent a security threat. The contribution of these Mexicans to the U.S. economy has been recognized by the U.S. private sector and different organizations that favor substantial changes to the current immigration law which does not reflect the economic and social realities in both countries.
Regularizing the legal situation of these undocumented Mexicans would enable them to participate in the efforts to enhance the security of the country in which they live, without fear of being confronted by authorities due to their irregular migratory status. They would be screened by the authorities in order to be properly identified, allowing them to work legally and be treated fairly, and their human and labor rights would also be protected. This regularization also would contribute to the stabilization of the workforce supply for American employers who require certainty in the labor market with workers properly screened and identified.

The recent case of the Wal-Mart undocumented janitors detained in 21 states of the Union illustrates the need for finding a solution to address the situation of unauthorized workers who do not represent a security threat.

The design of legal channels to match willing workers with willing employers will reinforce the security of the common border. The circularity of Mexican workers, which has been altered due to the border control operations, must be restored. These people are unable to return to Mexico, and their relatives who wish to reunite with them only have increased the influx of unauthorized migrants.

Border security would be significantly improved if Mexican workers could join the U.S. labor market, conditioned to a previous screening process, bearing proper documentation and entering through designated ports of entry, rather than entering without authorization hiring smugglers and traveling through high risk routes at the border.

Although Mexican migrants cross the border for economic and family reunification reasons and therefore do not pose a security threat, we certainly understand that the U.S. fears that Mexico could be used as a passage of security menaces from other regions. In other words, the U.S. concern with respect to Mexico is that the country might become a terrorist risk in the future.

But the threat is to the region as a whole, not only to the United States. For this reason, the Mexican National Migration Institute is working on the modernization of its control systems. This year the Integral System of Migratory Operation was redesigned – it is a technological platform which will include the National Migration Institute’s main migratory processes. By the end of this year the system’s first stages will be installed, which will allow us at all times to have a greater control and timely information on the migratory status of foreigners either visiting Mexico or living there.

Moreover, the Migratory Predocumentation System was established and is now operating at the Cancún, Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta and Los Cabos airports. In addition to the benefits that this system implies, due to the lower amount of time that visitors have to wait at the immigration lines, this system allows us to know in advanced the identity of people who will arrive in Mexico. With these systems we shall have a decisively tighter control and scrutiny.

Security and border concerns

Migration is linked to security issues due to the risk implied by the entry into the region of potential external threats. At the U.S.-Mexico border the relationship of security and migration is clearly illustrated.

Moreover, Mexico and the United Status have solid reasons to think about the security issue. The Mexico-U.S. border is a microcosm of the whole bilateral relationship. In the border, all the good and the bad aspects of the bilateral relationship happen every day.

The Mexico-U.S. border is the busiest border in the world. It is a nearly 2,000 mile-long border, through which more than 300 million people, 90 million cars, 4.3 million trucks and US$195 billion worth of
goods cross every year. Today, México buys more American goods than the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Netherlands and Italy combined. Around 80 percent of the 250 billion dollars of bilateral trade between Mexico and the U.S. crosses over the border. Trade among both countries amounts more than 650 million dollars a day. Because of its high degree of interaction, many refer to the border area not as a border, but as a binational region, an entity in itself. The challenge then is how to guarantee the region’s security without affecting the positive flows.

Given the geographic proximity as well as the regional economic interdependence, the United States, Canada and Mexico find themselves in a situation where they must adapt to the post 9/11 security needs.

In the hours following the terrorist attacks, the United States shut down its borders with Canada and Mexico essentially imposing an embargo on the North American continent in the name of national security. Border crossings into the United States that ordinarily delay travelers and commerce a few moments (or at worst, a couple of hours) were converted in vast parking lots spanning kilometers and lasting up to 15 hours. Canadian and Mexican leaders understandably panicked, not because of the terrorist attacks per se, but rather because of the impact that the September 11 events had had and would continue to have on their relations with the United States. The additional pressure created by the urgency to adopt more security measures affected significantly the functioning of the oversaturated physical infrastructure of the common border.

This situation has created new challenges for both countries in adapting the need for security reinforcement without affecting the interaction of that region. This is the main purpose of the U.S.-Mexico Border Partnership Action Plan.

After more than a year since it was signed, Mexico and the U.S. have achieved progress to their security goals with the implementation of the 22 points of that agreement. Both countries have worked to carry out actions aimed at increasing security without disturbing the flow of goods and people, such as the expansion of the dedicated lanes known as FAST (for cargo) and SENTRI (for people). Other measures have contributed to the security of physical infrastructure and strategic facilities at the border. We are exchanging intelligence information about different subjects on a regular basis, with a spirit of cooperation and a mutual trust base.

At the same time, both countries have taken important steps against organizations of human smugglers in both sides of the border. One example of recent collaboration on this aspect is the information gathering in Mexico that provided elements for the prosecution in the U.S. of the members of the criminal organization responsible for the 18 migrant deaths in Victoria, Texas in May 2003.

Not withstanding these important advances, there is still a long way to go. We are still confronting difficulties in the implementation of better border management and a policy of “smart borders” due to different factors: an already overwhelmed and insufficient border infrastructure, a lack of sufficient technology and human resources, and a different view and approach to solve problems like the undocumented flow of people.

In the implementation of our cooperation scheme on security, the more complicated element we’ve had to deal with has been the management of people crossings. We still do not have a final answer to combine a security element for the crossing of legitimate people with the facilitation element required to administer the 300 million border crossings on yearly basis. The long waiting times for pedestrian border crossings persist and the SENTRI program for expedite crossing of passenger vehicles is only operating in three of the 52 ports of entry along the border.
Final considerations

It is important to generate more awareness among both U.S. public opinion and the U.S. government on the contribution of Mexican migrants to the United States. Mexican migrants do not pose a threat to national security; to the contrary, they contribute to American prosperity. U.S. consumers benefit from Mexican migration with lower prices, and, according to different studies, Mexican migrants are more likely to be economically active than other minorities in the United States. In other words, they contribute more than what they take in public services. This is particularly important now that the United States is approaching its electoral period. We believe this issue should be part of the U.S. domestic political agenda.

The immigration debate has recently returned to Congress. Important initiatives aimed at solving some of the complexities of this economic and social phenomenon are under discussion. These efforts reflect the importance that some members of Congress attach to reforming the current immigration system, in order to ensure domestic and border security as well as regulate on legal basis the foreign labor force that the U.S. economy requires.

A silent regional integration will continue to deepen, with or without the intervention of our governments. We now face different options: we can either choose to have a regional perspective, which is what has been mentioned before, or we can continue with essentially unilateral approaches with modest levels of cooperation. Many of us would certainly opt for the former. We can contribute to make the most and the best out of this integration if we set the grounds for an orderly development of this process rather than letting it continue in a disorganized manner.

In an increasingly interdependent world, migration policies cannot be adopted unilaterally. The people’s flow must be approached as a bilateral issue, or even a multilateral one. In a world in which there is an increasing opening to the free exchange of capital, goods and services, it is not coherent to lack the policies that promote a legal, orderly and safe flow of people, based on cooperation. We need to deal with this issue with a view of shared responsibility.

The means to achieve a greater control of migratory flows lies in a shared prosperity such as that announced by Presidents Fox and Bush in February 2001. The long-lasting solution would be to work to lessen the gap in the standards of living between our countries.

This initiative aims to promote growth, and the economic and social well-being of citizens, especially in those areas where insufficient economic growth has led to migration.

National security is intimately linked to regional security. Given the nature of the economic and social relations among the countries of North America, regional security is a shared interest, just as it is a shared responsibility. As both President Fox and President Bush have pointed out, it is important to build a “zone of confidence”. Important steps have been taken to further cooperation, as we have said before, but these are not enough.

We must focus our efforts and energy efficiently, facilitating the positive flows, not only of goods and services, but also of people, thereby achieving an efficient and modern management of our region. The focus therefore needs to be on the process -better services and smarter processes to make crossings faster and more efficient.

The expansion of programs like SENTRI and FAST in the short and medium run should be the model, not the exception, to manage the flows of people and goods in the common border. The challenge is to devote a significant increase in investment on technology and infrastructure, which are needed to operate these
programs, and make them compatible with the one used in Canada for the same purpose. The concept and
the operation of a policy for “Smart borders” should be compatible for the needs of all NAFTA partners

Both countries need to continue working on a bilateral approach to solve sensitive aspects of border
security cooperation. In recent years, we have learned that unilateral decisions addressing different
problems, which in principle look feasible, at the end only gave partial results, and sometimes have
generated undesirable consequences that undermine the spirit of bilateral cooperation.

Both governments respect each others sovereign rights to adopt measures to protect their borders. With
that in mind, it is important to set forth plans and initiatives that require coordination of both authorities
for better results in sensitive aspects such as the return of Mexicans to their country.