

Achieving Security

along the U.S. Southwest Border

by **Claudia Pena-Guzman**

Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.

Laurence J. Peter¹

Two distinct cultures, economies, political systems, and ideas of what comprises the national security interests of the U.S. and Mexico intersect at the U.S. southwest border. Those security interests stem from a desire by both countries to prosper in the global economy while assuring the safety and security of their respective populations. Each nation understands that its individual prosperity and security depends, to an extent, on the prosperity and security of other. This interdependence introduces immense complexity to the situation, given the multiple and diverse facets that must intersect and work together.

Today's global economy requires the safe and expeditious movement of capital, goods, and people to ensure the prosperity of its participants. While the expeditious flow of licit capital, goods, and people across the southwest border enhances the prosperity of the U.S. and Mexico, it introduces vulnerabilities to the national security and prosperity of both nations. The vulnerabilities at the border include illegal migration; illicit trafficking of arms, drugs, people, and black market goods; and drug-related impunity that permits illegal activities. Poor monitoring of sections of the border further exacerbates these issues.

These threats create a multitude of problems that require special attention from the federal agencies involved. The threats are interrelated; therefore, no agency can operate in a vacuum. In essence, the challenges related to the southwest border are “wicked” or complex problems. Dr. Jeff Conklin points out “wicked problems” evolve in a social context where there are multiple stakeholders who are unaware of the multiple functions and connections found in a complex

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system.² A phenomenon Conklin describes as fragmentation results in each stakeholder making independent decisions to solve what he believes is a simple or complicated problem without regard to other stakeholders or aspects of the problem. Conklin adopts six of ten characteristics developed by Horst Rittel to describe wicked problems:³

- The problem is ill structured with an “evolving set of interlocking issues and constraints.”
- There is no definitive solution indicating that the only stopping rule is running out of resources.
- There are no simply right or wrong solutions, only better or worse solutions.
- No two wicked problems are alike.
- It is impossible to learn about the problem without attempting solutions.
- There are no given alternative solutions.

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The complexity of the security situation at the U.S. southwest border is significant from the perspective of a single U.S. government agency, and multiplies when considering the numbers of stakeholders from the national to the local level. Partisan politics, immigration policy, North American Free Trade Agreement policy, security interests, environmental concerns, and treaty obligations under United

Nations counternarcotics programs are just a few of the issues connected in complex ways with systemic implications when acted upon. There is arguably no right action to take, no clear alternative to adopt, and any approach that is adopted must operate in a system where security strategies and government programs are already established. This litany meets the conditions that Conklin and Rittel describe.

In light of the complexity, U.S. national-level strategies adopted to address the problems articulate ends that could improve security along the southwest border. However, there does not appear to be a bridge from the strategic to the tactical level nor unity of command to see the actions through. There are numerous U.S. governmental agencies with jurisdictional claims related to the southwest border. They promulgate policies and strategies to carry out their responsibilities. This article considers those that apply most directly to southwest border security.

In this article, I argue parties involved must take several steps to improve security along the southwest border. The first step is to develop a common understanding of what defines the security problem. The second step is to develop a single, overarching strategy with a single governing body to achieve what is known in military terms as unity of command. The governing body must be empowered to hold all participating and contributing agencies and departments accountable to ensure convergence on the problem and unity of effort.

Reaching a Common Understanding of Southwest Border Security

The Difficulty in Defining Security

Since there is no common language or book of terms used by all federal government agencies, each agency interprets security differently. The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines security as the quality of

being secure as in freedom from harm or danger, but security also means measures taken to guard against espionage or sabotage, crime, attack, or escape. The Joint Chiefs of Staff define security as “measures taken by a military unit, activity, or installation to protect itself against all acts designed to, or which may, impair its effectiveness or a condition that results from the establishment and maintenance of protective measures that ensure a state of inviolability from hostile acts or influences.”⁴

In practice, the definition of security will depend on its context in concert with the particular mission or charter of the department or agency. Adding to the complexity, federal agencies take their direction from multiple sources to include Presidential directives, Congressional legislation, and the National Security Strategy.⁵ This “evolving set of interlocking issues and constraints”⁶ illustrates that the security problem is ill structured.

How the Different Strategies Define Security

This analysis looks at the following U.S. strategies that deal directly with illegal migration, drug trafficking organizations, and organized crime organizations.

- “The National Security Strategy,” 2010
- “The National Drug Control Strategy,” 2011
- “The National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy,” 2011
- “The Department of Homeland Security Strategic Plan,” Fiscal Years 2008–2013
- “2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan”
- “The Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime,” 2011

Four enduring national interests—security, prosperity, values, and international order—define the desired end state in the May 2010

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“National Security Strategy.” For the sake of comparison, the Mexican 2009–2012 “National Security Strategy” has two overarching national interests underwritten by 13 objectives and 145 supporting components toward achieving the objectives. The overarching national interests are to reinforce the Mexican national security system and to address the threats that endanger the national security comprehensively.⁷ Both countries’ national security strategies describe a whole-of-government approach to achieve their desired objectives. Notably, both documents include secure borders to facilitate trade as the venue for economic prosperity.

The 2011 “National Drug Control Strategy” outlines two main goals with seven sub-measures for achieving the objectives. The two goals are to curtail illicit drug consumption in the U.S. and to improve the public health and public safety of the people by reducing of the consequences of drug abuse. The seven sub-measures are statistically measureable data points depicting at-risk populations with a propensity for drug use and subsequent abuse.

With respect to the southwest border, the 2011 “National Drug Control Strategy” provides specific focus areas. Establishing the Border Intelligence Fusion Center at the El Paso Intelligence Center is key to ensuring accurate, actionable, and timely information and intelligence sharing. The strategy alludes to the “importance of partnering with other nations”⁸ for disrupting drug trafficking and production.

In the case of the U.S. southwest border, the strategy recognizes the requirement to work with Mexico in the areas of intelligence gathering,

investigation, enforcement operations, and prosecutions.⁹ Building resilient communities along the southwest border through education and technical assistance is also addressed.¹⁰ All other specific goals for the southwest border are deferred to the separate “National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy.”¹¹

The goal of the “National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy” is to “substantially reduce the flow of illicit drugs, drug proceeds, and associated instruments of violence across the southwest border.”¹² These strategic objectives describe how to achieve the strategic goal: enhance information and intelligence sharing; interdict drugs, drug proceeds, and associated instruments of violence along the entire southwest border; disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking organizations along the southwest border; stem the flow of illicit proceeds and illegal weapons across the border into Mexico; improve counterdrug technologies for drug investigation and interdiction; develop strong resilient communities to resist criminal activity while promoting healthy lifestyles; and enhance cooperation with Mexican counterdrug efforts.

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linked to actions taken along the southwest border. The strategic plan further subdivides the five missions into goals that include objectives and performance indicators for measuring success. Objectives for securing the country from terrorist threats and enhancing security focus on deterrence, early detection of all threats, and managing risks to critical infrastructure, key leaders, and events. To secure the borders, the plan calls for the prevention of illegal flow of immigrants and goods across any point on the border, “while expediting the secure flow of lawful travel and commerce.”¹⁴ Additionally, transnational criminal organizations are to be disrupted and dismantled. Lastly, to enforce immigration laws, the plan calls for the strengthening of the administration system and a comprehensive effort to prevent illegal immigration that includes addressing incentives that contribute to it.

The “2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan” has two goals. The first goal is to secure the border through a combination of “information, integration, and rapid response in a risk-based manner.”¹⁵ The second goal focuses on internal growth, maturing, and strengthening the border patrol force to exploit the new tools and approaches described by the first goal. The overall end state is to manage risk along the border to prevent terrorism, increase illegal immigrant certainty of arrests, and reduce smuggling and its associated crimes.¹⁶

The 2011 “Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime” has a single principle—to “build, balance and integrate” all the instruments of national power to “combat transnational organized crime and related threats to national security and urge foreign partners to do the same.”¹⁷ The end state is to reduce the threat posed by transnational organized crime from a national security level threat to a manageable public safety problem.¹⁸ The five key objectives to achieving this end state are protecting the U.S. and partner’s

population, strengthening partner's capacity for governance and transparency, breaking transnational criminal organizations' economic power and ability to exploit financial markets and instruments, defeating the transnational criminal organizations that pose the greatest threat, and building consensus and multilateral cooperation across industry, finance, academia, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations at the national and international level.

To meet these key objectives, the "Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime" 2011 sets out 56 specific priority actions. This strategy is the most complete description of both the threats to U.S. security interests and ways to address them. Specific to the security threats along the southwest border, the strategy seeks to sever the illicit flow of drugs, money, people, black market goods, and weapons across the border.

Is Current Strategy on the Right Course?

As Conklin tells us, complex problems do not have right or wrong solutions. At best, the solutions are good enough based on resource constraints, while at worse, solutions are not good enough. The most obvious problem with southwest border security is the lack of a single, comprehensive, security strategy. Further complicating matters is the lack of an overarching definition of what it means to achieve security along the southwest border.

Each agency is left to its own definition of security in order to obtain objectives that best align with its individual charter or mission. This autonomy causes fragmentation because each agency internalizes its view of the problem of southwest border security. What is left is a complex system being probed from multiple, asynchronous directions. Actions taken by one agency have the potential for multiple second- and third-order effects on the system. The

unintended consequences are exponentially greater when multiple agencies and departments act independently on the system. This phenomenon drives different agencies to focus on what are symptoms of the problem and reshape the problem in indiscernible ways.

What in the Current Strategies is Impeding the Achievement of Security?

What is a strategy? Strategy is broadly defined as "a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate."¹⁹ More specifically and likely more helpful when looking for precision, Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* defines strategy as a "prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multi-national objectives."²⁰

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As each agency develops its own criteria and goals, there is overlap in approaches, and it is not evident how or to what extent the integration of these approaches is occurring across agencies and departments.

All the strategies that relate to security along the southwest border focus on measures of performance (MOP) as opposed to more important measures of effectiveness (MOE). What is the difference and why does it matter?

MOP as defined by Joint doctrine “is a criterion used to assess friendly actions that is tied to measuring task accomplishment.”²¹ In simplest terms, MOP allows a department or agency to measure whether it is doing things right. MOE “is a criterion used to assess changes in system behavior, capability, or operational environment that is tied to measuring the attainment of an end state, achievement of an objective, or creation of an effect.”²² MOE tells the user whether necessary tasks are getting accomplished; are they doing the right things?

MOP and MOE are dependent on each other and to the problem to which they are applied. They serve as tools when conducting an assessment or evaluation to “judge progress toward desired conditions and determining why the current degree of progress exists.”²³ Both MOP and MOE are necessary to assess and identify indications of whether or not the desired end state is being achieved.

In a budget-constrained environment, achieving efficiency is paramount. How can we do things better or achieve security goals under fiscal constraints? The incentives for

also risk doing a lot of things right that fail to achieve the desired overall end state, as well as inadvertently affecting another agency’s efforts.

A Way Forward to Achieve a Better State of Security along the Southwest Border

A baseline definition of what it means to achieve security along the southwest border is necessary. This baseline definition will help build a common understanding of the true nature of the border security problem. The gaps identified between the current security situation along the southwest border and the desired end state will illuminate what approaches and measures, commonly called lines of effort, to take going forward. To adequately assess the validity of the lines of effort, agencies must clearly articulate and define MOE and MOP. MOP are related to MOE, and both must be integrated to give an accurate assessment of the current situation and longer-range trends. Additionally, agencies must periodically review MOP and MOE for validity and to assess or reframe the common understanding of the security situation. Keep in mind (from Conklin and Rittel) that once a change is made to the system, the entire system itself may change and require constant evaluation. MOE and MOP are not static and must aid in the ongoing evaluation of progress and problem reframing as necessary.

The situation on the southwest border will change because it is a complex system. The current situation requires continual assessments to ensure the right tasks are accomplished and the tasks are being done right to achieve the desired security objective.

The strategy that best delineates objectives that are most likely to reduce the multiple threats to security present at the southwest border is the 2011 “Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime.” However, there is no executive lead agency to oversee the accomplishment of all the objectives listed in

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agencies to do the right things are in conflict with doing things right in order to secure the funding to continue to run their programs. In order to secure funding for their programs from Congress, departments and agencies must demonstrate that they are making progress to meet the objectives they established. They

the strategy. Without an executive agent to lead and be accountable for the effort, there is a potential for a lack of synchronization with multiple agencies and expending resources inefficiently and at cross purposes.

Those strategies that appear to reflect a common definition of security, or are best aligned, appear synchronized and on the right path. Such is the case of the “National Drug Control Strategy” 2011 and the “National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy” 2011, which both fall under the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Similarly the “Department of Homeland Security Strategic Plan” (Fiscal Years 2008–2013) and the “2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan,” which both fall under the Department of Homeland Security, appear synchronized and complementary.

Conclusion

The smuggling of drugs, people (illegal immigrants and potential terrorists), black market goods, and possibly weapons of mass destruction into the U.S. and the flow of weapons, ammunition, and illicit currency into Mexico are daily threats along the southwest border. These threats are compounded by the sophistication with which the drug trafficking and organized crime organizations challenge the authorities and jeopardize the integrity and well-being of the population on both sides of the border.

All these threats generate a multitude of security problems that require special attention by the governmental agencies and departments involved. The problems generated are interrelated, and actions taken to deal or remedy one aspect have an impact on the rest of the issues. By any measure, the security situation along the U.S. southwest border is a complex problem.

There are competing requirements that touch multiple aspects of society and, at times, are at odds with the agencies charged with the task of providing security. In order to get to a better state of common security, the first essential step is to develop a consensus and common understanding of the problem of security along the southwest border. To achieve consensus and common understanding, a single, overarching strategy is necessary. A single governing body with clear leadership must have the ability to hold all participating and contributing agencies and departments accountable.

The governing body must also be able to conduct periodic reviews of progress toward achieving the desired objectives, as well as the ability to reframe and adjust as the dynamics of this complex system shift and change. The focus must be on doing the right things to impact the system in the direction that best achieves security and not on doing the right things to secure funding for an agency or department to ensure its viability. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 Laurence J. Peter, *Peter's Almanac*, William Morrow and Company, New York, October, 1982, quoted in Jeff Conklin, Ph.D., “Wicked Problems & Social Complexity,” <<http://www.cs.uml.edu/radical-design/uploads/Main/WickedProblems.pdf>>, accessed on April 19, 2012.

2 Jeff Conklin, Ph.D., “Wicked Problems & Social Complexity,” <<http://www.cs.uml.edu/radical-design/uploads/Main/WickedProblems.pdf>>, accessed on April 19, 2012, p. 3.

3 Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Weber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, 1973, pp. 155–169, quoted in Conklin, p. 7.

- 4 Joint Publication (JP)1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, as amended through 15 August 2012, Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 302.
- 5 A document approved by the President of the United States for developing, applying, and coordinating the instruments of national power to achieve objectives that contribute to national security.
- 6 Conklin, p. 7.
- 7 Felipe Calderon, "National Security Strategy of Mexico 2009–2012," <<http://www.cisen.gob.mx/site/pdfs/progSignal.pdf>>, accessed on April 27, 2012, p. 18–20.
- 8 "National Drug Control Strategy," Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2011, p. 7.
- 9 Ibid., p. 55.
- 10 Ibid., p. 15.
- 11 Ibid., p. 60.
- 12 "National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy," Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2011. p. 2.
- 13 Michael Chertoff, "Department of Homeland Security Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2008–2013," Department of Homeland Security, p. i.
- 14 Ibid., p. 7.
- 15 Michael J. Fisher, "2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Department of Homeland Security, p. 4.
- 16 Ibid., p. 7.
- 17 Barack Obama, "Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime," National Strategic Document, The Office of the President of the United States of America, Washington, July, 25, 2011, p. 1.
- 18 Ibid., p. 1.
- 19 Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy*, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, February 2006, p. 10.
- 20 Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Government Printing Office, 11 August 2011, p. GL-16.
- 21 JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, p. 214.
- 22 Ibid., p. 214.
- 23 Army Doctrine Reference Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 2012, p. 5-2.