

The border

Homeland Security is not enough

By Lawrence A. Herzog

President Barack Obama's recent visit to Mexico, inside his first 100 days in office, underscores a new era of U.S. foreign policy. After eight years of U.S. global policy fixated on war in the Middle East, terrorism and building fences around the nation's borders, the new administration understands that a "homeland security" foreign policy is not enough. It certainly won't get us out of the recession.

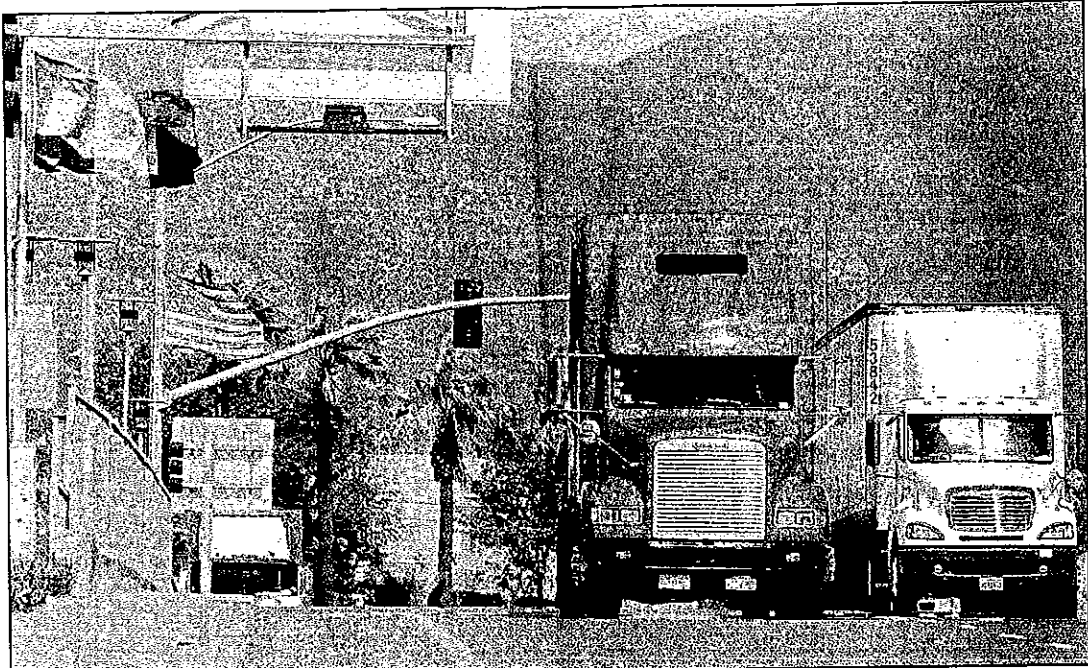
Instead, America needs to better position itself in the global economy. This means, both literally and metaphorically, building bridges, not fences, across our border. Yet, like a post-trauma patient struggling to let go of the past, our nation's psyche remains locked onto terrorism and security. Talk-show hosts see terrorists behind every shadow. The nation may need to turn down the radio, switch off cable news and slowly wean itself off this legacy.

In their press conference, President Obama and his Mexican counterpart, President Felipe Calderón, showed they are willing to step up to the plate on immigration, climate change, trade, border infrastructure, Mexican trucking and the drug cartel problem. Obama noted that "our deep economic ties mean that whatever steps we're going to take moving forward have to be taken together." Deep economic ties, indeed. Mexico-U.S. trade amounts to more than \$300 billion annually. But it was drugs, not dollars, that attracted the attention of the media the day after the recent U.S.-Mexico presidential rendezvous.

CNN's lead story carried the headline "Assault-gun ban could curb border violence." *USA Today* followed suit with "Obama backs Mexico's Calderón in Drug War." Closer to home, the *Los Angeles Times* led with "Obama pledges help in Mexico's war on drug lords," while this newspaper's headline read "Obama attacks arms trafficking."

In this new era of U.S. foreign policy, our "Mexican connection" needs to be dusted off and seen for what it really is. We need to move beyond the oversimpli-

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Trucks enter the United States from Mexico at the Otay Mesa crossing last month. Sandy Huffaker / Getty Images

fied idea that our border's destiny is only measured in terms of cartels and assault weapons.

Here on the California border, we have the potential to build our future around an import/export economy that moves \$65 billion in goods to and from Mexico. The multiplier effects could create a hundred-billion-dollar cross-border economy for our state.

The Mexico-U.S. frontier zone serves as the main conduit for the movement of goods, people, trucks, trains, *maquila* (assembly) parts and shipping containers that are the life blood of this multibillion-dollar binational economy. Unbeknown to most of us, the vital facilities that make this colossal exchange work — ports of entry, customs inspection buildings, pedestrian spaces, truck crossings, rail connections, highways — are vastly outmoded and woefully inadequate. While the border was booming in the 1980s and 1990s, we failed to upgrade.

Along the California border, 35 million vehicles, 70 million passengers and 2 million trucks cross annually. For nearly a decade, traffic congestion has clogged things up to the point where businesses are pulling away from the border en masse. A 2006 San Diego As-

sociation of Governments study found that border delays lead to \$6 billion in lost revenue each year, along with 50,000 jobs.

The volume of flows, expected to double by 2030, simply cannot be handled by existing ports of entry, roads, highways and rail circuits. California border infrastructure was, in the words of the SANDAG study, "sized for a much smaller and radically less security-conscious economy."

Our binational region needs a revised homeland security approach that embraces the border as a thriving community space. We need structural engineers, transport planners, contractors, architects, urban designers, trade analysts and economic development experts, rather than militias, the CIA or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. We need to balance spending on concrete bollards, electronic screens and high-tech radar, and hard wiring our cross-border region for the new age of global trade.

According to the most comprehensive study of border facilities — the U.S. Department of Transportation's "Border Infrastructure Needs Study" — along the California border alone, more than 100 new highway projects, a half-dozen

brand new and remodeled ports and rail improvements are desperately needed, at a cost of tens of billions of dollars. At last count, the state and the feds have identified only about 20 percent of the funds to build these vital facilities.

Meanwhile, the 2010 federal budget allocates \$45 billion for the Department of Homeland Security. In the last administration, billions were aimed at building barriers along the boundary, such as the 12- to 18-foot-high fences across some 300 miles of Arizona's border with Mexico.

Heightened vigilance at the border has often compromised the very quality of life it proposes to protect. For example, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Homeland Security announced the closing of the bicycle lane at the San Ysidro crossing, the one truly healthy community response to the daily post-Sept. 11 logjam of vehicles and pedestrians at the port of entry. The existing walkways at the San Ysidro gate force pedestrians through alienating and sometimes dangerously dark, tunnel-like corridors.

The future of our border economy will, in the end, not be defined by guns, drugs or walls, which are really 19th-century artifacts. Our border needs a 21st-century solution.