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MANAGING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER PROBLEM

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Managing the U.S.-Mexico Border Problem

Although legislation for migration reform and an international guest worker program has been effectively tabled for the remainder of the Bush administration, work continues on projects to more effectively monitor the U.S.-Mexico border. A key federal program in this effort is the Department of Homeland Security's adoption of military surveillance methods employing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and other advanced surveillance technologies to police the shared boundary. We share this border not with a potential aggressor, but rather with a key political and commercial partner. This program sends a clear and confrontational message to Mexico. Further militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border will continue to sour the bilateral relationship while doing little to stem the flow of job seekers from Mexico and Latin America.

One UAV, Predator, is a star performer in U.S. military operations waged against the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other Islamic militant groups. Previously a reconnaissance system, satellite-linked to a ground-based operator, hundreds or even thousands of miles distant, it evolved from an unarmed reconnaissance platform extensively used in NATO's policing of the Balkans to a missile launching combat aircraft, credited with killing several alleged members of Al Qaeda, including the *USS Cole* bombing plotters. In addition to its surveillance and strike duties for the U.S. Air Force and CIA in the Middle East, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is deploying unarmed Predators in Arizona to keep a watchful eye on the U.S. southern border.

Predator's adoption by DHS is part of an enormous project designed to close the U.S.- Mexico border to illegal immigration. A key issue for Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, DHS has begun stitching together sensors, communication technologies and computing resources under the Secure Border Initiative (SBI) program. First among SBI's core objectives is to gain effective control of the borders, with emphasis on Mexico, and using information technology (IT), the Secure Border Initiative Network (SBINet), has become one of government's most ambitious technology projects. According to a DHS briefing document, the American taxpayer can expect to see that, "[SBINet] provides DHS and CBP with the optimum mix of personnel, technology, infrastructure, and response platforms to detect, identify, classify, and respond to

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illegal breaches of the international borders ... and thereby bring the situations to the appropriate law enforcement resolution.”

With SBINet, DHS is arguing that IT will allow it to have a God’s eye view of the Mexican border, detecting any individual attempting to enter the United States without submitting for immigration inspection. “We’re going to have a virtual fence. ... It’s going to be a smart fence, not a stupid fence — a 21st century fence, not a 19th century fence,” Secretary Chertoff said. IT is being sold as the “silver bullet” that will fix the border problems of illegal migration, narcotics trafficking, and international terrorism. In a first step toward implementation, aircraft manufacturer Boeing was named the lead contractor for SBINet in December 2006 and received an initial \$2.6 billion to fund the installation of 1,800 new camera towers.

Unfortunately, IT is not a panacea for the border issue. G. Dan Tyler, an electrical and computer engineer and head of the National Security Technology Department at Johns Hopkins University, offers strong argument to the contrary. “Technical solutions may burden human resources by affecting operations negatively and by requiring human interaction in controlling, operating, maintaining, and repairing technology and analyzing and communicating its products.” As the DHS’s own Inspector General’s Office reported, sensors are easily spoofed, often cannot differentiate between legal or illegal actions, and may be triggered by animals or even seismic activity.

DHS is saddled with the problem of keeping out people literally dying by the hundreds in the Sonoran Desert and elsewhere for the opportunity to increase their income by a factor of 10 by crossing a boundary that separates the developing world from a post-industrial superpower. President Bush was entirely in the right to pursue immigration reform and a managed guest worker program, but with their political defeat on the Hill, the surviving legacy will be the deployment of a hugely expensive and dysfunctional surveillance system unlikely to stop illegal immigration. Of greater value in managing this risk is not a system of fences, real and virtual, but rather strengthened partnership with Mexico City.