The conventional wisdom among those who study the border is that following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States unilaterally imposed significant additional security requirements on the management of the U.S.-Mexico border, and that the measures taken to meet these requirements have made the border more difficult to cross for not only illicit but also licit traffic, including the trade and travel that is the lifeblood of cross-border communities. There is much truth in this interpretation, but it largely portrays Mexico as a passive receptor of U.S. policy, which could not be further from reality.

Rather, the increasing relevance of transnational non-state actors—terrorist groups, organized crime networks—posing border and national security threats in the region have demanded increased international cooperation to monitor and mitigate the risks. At the same time, the U.S. and Mexican economies have become ever more deeply integrated, causing significant growth in cross-border traffic and placing the efficient management of the U.S.-Mexico border as a first-order national interest for both countries.

The post-2001 border management framework has pushed away from the traditional understanding of the border as a line in the sand and moved toward an approach that seeks to secure and (in the case of licit travel and commerce) facilitate flows. This focus on transnational flows has expanded the geographic scope of what were traditionally border operations and thus required an internationalization of border management, the development of partnerships and cooperative methods of border administration.

Mexico historically took a largely hands-off approach to its northern border, with virtually no entry processing required for the majority of travelers and a limited law enforcement focus on the border itself. After September, 2001, the U.S. sought cooperation from its allies in protecting the homeland, which in the case of Mexico predominately focused on the border. Mexico responded by offering support for U.S. security objectives, but also pressured for the creation of mechanisms to limit the economic and quality of life costs of increased security. More recently, Mexico has reciprocated by pushing for increased U.S. action to stop the southbound flows of weapons trafficking and illicit bulk cash.

At the U.S.-Mexico border, these changes meant that Mexico necessarily and for the first time fully got a seat at the table in discussions of border management. It took several years for the development to be fully institutionalized, but it was achieved through the formal creation of the Executive Steering Committee (with leadership in the White House and Los Pinos) and related binational committees for various aspects of border management in 2010 as part of the 21st Century Border initiative. Similarly, through the Merida Initiative, Mexico and the United States have jointly sought to strengthen public security in the border region, and through the High Level Economic Dialogue aimed to cooperatively strengthen the competitiveness of the regional economy.
Over the past decade and a half, the United States and Mexico have transitioned from largely independent and unconnected approaches to managing the border to the development and implementation of a cooperative framework. With contributions from government officials and other top experts in the field, this collection of essays explores the development of cooperative approaches to the management of the U.S.-Mexico border. The essays will be released individually throughout the fall of 2015 and published as a volume in early 2016.

The Mexico Institute would like to thank each of the contributors for sharing their expertise and experience. They include Assistant Secretary Alan D. Bersin and Michael D. Huston of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security; Sergio M. Alcocer from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; Managing Director Gerónimo Gutiérrez of the North American Development Bank, David A. Shirk from the University of San Diego (and a Wilson Center Global Fellow); Carlos Heredia of El Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas; and Carlos de la Parra of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.