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Carlos Navarro

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More than Half of Border Governors Skip Annual Conference

by Carlos Navarro

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This year's edition of the Border Governors Conference was notable mostly for the absence of more than half the chief executives. Only three of the six Mexican governors and one of the four US chief executives made an appearance at the annual gathering in Ensenada, Baja California state, this year. The lack of attendance, particularly of US governors, raised questions on whether the annual gathering was still relevant. One governor who did not attend, Rick Perry of Texas, created his own headlines the day after the conference closed. Perry, who is seeking the Republican presidential nomination, grabbed headlines in the US and Mexico when he suggested during a campaign stop in New Hampshire that, if elected, he would be open to sending US troops to Mexico to help battle drug cartels.

The poor attendance was a strong contrast to the gathering in Hollywood, California, in 2008, when all 10 chief executives attended the event hosted by then California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger ([SourceMex, Aug. 27, 2008](#)).

Three of the four governors who attended this year's conference--Guillermo Padrés Elías of Sonora, César Duarte of Chihuahua, and Susana Martínez of New Mexico—are fairly new to their jobs. The other chief executive at the meeting in Ensenada was host Gov. José Guadalupe Osuna Millán of Baja California.

For Duarte and Martínez, this was the first border governors conference, although the Chihuahua chief executive attended the annual gathering in September 2010 as a guest of then Gov. José Reyes Baeza Terrazas. That conference was originally scheduled for Phoenix but was hastily reconvened in Santa Fe, New Mexico, after Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer canceled the original gathering ([SourceMex, Sept. 22, 2010](#)). The governor justified her decision by citing a boycott by the six Mexican governors, who were protesting Arizona's immigration policies, especially SB1070, which she signed into law in April 2010. The measure, which was partially struck down by a federal judge, would have allowed law-enforcement officials to detain anyone suspected of being an undocumented immigrant ([SourceMex, April 28, 2010](#) and [July 21, 2010](#)).

Brewer had originally planned to attend this year's gathering in Ensenada but backed out at the last minute, citing the need to tend to pressing issues in Phoenix upon her return from a 10-day trip to China. A spokesperson said the decision not to attend had nothing to do with the Mexican government's vocal opposition to SB1070.

Has annual gathering become irrelevant?

Gov. Jerry Brown of California also backed out after originally committing to attend the gathering. A spokesperson said Brown also had to attend to important matters in Sacramento. Both Brown and Brewer sent representatives to the gathering in Ensenada, and California and Arizona signed on to the final document that came from the conference. In contrast, Perry did not attend nor did he send a representative to sign the final declaration.

Govs. Jorge Torres López of Coahuila, Egidio Torre Cantú of Tamaulipas, and Rodrigo Medina de la Cruz of Nuevo León had also initially committed to attend the gathering but instead sent representatives. There was no word on why the Mexican governors backed out.

The scarce attendance left some to wonder if the annual gathering has lost its value as a forum for conversation and consultation among the governors of the 10 states. "The meetings have been forums for a host of shared opportunities and challenges from trade and cross-border violence to water rights and infrastructure needs since 1980, when the governors met in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico," said the Associated Press. "Up to 1,200 people came in the early 1990s, leading to limits on attendance aimed at making the gatherings more intimate."

Similar concerns were raised in Mexico. In a piece published in the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada*, columnist Enrique Galván Ochoa criticized the three US governors who missed the gathering, although there was no mention of the chief executives from Coahuila, Tamaulipas and Nuevo León, who sent representatives instead of attending the conference.

"In other times these gatherings presented a great opportunity to discuss common problems, and at times important agreements were reached," said Galván Ochoa. "But the event that took place in Ensenada...was pathetic. The biggest snubs came from California Gov. Jerry Brown, who is the immediate neighbor of host José Guadalupe Osuna Millán, and from presidential candidate Rick Perry, who made his presence known from a distance with the not-so-friendly message that if elected president he would send troops to Mexico to help the government bring peace to the country.

Even with the absence of more than half the region's chief executives, Osuna Millán and Duarte said they were pleased with the outcome. They said the states represented at the gathering by either their governors or their representatives were able to reach agreements dealing with agriculture, water, science and technology, education, economic development, civil protection, tourism, and public safety.

"These were not minor agreements," said Osuna Millán, who noted that the agreements would provide benefits to both sides of the border

Discussions focus on security, weapons, immigration

As has been the case since the border governors conference was launched in 1980, US immigration policies were a prominent part of both the formal and informal discussions. But any conversation on immigration took place in the context of discussions on border security, crime, and drug-related violence. Security concerns came to the forefront in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington in 2001 ([SourceMex, Sept. 26, 2001](#)) and have now taken on a greater urgency with the increased drug-related violence in the Mexican border states.

This focus on security was reflected in some of the top agreements that came from the gathering. The final declaration even suggested that addressing crime and security concerns was a priority for states on both sides of the border.

As a result of their consultations, the governors or their representatives agreed to create a database so that law-enforcement officials on both sides of the border could share DNA results, arrests and arrest warrants, and other relevant information. "We are looking for a way to develop information

on people deported from the US who have criminal records," said Baja California public safety secretary Daniel De La Rosa Anaya. "We are looking for a way to develop information on people deported from the US who have criminal records," said Baja California public safety secretary Daniel De La Rosa Anaya.

The governors said an improved exchange of information would also help their efforts to reduce the illegal flow of weapons to Mexico and the movement of drugs to the US. "The trafficking of arms and drugs has put us in a difficult position, but with defined strategies, along with other actions—such as generating jobs and promoting education—we can combat these problems," said Duarte.

Martínez drew a connection between concerns about crime and immigration, explaining her decision to push for the repeal of a state law that grants driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. "People from all over the world come to the US and enter illegally through New Mexico," said the New Mexico governor. "There are people who have come from South America, for example, and have committed crimes in the US. Those are the people who I'm targeting, and they are the ones who are causing harm to New Mexico."

But observers said the border governors can only do so much. "Part of the governors' challenge is that many decisions are made by federal governments, a dilemma also facing border city mayors who meet periodically to discuss issues like immigration and congested border crossings," said the AP.

There were some representatives of the federal governments of the two countries, including Mexico's Interior Secretary Fernando Blake Mora and Earl Anthony Wayne, US ambassador to Mexico City. Wayne focused his comments on the drug cartels, which he called a common enemy for the US and Mexico. He suggested that the two countries work closer together to develop a joint strategy to fight organized crime. "We must speak a common language," he said.

Blake Mora addressed the illegal flow of weapons into Mexico, which he said would continue to define the relationship between his country and the US. He said the control of arms is a "fundamental factor" in the binational effort to reduce crime.

Mexico rebukes Perry's controversial comments

Perry's absence from the gathering represents a strong contrast to the governor's stance just six years ago, when he hosted the conference in the state capital of Austin. At that gathering, Perry joined with other US governors to send a letter to US congressional leaders urging them to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

But even though Perry was not physically present in Ensenada, it did not take long for the Texas governor to make headlines in Mexico. At a campaign stop in New Hampshire on Sept. 30, Perry suggested that it might take US military action to stop the powerful Mexican drug cartels. "It may require our military in Mexico working in concert with them to kill these drug cartels and keep them off of our borders," he said.

A spokesperson for Perry's campaign was forced to put out the fire by clarifying that the candidate is open to all options to cooperate with Mexico. But the clarification did not mollify Mexican officials.

Arturo Sarukhán, Mexico's ambassador to Washington, immediately issued a statement denying that such a plan had been discussed by anyone. "The issue of having US troops present on Mexican soil is not on the table," the ambassador said in a press conference.

The reaction in the Mexican Senate was more blunt, including a statement from Sen. Francisco Labastida, who described any US military intervention as "an undeniable act of interventionism." Labastida is a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Sen. José González Morfín, a member of the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and president of the Senate, suggested that candidates, instead of talking about intervention, should discuss arms control. "[The US] should invest money on measures that would stop the flow of weapons to our country," said González Morfín.

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