



Toward a New Trilateral Strategic Security Relationship: United States, Canada, and Mexico

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Toward a New Trilateral Strategic Security Relationship: United States, Canada, and Mexico

Author Biography

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Abstract

The term "perimeter defense" has come back into vogue recently, with regard to security strategies for North America. The United States' concern primarily with the terrorist threat to its homeland subsequent to September 11, 2001 (9/11) is generating this discussion with its immediate neighbors of Mexico and Canada (and to some extent some Caribbean nations—the "third border"). The concept is simply that by pushing defenses out to the "perimeter" nations, then security will be enhanced, since the United States visions itself as more vulnerable to international terrorism than its neighbors. However, Canada and Mexico have not been very happy about the perimeter defined by Washington since 9/11. These nations have sought to define the trilateral relationship beyond just discussions of terrorism to include natural disasters and international organized crime as a component of a broader trilateral agenda. Eight years later these three nations continue to look for some convergence of security interests, although

there remains a degree of tension and hesitancy towards achieving a "common security agenda" in the Western Hemisphere. This article examines the concept of "perimeter defense" within the context of the new security challenges that the United States, Mexico, and Canada face today. Questions to be addressed in the article include: Do all these nations share the same "threat" perception? Where exactly is the "perimeter?" What security arrangements have been tried in the past? What are the prospects for the future for increased security cooperation? The main focus of this article is at the sub-regional level in North America and whether a new "trilateral" strategic security relationship between the United States, Canada, and Mexico can emerge in North America.

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**By Richard J. Kilroy, Jr., Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano, and
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Introduction

The term "perimeter defense" has come back into vogue recently, with regard to security strategies for North America. The United States' concern primarily with the terrorist threat to its homeland subsequent to September 11, 2001 (9/11) is generating this discussion with its immediate neighbors of Mexico and Canada (and to some extent some Caribbean nations—the "third border"). The concept is simply that by pushing defenses out to the "perimeter" nations, then security will be enhanced, since the United States visions itself as more vulnerable to international terrorism than its neighbors. However, Canada and Mexico have not been very happy about the perimeter defined by Washington since 9/11. These nations have sought to define the trilateral relationship beyond just discussions of terrorism to include natural disasters and international organized crime as a component of a broader trilateral agenda. Eight years later these three nations continue to look for some convergence of security interests, although there remains a degree of tension and hesitancy towards achieving a "common security agenda" in the Western Hemisphere.

This article examines the concept of "perimeter defense" within the context of the new security challenges that the United States, Mexico, and Canada face today. Questions to be addressed in the article include: Do all these nations share the same "threat" perception? Where exactly is the "perimeter?" What security arrangements have been tried in the past? What are the prospects for the future for increased security cooperation? The main focus of this article is at the sub-regional level in North America and whether a new "trilateral" strategic security relationship between the United States, Canada, and Mexico can emerge in North America.

The Post 9-11 Security Environment

Since 9/11, the United States has reshaped its security strategy and institutional structures in order to respond to the new threat of international terrorism, specifically targeted against U.S. interests at home and abroad. This fundamental shift in U.S. policy directly impacted its security relations with nations around the globe. While many nations echoed support for U.S. and coalition forces' action in Afghanistan, specifically targeted against the Taliban regime and known terrorist bases in that country, they did not weigh-in with U.S. efforts against Saddam Hussein and military action in Iraq. In fact, two nations in Latin America, Mexico and Chile—both United Nations Security Council members at that time—formed a strategic coalition against U.S.-sponsored action in the United Nations and sought an international sanction for military action, because in the view of the Mexican Ambassador to the UN Security Council at that time, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, "there was at stake our relations with the Arab world and the integrity of the international right at the United Nations."¹ Even Canada, a staunch Cold War ally, refused to support U.S. military action in Iraq, instead limiting its military support to the Global War on Terrorism to coalition actions in Afghanistan.

While the Canadian and Mexican Governments took public stands against the United States on Iraq, behind the scenes both countries were moving toward accommodating the United States' view of the threat of terrorism in the Northern Hemisphere (an example being the signing of the Smart Borders initiative with both countries in 2001–2002). On the military side, both Canada and Mexico began to take on new security relationships with their U.S. counterparts, even challenging some old taboos. For example, after 9/11, the United States military stood up a new command to specifically support the Homeland Defense role of the military in support of Homeland Security.² U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) was carved out of the existing U.S. Space Command structure, located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which also housed the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Canada continued to provide personnel to NORAD even as the United States stood up the new NORTHCOM structure. Defense planners in the Pentagon were also considering overtures to Mexico, based on the new Unified Command Plan architecture that "placed" both Mexico and Canada under the operational area of responsibility (AOR) overview of the NORTHCOM Commander.³

On the political side, there were also changes in Mexico with regard to their view toward security relations with the United States. Prior to 9/11, Mexico appeared to be moving in the direction of recommending that the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty of 1947) and

the Inter-American Defense Board be revoked in their entirety since these structures lacked validity due to the fundamental change in the security relationships between nations in the hemisphere.⁴ However, after 9/11, then Mexican President Vicente Fox took the complete opposite position, citing the need for a second Chapultepec Conference in Mexico City in 2003, to discuss hemispheric security issues. Although he was careful not to allude to the formation of any new formal military alliances and insisted that the real "threat" to the hemisphere was still poverty, for practical purposes, Fox was clearly falling more in line with U.S. interests and desires to expand the security relationship in the Northern Hemisphere. Yet Fox, and his Minister of Foreign Relations, Luis Ernesto Derbez, sought a much broader multidimensional approach on security delineating a sharp distinction with American military emphasis. This became more evident after the departure from the Fox administration of the Mexican Ambassador to the United Nations Security Council, Aguilar Zinser, in November 2003, and the approval of a new law on national security in Mexico in January 2005. This new law reflected Mexico's focus on the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking, which was also addressed with the signing of the Security and Prosperity Partnership between the United States, Canada, and Mexico in Waco, Texas in March 2005.⁵

NORAD

After 9/11, Canada and the United States continued to make significant progress in the realignment of their bilateral security relationships. In December 2002, the Bi-national Planning Group (BPG) was established, after exchanging formal diplomatic notes and terms of reference through diplomatic (Secretary of State and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) channels. The BPG sought to expand the current NORAD agreement to include maritime and land-based approaches to the Northern Hemisphere. Other topics addressed include enhanced intelligence and information sharing, inter-agency cooperation, better situational awareness, and border security. The BPG completed their preliminary recommendations in 2005, and a renewed NORAD agreement, to include a maritime component, was signed in August 2006.⁶

For U.S. Northern Command and NORAD officials seeking to accomplish their assigned mission of providing for the Homeland Defense of the Continental United States and Canada, the prospect of expanding the "perimeter" of defense out beyond the borders of these two nations, to include Mexico, continues to be problematic. Overtures continue to be made to Mexican defense officials through low-level contacts, or through established working relationships, such as the Fifth U.S. Army-sponsored Bor-

der Commanders Conferences. The Mexican Navy has also placed a liaison officer at NORTHCOM Headquarters in Colorado Springs;⁷ however, the prospects of an expanded security relationship that would bring Mexico into either the current NORAD structure or the proposed expanded NORAD agreements is not likely to occur any time soon.⁸

NORTHCOM

On the U.S.- Mexico side of bilateral security cooperation, progress has been much slower. After Mexico's initial show of support for U.S. security concerns after 9/11, political reality set in, with a retrenchment of Mexican nationalism and public concern over Mexico's involvement in any new formal military alliances. The Mexican press ran a number of articles condemning the formation of NORTHCOM in 2002 and the "assigning" of Mexico to its area of responsibility (AOR), arguing that Mexico would soon be "occupied" by the U.S. military on its side of the border.⁹ Pentagon planners exacerbated Mexican sensibilities and history after delivering a presentation of the new NORTHCOM emblem showing Mexico within its AOR; this emblem continues to pose an obstacle to deepening security collaboration with Mexico.

Mexico's Secretary of Defense at the time, General Clemente Vega Garcia, initially indicated a willingness to open channels of communication to this new command and not be constrained by past relationships in military-to-military cooperation with the United States.¹⁰ However, in Mexico, he was reluctant to publicly accept any such collaboration. For example, in October 2004, in his testimony before the Mexican Congress, General Vega argued that Mexico "will never be subordinated to the Northern Command even in its dreams."¹¹ He was adamant that he would not work through a U.S. regional combatant commander, insisting that his relationship with the U.S. military would still be directly with the Secretary of Defense (considered his equivalent cabinet-level officer) or the Chief of Staff of the Army.¹²

The strategic shift from ambivalence to cooperation on defense issues between the U.S. and Mexico has occurred as a result of the October 2007 Merida Initiative, an agreement between the U.S. and Mexico which pledged \$1.4 billion in U.S. aid to help Mexico and Central American nations in their fight against drug trafficking. In March 2009, NORTHCOM Commander, General Gene Renuart, pointed out to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee the historic transformation between the NORTHCOM and the Mexican Armed Forces, "Over the past year, we have advanced our relationship from one of introductions and orientation

visits to one of open, frequent and frank discussions on how we can improve our collective security from common threats...We are now finalizing the requirements for delivery of transport helicopters and maritime surveillance aircraft to the Mexican military under the Merida Initiative."¹³ However, this "clarity" in mission toward the relationship with Mexico from the Northern Command perspective has not been resolved by the Mexican Government.

There were also additional political obstacles in furthering U.S.- Mexican strategic security cooperation. The State Department (still reeling over Mexico's failure to back the United States in the 2003 UN Security Council to authorize force in Iraq) continued to play hardball with the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The State Department also blocked the Department of Defense's desire to increase its Foreign Military Financing Program (FMFP) budget for Mexico to \$57 million in FY05, reducing it to a meager \$2.4 million. Mexico did receive \$11 million in FMFP funds in FY06.¹⁴ Funding for FMFP dropped in FY07 and FY08, but picked up again in FY09 with a request for \$2 million. The reason for this major shift in U.S. funding for Mexico occurred in FY08 with the Merida Initiative¹⁵ and \$500 million now designated for counter-drug efforts, funded through the State Department, International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL).¹⁶

Defining the Threat and the Perimeter

The most successful security agreements have been those shaped by shared threat perceptions and the imminence of attack. The more distant the adversary, the less likely the "home team" is willing to play. Perimeter defense implies that the threat remains "out there" and there is a need to keep it from coming "in here." Clearly, the focus on homeland security and homeland defense in the War on Terrorism conveys this point of view. However, by taking an "all-hazards" approach to homeland security and including the threats from both man-made and natural disasters into the equation, the concept of perimeter defense takes on an internal dimension in addition to the traditional external focus. In other words, the threats that Canada, Mexico, and the United States collectively face, now and in the future, are of such significance to economic security and domestic policy considerations that the response to disasters (whether man-made or not) and other security threats (such as drug trafficking and transnational crime) must also serve to "contain" the damage and prevent the spillover effect beyond the "perimeter" of each country into that of their neighbors.

If the United States, Canada, and Mexico are to form a new trilateral strategic security relationship in the North American Hemisphere, given the large number of impediments previously discussed, another approach may be necessary. It is worthwhile to re-address the security concerns of each nation, in the post September 11 world by re-examining the nature of the threat that each nation perceives and the context of "perimeter" with regard to the security concerns of each.

U.S. Threat Perception

For the United States, the threat of global terrorism, primarily from fundamentalist Islamic groups, is very high. The U.S. State Department currently lists 45 Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), of which 29 are Islamic groups.¹⁷ Some of these groups (Hizbollah, Hamas, etc.) are known to operate in Latin America, but other than Hizbollah's implication in an attack on the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992, they have not actively targeted Latin American or U.S. interests in the region, to include Canada.¹⁸ Some terrorist groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), have been identified as operating in Colombia with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), possibly providing demolitions training, but again, there is no evidence of any of these identified FTOs specifically targeting U.S. interests in the region.

Since the inauguration of President Barack Obama, the United States has focused less on the terrorist threat which could come through either Mexico or Canada, and more on the threat of Mexico's war on its drug cartels which spilled over the border into the southwestern United States. In light of the emergency situation, the United States has refocused its efforts on countering the threat of drugs and related criminal violence. To their credit, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama both acknowledged that Mexico's internal security problems due to drug violence were fueled by arms trafficking coming from the United States and that the U.S. shared in the responsibility to help stem the violence.¹⁹

Mexico Threat Perception

Certainly, for Mexico, the threat is not so much terrorism, but rather Mexico's drug cartels, the nature of transnational organized crime, and the economic crisis. Mexican President Felipe Calderón realizes that Mexico faces increased instability due to the growing power of drug cartels and political violence if economic hardship were to escalate, and the "pressure value" of the U.S. border were to be closed off over U.S. fears of undocumented immigrants and terrorists crossing the border. If the United States were to attempt to close the border, the impact on both nations'

economies would be enormous, primarily on Mexico, which has seen its trade with the United States grow exponentially in the last 14 years of NAFTA (\$234 billion in exports in 2008).²⁰ The economic impact on Mexico would also be staggering should the United States attempt to limit the amount of foreign remittances from illegal Mexicans working in the United States being sent back to Mexico (estimates of \$25 billion annually, second only to oil, as Mexico's major export earning commodity).²¹

Viewed in this light, Mexico can't afford for there to be another terrorist attack on the United States, particularly if it appears that the terrorists used Mexico as the infiltration route. Thus, the drug trafficking issue, due to its transnational nature, is a shared concern which compromises the security of both the United States and Mexico. For Mexico, the United States needs to address domestic consumption and illicit gun sales. For the United States, Mexico needs to reform the judicial system, public security and the entire intelligence, defense, and national security structure. Blocking impunity and corruption is also valid concern for the United States. In the end, there is at least a consensus among the three countries on the transnational nature of organized crime and the negative impact for North America. Terrorism is not an equally-shared threat in the region; however, drug trafficking and the growing power and influence of complex transnational criminal organizations is a shared concern.

Canada Threat Perception

For Canada, the threat of a loss of sovereignty to the United States appears to be the greatest stumbling block to increased security cooperation. Under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Canada refused to support the United States and the war in Iraq. Under Prime Minister Paul Martin, Canada further refused to support the American National Missile Defense plan. Conservative Party Prime Minister Stephen Harper (elected in 2006) has attempted to draw Canada closer to the United States on security cooperation and undo some of the hostility encountered during the previous administrations, such as supporting Canada's involvement in the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP). The SPP, signed in Waco, Texas, in 2005, is viewed skeptically by Canadians and Americans both, who believe it is a cover for ushering in a North American Union (NAU) under a shroud of secrecy.²² Ironically, Canadians view it as a loss of sovereignty to the United States, while American citizens view it as a loss of sovereignty to Mexico.²³

Framework for Cooperation: Common Threats

Three areas that have witnessed an increase in security cooperation among the three countries involve natural disasters, pandemic influenza, and drug trafficking. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in September 2005, both the Canadian and Mexican militaries sent uniformed personnel to the United States to aid in disaster relief. For Mexico, the sight of Army convoys, traveling north across the U.S.- Mexican border signaled a new era of security relations with the United States and a new role for the Mexican military, operating outside its borders.²⁴ For Canada, it was a routine deployment, providing humanitarian assistance, this time to its southern neighbor.²⁵

In May 2009, the H1N1 swine flu outbreak in Mexico threatened to become a pandemic, with cases spreading to the United States and around the world. Mexico moved quickly to control the disease by shutting down the country for up to three weeks, closing schools, restaurants and even suspending Cinco de Mayo celebration gatherings. Although some U.S. members of Congress called for a closing of the border, the Obama administration refrained from taking any extraordinary measures to halt travel or commerce between the countries. The sense of cooperation in the public health sector rapidly escalated as a priority for all three governments. In fact, they had already developed tri-national instruments to advance communication and the necessity of rapid coordination linked to the World Health Organization.²⁶ For the United States, this was done through the Department of Homeland Security; in Mexico, the Ministry of Public Health; and in Canada, the Public Safety Office. This demonstrated the ability of all three governments to reach a level of cooperation and convergence toward a common threat.

The recent spike in drug-related violence along the U.S.- Mexican border has caused serious concern for the United States and Canada. In March 2008, Mexico sent five thousand soldiers and federal judicial police to Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso, Texas, to help the beleaguered municipal police combat the drug cartels and stem the homicide rate. Despite their presence, homicides reached a record 1600 deaths in the city by December 2008.²⁷ Another five thousand troops were sent to Juárez in March 2009, taking control of the city and all law enforcement and government operations in the city. On May 14, 2009, President Calderón visited Juárez, meeting with military and state and local government officials. Calling it the "epicenter" of Mexico's war on drugs, President Calderón's decision to "militarize" the conflict in the state of Chihuahua has caused some Mexican Government officials to worry about the strategy, warning that if they do not succeed in controlling the violence in Juárez,

then other cities and states throughout the country will fail as well.²⁸ Canada has also experienced a spillover effect on its border with the United States when there has been increased attention placed on the U.S. southern border or Caribbean trafficking routes. It is extremely likely that Mexican drug trafficking organizations are expanding their operations in Canada today, where they see the U.S.- Canadian border as more porous and easier to penetrate.²⁹

The Road Ahead: August 2009 North American Leaders Summit

In August 2009, Guadalajara, Mexico, hosted a North American Leaders Summit attended by Barack Obama, Felipe Calderon, and Stephen Harper. The two-day event focused on the swine flu (H1N1 Virus) pandemic, economic and trade issues, transnational criminal activity, and global warming.³⁰ Although the leaders did not specifically address the need for a new strategic security relationship, perimeter defense and regional security cooperation will remain a key component of the trilateral relationship between Canada, Mexico, and the United States for many years to come. A catastrophic terrorist incident at the border, pandemic flu, the rise of powerful drug trafficking cartels, or even a major natural disaster are not isolated events which impact only one nation. They pose a series of challenges to the region as a whole and recognition that the growing interdependence, which is still primarily economic, has created a security dimension of its own, whereby a threat to any one of the three countries has to be considered a threat to all three. The challenge this new reality poses is key to developing a trilateral strategic security relationship, one that is yet cognizant of the relative power of each nation within the international system. The weight and dimension of each nation and their particular views on national security concerns are still very different, which makes security cooperation a complex task, although a much needed one for the future of North America.

About the Authors

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administered through the U.S. Southern Command, which had moved its headquarters from Panama to Miami commensurate with the handover of the Panama Canal in 1999. Canada, as part of NATO, was essentially part of U.S. European Command's "Area of Responsibility" for all intents and purposes, with the exception of Canada's involvement in NORAD, which came under SPACECOM, which was functional, rather than geographic Combatant Command.

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- 29 See Barnard R. Thompson, "The Worldwide Expansion of Violent Mexican Drug Cartels," *Mexidata.info*, April 13, 2009, available at: <http://mexidata.info/id2224.html>. See also: CTV News, "Gang violence in B.C. linked to Mexican drug wars," March 4, 2009, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/ydx45de> (www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20090304/bc_mexico_drugs_090304?s_name=&no_ads). See also: Eric Weiner, "Latin drug traffickers use Canada as new route," *New York Times*, December 26, 1989, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/yktzqka> (www.nytimes.com/1989/12/26/world/latin-drug-traffickers-use-canada-as-new-route.html).
- 30 "Joint Statement by North American Leaders," *The White House*, August 10, 2009, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/nfink7w> (www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-statement-by-North-American-leaders/).

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