

Working Draft - Please Do Not Quote

Mexico and North American Security

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Paper prepared for

**Robarts Centre Canada Mexico Seminar
Canada-Mexico Big Picture Realities: NAFTA Plus, Immigration, the Security-First
Border, The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy and The Global South
Panel 4**

Organized by

Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, York University

November 7 – 8, 2005

The profound changes Mexico has undergone over the last two decades (a significant, albeit protracted, move away from authoritarianism and into highly competitive electoral politics and the transformation of a fairly closed economy to one integrated with international markets) did not appear to have affected its foreign policy as it continued to maintain, right until the end of the last administration of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), a relatively isolationist position in international affairs.¹ This changed, however, with the arrival of Vicente Fox to the presidency in 2000 as he sought to veer Mexico into a more activist international role through a foreign policy hinged on two main tracks: a close political relation with its northern neighbours and active internationalism through a more prominent role within multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations. In regard to the former, Fox articulated his vision of a new North America early in his administration. At the Quebec City Summit of the Americas of April 2001, he declared his desire to move toward a “North American Union,” an arrangement similar to the European Union that would involve a common currency, a customs union, new political institutions, the harmonization of a wide range of policies, and the establishment of a North American Regional Development Bank. Although Fox’s proposals were received rather coolly by his northern counterparts at the time, the attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001 (9/11), sparked interest in strengthening cooperation among the three countries, especially on issues of security, border patrol and immigration. Soon after the attacks, Fox declared:

“... [w]e consider that the struggle against terrorism forms part of a commitment of Mexico to Canada and the United States, as a result of the need to construct the framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement within which we build a shared space for development, well-being and integral security ... at the hemispheric level, Mexico considers that the current struggle against terrorism is a basic component of our

¹ I say relative because despite the inward-oriented nature of Mexico’s defence and security policies, it did participate at times in foreign missions, such as during the Central American crises of the 1980s when Mexico was an active participant of the *Grupo Contadora*.

regional security that demands a redefinition of a doctrine of continental security and a redesign of the legal and diplomatic instruments for our legitimate defence.”²

The U.S. also expressed interest in further integration; Paul Celluci, then-Ambassador of the US to Canada, declared in October of 2001 the need to update border policies and the harmonization of immigration procedures. And Canada, under former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, called, in turn, for tougher screening measures at entry points so as to facilitate internal trade flows. This renewed interest in strengthening collaboration in North America has crystallized into the call for the establishment of a “North American Security Perimeter,” an arrangement whereby the three countries would cooperate in a variety of areas creating a common security area within which trade would be protected.

Several steps have been taken by the three countries to strengthen cooperation, but it appears that we are still far from the establishment of an international regime that would resemble anything close to a security perimeter. In this paper I attempt to answer the two main questions that I have been asked to address: How much has Mexico done in parallel to the U.S. and Canada in the construction of regional security arrangements; and what else needs to be done. In order to answer these two questions, it is important to look at the recent evolution of security coordination in the region. In the first section of this paper, I review thus very briefly the various steps that have been taken in the area of security cooperation since 2001 by looking closely at the Mexican case. In the second section of this short paper I look at possible future directions and argue for the need to pursue the institutionalization of security arrangements.

North American Security Co-operation

² Declaration made by President Fox at the “Meeting for the Evaluation of Co-ordinated Action for Border and National Security,” Tijuana, Mexico, October 3, 2001.

Increased North American cooperation after 9/11 has mostly evolved through bilateral agreements and initiatives given the nature of North American relations. Despite the coming into effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), North American relations have, for the most part, unfolded along its two traditional axes: the US-Canada relation and the US-Mexico relation. As a result, the US has, perhaps expectedly, signed several bilateral agreements with both of its neighbours. In the case of Canada and the US, cooperation, especially on areas of security and defence, has long existed (especially through NORAD), but it increased and has strengthened on a variety of other areas after September 11, 2001.³ Within weeks of the attacks, Canada established a Borders Task Force with the intention of developing a new strategy to manage the 49th parallel within the new security reality. This task force eventually led to the signing, on December 12, 2001, of the Smart Borders Agreement (SBA) between the two countries. The SBA, which institutes measures to facilitate the flow of goods between the two countries, set the stage for increased bilateral cooperation: Within the SBA, both countries created the Integrated Border Enforcement Teams (IBETs), which are multi-agency groups of law enforcement officials that share information and intelligence; on December 3, 2002, both countries signed the Joint Statement of Cooperation on Border Security and Regional Migration Issues, through which both countries agreed to include Canadian personnel in the US Anti-Terrorist Elite Group and allowed member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to have access to US intelligence; and on December 4, 2003, both countries signed the Free Trade

³ Cooperation between the two countries began almost immediately as Canada allowed the diversion of more than 220 commercial jetliners to its airports and placed its entry points in a state of emergency. Canada-US cooperation on border management predates the 9/11 attacks, however. In 1995 they signed the *Accord on our Shared Borders* agreement and in 1997 both countries' immigration departments (Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the US Immigration and Naturalization Services) began developing a regional approach to migration issues through the *Border Vision*, which eventually resulted in the launch of the Canada-U.S. Partnership Forum (Benítez and Rodríguez Ulloa 2006).

Secure Trade Programme (FAST), which consists of the registration of businesspeople that belong to the Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (C-TPAT).

Co-operation between the US and Mexico also increased after 9/11 and several agreements have been reached to coordinate efforts on several fronts. Soon after the attacks of 9/11, the Mexican government stepped up security efforts and assigned increased security and surveillance responsibilities to various ministries: The Ministry of Defence was tasked with airport security and special surveillance across the border; the Ministry of the Navy and the Attorney General's Office (PGR) was directed to facilitate collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA); the Ministry of Public Security (SSP) and National Institute for Migration (INM) were asked to redouble efforts of surveillance on borders and bus stations; and the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR) created the National Security Commission to guarantee the security of national and foreign tourists.

At the bilateral level, the SBA agreed upon by the US and Canada was replicated and signed by the US and Mexico on March 22, 2004. Both countries have also agreed to exchange more fluidly intelligence and security information and have advanced toward greater coordination on migration matters. On February 2004, the two countries signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" in which the US guaranteed that the repatriation of Mexican nationals would be done in a humane and secure manner. Later in the year they signed the Plan for Border Security, which agrees on measures to facilitate the exchange of information to fight the organized trafficking of people and the establishment of exchange programmes for the training of personnel in charge of carrying out the plan.

As Benítez and Rodríguez Ulloa show, however, relations between the two countries have gone beyond mere cooperation on these issues and have assumed a certain level of

institutionalization (2006). Mexico's intelligence institution, the Centre for Research on National Security (CISEN) and the US Information Analysis and Critical Infrastructure Protection Directorate (IAIP), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), have established six inter-ministerial working groups devoted to the protection of critical infrastructure along the US-Mexico border (Benítez and Rodríguez, 2006). These groups are presided by the 'bilateral steering committee' and are organized by sector: energy, health, agriculture, water, telecommunications and transportation. Local agencies in Mexico have also increased cooperation with US federal agencies, such as the FBI, and the DHS is currently elaborating the Operation Ice Storm, which is plan of action formulated to implement immigration and customs regulations in collaboration with Mexican authorities.

The North American Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP), negotiated among the leaders of the three countries at their high-level meeting of Waco, Texas, in March 2005, seemed to point to the progression toward the construction of a trilateral arrangement and the quite possibly the institutionalization of a North American security perimeter. The agreement calls for further cooperation on border controls, transportation and emergency planning procedures, however, and deals mostly with regulatory issues on migration and automobile integration. Although defence and security cooperation figure in this new partnership, it is limited to maritime and port surveillance, and, on the defence file, it is mostly a US-Canada affair.⁴

What we have witnessed, then, is a strengthening of cooperation among the three countries, which on certain areas has become institutionalized, rather than the emergence of an international security regime that involves the three North American countries. Despite calls for the establishment of a security perimeter, the three countries appear to continue to operate along the traditional axes, and there has been stronger cooperation between Canada and the US on the

⁴ The details of the initiative were released in June 2005 and can be found at <http://www.spp.gov>.

defence and security fronts. Several factors appear to explain the fact that Mexico has not sought the same level of cooperation with the US than Canada has, especially on the security file. First, among many in Mexico's political elite, the link between security and trade was not rapidly or easily recognized. Despite the fact that over 90% of Mexico's exports go to the US, Mexico was not quick to react to the new security reality to ensure that trade continued to flow undisrupted. Mexico did not act quickly to protect its trade with the US after 9/11 (Fox was not among the first heads of state to offer official condolences to the US and to offer assistance). This is in stark contrast with Canada's swift reaction as it proceeded almost immediately in establishing a task force to look into ways in which trade be protected within the post 9/11 reality. In Canada, the economic consequences from a disruption to trade with the US became all too obvious in the hours after 9/11 given how highly integrated the three economies have become.⁵ The Smart Border Agreement was in fact a Canadian initiative (Welsh 2004: 58-59).

Part of the reason why Mexico has dragged its feet on the security front is because Mexico has traditionally looked inward on matters of security as well as a different conception of security. Mexico's has traditionally held an inward-oriented view on security, and when it has included an international dimension, it has mostly been on intermestic issues such as drug trafficking. The Fox administration attempted to reframe the notion of national security; the National Development Plan of 2001-2006 states that the new government would adapt the country's national security to the "new times and the new phenomenon of vulnerability." (Mexico's withdrawal from the Rio Treaty was part of Fox's new approach on security issues.)

⁵ As Stephen Flynn reported, "within 36 hours of after September 11 attack, DaimlerChrysler announced that it would have to close one of its assembly plants because Canadian supplies were caught in an 18-hour traffic jam at the border. Ford announced that five of its plants would have to lie idle the following week. The cost of this loss in productivity?: each assembly plant produces on average \$1 million worth of cars per hour" (2001: 60). More trade occurs between the US and Canada at the Detroit-Windsor border than occurs between the US and the European Union (Grunwald 2002).

But the new approach to security still focused on national domestic issues, such as corruption, environmental degradation and organized crime. Moreover, issues of personal security in Mexico, an area of priority for the Fox administration given its deterioration over the last few years, have trumped issues of national security. There is also significant opposition in Mexican public opinion toward increased security co-operation with the US as it is looked upon as an infringement on the country's sovereignty. Political leaders in Mexico, regardless of the party, are constrained in their ability to engage overtly with the US on security and defence issues given nationalist sentiments harboured among a significant part of the population. Further, security is not an area of priority for Mexico in its relations with the US. Migration and economic development have been Mexico's priorities when dealing with the US, relegating security to a subsidiary position. Finally, in regard to defence, there is immense opposition with Mexico's army to increase collaboration with the US armed forces in any significant way. Although Mexico's navy appears to be prepared to do so, the top brass of Mexico's army have continually expressed their lack of interest in expanding defence collaboration with the US. They have reiterated that their priorities are domestic, such as natural disaster relief and combating drug trafficking, which have historically been their areas of operation (Díez and Nicholls 2005).

What are the prospects of the establishment of a trilateral security regime? It would appear that, at least discursively, the three countries are still interested in building on NAFTA and on furthering North American integration. This much was evident with SPP initiative, when the leaders declared their desire to "... develop new avenues of cooperation that will make our open societies safer and more secure, our businesses more competitive, and our economies more resilient." But it seems that Canada may be the only country truly interested in further integration. In the International Policy Statement revealed by Prime Minister Paul Martin in May

of 2005, the current administration reasserted its commitment to North American and emphasized aspects of cooperation. It also considers Mexico as a strategic partner. In the case of Mexico, however, any push for further integration has been hampered by Fox's inability to reach agreement with the Bush administration on immigration; a central policy objective of his foreign policy was the establishment of a temporary workers programme for Mexicans living in the US. Moreover, President Fox is by all accounts considered more than a 'lame duck,' but rather a 'dead duck' president given that he only has just over one year left in office and he is constitutionally barred from re-running. It is unlikely that new momentum will emanate from Mexico over the next year.

Furthermore, the enthusiasm with which Mexicans supported NAFTA when it was first adopted has subsided substantially for several reasons. The economic benefits that President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) promised with the advent of NAFTA have not materialized. Although Mexican exports to the US and Canada have indeed trebled since its coming into effect, poverty has not been reduced in any significant way and it appears that the wealth has failed to be distributed equitably. Income distribution has widened over the last decade and the country has started to experience a stark regional differentiation where its southern parts have failed to reap the benefits of free trade and have lagged behind (Middlebrook and Zepeda 2003). Moreover, in the same manner in which the US failure to abide by NAFTA rulings on lumber dispute is eroding the legitimacy of NAFTA before Canadian public opinion, several disagreements between Mexico and the US on some areas (i.e. the US refusal to allow Mexican transportation trucks to enter US soil) have had a similar effect in Mexico.

Further, the US decision to act outside multilateral institutions in the invasion of Iraq have fuelled the distrust of US intentions among a great number of Mexicans and augmented

anti-American sentiments, especially given the faith Mexico has historically placed on multilateralism. It appears that any attempt to further integration would first have to address these negative feelings in public opinion at some level.

More fundamentally, however, the main obstacle for further integration beyond areas of trade regulation and border management is the disparate national priorities of the three governments. For the US, the 'homeland security' has become the number one priority for the current administration and all other issues have been placed in the backburner. President Bush's refusal to reach an immigration agreement attests to this. For Canada and Mexico, trade with the US continues to be of utmost importance, but for Mexico issues of economic development, drug trafficking and personal security are atop its citizens' priorities and any attempt at further integration will not get far unless these issues are not formally addressed. And although some within Mexico's administration are said to be trying to resume talks for further integration given the recent improvement of relations between Mexico and the US (Wood 2006), the time left on Fox's administration is, as mentioned, limited.

It is also unclear whether a new administration in Mexico City would bring about a significant change in Mexico's position on North American security. Barring an eventuality, the next president of Mexico is widely expected to be the popular former mayor of Mexico City and leading candidate of the left-leaning Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), Manuel Andrés López Obrador. He has been leading the polls for over a year. However, his policy proposals on security, unveiled on October 2 of this year, deal mostly with personal security, corruption and organized crime (*El Universal*, October 2, 2005). There is no mention whatever on security collaboration with Mexico's northern neighbours. On the defence front, he has pledged to

expand the role of the armed forces, through a constitutional reform, to fight drug trafficking and there are no proposals either on defence cooperation with the US or Canada.

According to some theories of regime formation, the establishment of formal regimes is to a great extent determined by the convergence of the interests of stakeholders (Keohane, Robert 1983; Stein 1983 and Axelrod and Keohane 1986). Neo-liberal Institutionalists argue that formal regimes – which are based on collaboration as opposed to cooperation - are unlike to emerge when stakeholders maintain widely disparate goals as the decisions they make will produce sub-optimal results, given the differential in objectives (Stein 1983). If theories can be used to look into the future of a North America Security Perimeter, it appears that given that the three countries have varied objectives, the likelihood of the emergence of a formal security framework is rather small.

How much further should we go?

Taking advantage of the licence I have been given to write this paper to take a position on these issues, I would argue that it is in the interest of the three countries to continue to pursue cooperation on security and defence and to push for the formation of a formal regime. Despite the fact that security does not have the same level of priority for the three countries, steps should be taken to try to institutionalize security relations in North America and to create a formal security perimeter. I would argue that debate should not be on whether closer cooperation on security should take place but rather on how. At a very pragmatic level, the economies of Mexico and Canada are extremely dependent on the free and stable flow of goods across borders and any disruption to trade caused by a security threat, whether it be terrorist or otherwise, would have an enormous effect on the economies of the two countries. Should an attack on the US be carried

out by an individual that used either Canada or Mexico as an entry point, the consequences would be rather disastrous. A formal security arrangement would of course not provide any guarantee that this would be prevented, but it would at least share the responsibility more equally and diminish any attempt at closing down the borders. In the case of Mexico, which lacks the resources necessary to step up security in any significant way and which has other priorities, the establishment of a formal security regime would potentially result in the transfer of resources from its northern neighbours which will in turn allow it to strengthen some of its notoriously weak institutions.

There exists the view in Canada and Mexico among the political elites, observers, academic circles and significant sectors of society that any pursuit of further security integration would inevitably result in the loss of sovereignty and would represent the imposition of the priorities of the US. Peter Andreas captures that feeling exquisitely when he refers to the positions of Canada and Mexico within a post-9/11 world as one of “two scared mice next to a neurotic elephant” (2003:11). He argues that, given the structural imbalance and power asymmetries in North America, Washington “... has significant policy leverage over its immediate neighbours, leaving them with limited space to manoeuvre. Here the United States largely sets the policy agenda and narrows the room for autonomous policy choices” (2003:12). However, even if policy options have been reduced in a post 9/11 context given the new priorities of the US – Mexico’s inability to secure an agreement on immigration is a perfect example, this does not mean that the two countries will not be able to contribute to the institution of a new regime nor that they will be dictated to adopt certain policies. Indeed, as Jennifer Welsh shows, the proposal to establish the smart border agreements in the region were a Canadian initiative and a policy triumph for Canada (Welsh 2004: 58-60). She details how the US had no

clear vision of what the post-9/11 borders should look like and Canadian officials elaborated a plan that was eventually adopted by the US and replicated along the Mexico-US border. This was not an imposition of the US on Canada.

But more importantly, the establishment of formal institutions would make it easier to guarantee greater transparency and accountability in security cooperation. As mentioned before, security cooperation in North America has been strengthened on several areas. But there is some evidence that such cooperation has involved areas that are not known to the public, such as anti-terrorist training. In an interview with Loretta Bondi, a high-ranking US official stated that: “we do a lot of that [anti-terrorist training] because Mexicans badly need it. We try to keep quite since Mexicans are very sensitive to that” (2004: 86). The same official stated that his agency has been putting together a ‘counter-terrorism training package’ which includes basic investigation, interview and interrogation techniques, as well as crisis management and hostage negotiations, evidence gathering and surveillance (Bondi 2004: 86). The same appears to be occurring in other areas, such as defence cooperation; despite the Mexican army’s official position that they do not wish to strengthen cooperation with the US, a Mexican General declared that cooperation is taking place and will take place regardless of formal institutions.⁶

Admittedly, a complete openness of security relations would not be guaranteed through the establishment of formal institutions. Indeed, by definition, intelligence has to be secretive. But the institutionalization of cooperation that is already taking place on some areas irrespective of the establishment of formal institutions would make it easier to bring increased transparency. And although it is difficult to oversee security agencies and bring them into account, it is not impossible. For example, Canada’s National Security Strategy, unveiled in April 2004, allows

⁶ This refers to statements made by General Alvaro Vallarta Cecena in declarations made on April 17, 2002 (*Reforma*, April 18, 2002).

for the inclusion of civil-society groups in the formulation of national security policy and a mechanism of oversight, the Roundtable on Security, was established to oversee security institutions and ensure that they do not overstep their responsibilities.

Given the distrust for supranational institutions that has long existed in the US, the establishment of a supranational security institution is unlike to transpire. But institutionalization can nevertheless take place at a lower level. The establishment of institutionalized intra-ministerial cooperation is a feasible and viable option. The close relationship that was established between Mexico's Centre for Research on National Security and the US Information Analysis and Critical Infrastructure Protection Directorate, through the creation of working groups, is an obvious starting point and their expansion to a trilateral institutionalization could be pursued. I would argue that it is because it is in the interest of Canada and Mexico that borders remain open and security relations become more transparent and accountable in the region that both countries should pursue their institutionalization.

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