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**NORTHCOM REVISITED: Tri-national Prospects for Continental Security**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **NORTHCOM REVISITED: Tri-National Prospects for Continental Security**

The United States, Canada, and Mexico share significant concerns regarding hemispheric security. Historically, the United States and Canada have had a strong military relationship through NORAD. However, past U.S. intervention in Latin America has at times produced strained U.S.-Mexico relations. Despite past disagreements, all three countries have an interest in a multinational security organization. The U.S. Northern Command should be structured to lead both military and civilian agencies in the security realm. The command should be comprised of a multinational naval task force and a civilian border enforcement team. For legal and political reasons, leadership in the organization should have both civilian and military expertise. Specifically, the U.S. Coast Guard provides the right mix of expertise. Canadian and Mexican leaders must have leadership roles for the organization to be a true partnership, and information sharing between all countries will be necessary for the organization to be an effect defense against terrorist activities in North America.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the twenty eight months following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, a significant amount of academic and military thought has been put into the idea of hemispheric security. From the perspective of U.S. planners, the 5,525 mile U.S.-Canada border, the 1,989 mile U.S.-Mexico border, and the 95,000 miles of shoreline and navigable waterways necessitates a unique combination of security measures to keep U.S. citizens safe from another terror strike within the border of the United States. One goal of the Bush administration is to make the War on Terrorism an “away game”, but a significant effort in being put forth to ensure that America can defend its homecourt. One struggle that is being faced by U.S. policy-makers is how to establish partnerships with our hemispheric neighbors that increase homeland security while maintaining borders that enhance the free flow of goods and services in an ever increasing global economy.

Some of the significant changes implemented by the Bush administration have been the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM), and the implementation of “Smart-Border” initiatives that can provide governmental authorities with a better means of tracking goods and people in the border regions. Administration officials have pointed to these initiatives as significant steps in the process of protecting the American homeland. While significant progress has been made in some areas, one question that remains is how can organizations from the United States, Canada, and Mexico increase cooperation to enhance North American security. The U.S. Northern Command was stood up to safeguard the land, sea and air in North America. This task includes elements of defense and security that may require operations in our neighbor’s territory. This essay explores the history of cooperation and struggles that have been faced

by the United States and its neighbors. It will highlight areas in which each government can implement policies to build an effective tri-national security agency. The essay argues that to achieve continental security against terrorist organizations, the United States should structure NORTHCOM to facilitate the integration of Canadian and Mexican agencies into a single command structure.

## **HOMELAND DEFENSE AND HOMELAND SECURITY**

Many writers have used the terms security and defense interchangeably. However, as stated by Paul McHale before the House subcommittee on readiness, there is a distinction between the two terms. Homeland Security is a “national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States....Homeland Defense [is] the military protection of United States territory, domestic population, and critical defense infrastructure against external threats and aggression.”<sup>i</sup> The missions are complementary, but the policy of the United States is to utilize the Department of Defense as a lead agency only in “military” roles. NORTHCOM must be flexible enough to take the lead in the event of a military strike against the United States while at the same time is a supporting organization to the Department of Homeland Security in a “peace-time” environment. Using the past as a guide, NORTHCOM can be structured to support tri-national as well as inter-agency partnerships that will fulfill its dual role of defense and security.

## **DEFENSE AND THE NORAD MODEL**

A defensive pact between the United States and Canada has been in place prior to the outbreak of World War II. In 1938, President Roosevelt proclaimed that the United States would not stand idly by if Canadian soil was threatened. A few days later, the Canadian Prime Minister voiced Canada’s part in this agreement: “We too have our obligations as a

good friendly neighbor, and one of them is to see, at our own insistence, our country is made immune from attack or possible invasion as we can reasonably be expected to make it, and that should the occasion ever arise, enemy forces should not be able to pursue their way, either by land, sea, or air to the United States from the Canadian territory.”<sup>ii</sup> This thinking quickly evolved into the Permanent Joint Board on Defense (PJBD) which was created in 1940. The leaders of the two countries stated that the main focus of this board would be to consider the broad defense of the northern part of the Western Hemisphere. Following World War II the Military Cooperation Committee (MCC) was formed as a follow on to the Permanent Joint Defense Board. By 1958, the new threats from the Soviet Union required rapid air defense. The North American Air Defense Agreement (NORAD) was created in 1958 as a joint Canadian/U.S. military command that would focus on defending North America from Soviet bomber attacks. As air threats evolved into missile and space threats, NORAD became the warning mechanism that the national command authorities of both countries would rely on in the event of an attack.<sup>iii</sup>

The NORAD agreement between the United States and Canada was driven by America’s desire for security in an increasingly unsure world. The thought of Soviet attacks on the United States through Canadian territory necessitated that the United States explore options to deter potential aggressors. Like the NATO agreement of 1949, NORAD became a way for the western world’s hegemonic power to pool resources with other countries. From a U.S. realist point of view, the idea that Canada would desire to partner in the defensive pact seemed obvious. Canada would gain access to advanced technological military hardware in exchange for supplying advantageous strategic locations for the United States to place that hardware.

However, the simple realist perspective of increasing power in response to an outside threat was not the only issue. Although leaders from both the United States and Canada were fully committed to NORAD, as the threat of Inter-continental ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons increased, the United States sought to evolve NORAD into a nuclear missile defense system. This was an early sticking point for Canadian leaders. Politically, Canada desired to remain a non-nuclear power. The agreement also placed some Canadian forces under the operational control of U.S. military commanders. This sparked a series of debates in Canada. Canadian leaders did not want to be unduly influenced by their larger and stronger neighbor to the south. Additionally, there were questions regarding under what conditions Canada would be required to commit forces and what would be the “chain of command” for these forces in peace time and in war.<sup>iv</sup> However, despite early challenges, PJDB, MCC and NORAD developed into a defense agreement that has lasted over 60 years and is arguably the most effective bilateral defense agreement in the world.

From a Canadian perspective, NORAD created an excellent opportunity for a consolidated defense. However, the short comings of the agreement were difficult to accept. In one sense, Canadian officials ceded a portion of their sovereignty to the United States in the form of military decision making. The only question that Canada was really allowed to answer was would they participate in NORAD, not HOW would they participate. In extending this type of agreement to Mexico today, the United States must be aware of the potential for political backlash from a weaker country that may want to partner with the United States, but be wary of the way in which it will partner.



## **THE U.S.-MEXICO EXPERIENCE**

Unlike the military relationship between the United States and Canada, the United States' experience with Mexico (indeed, all of Latin America) has been tempered with periods of strained relations. There have been four distinct periods in the relationship between the United States and its Latin neighbors: the Imperial era, the Good Neighbor Policy, the Cold War, and the Post-Cold War. From the early days of America's independence, there was imperial era in which the United States struggled for hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine staked the United States' claim to the Western Hemisphere. Following the Louisiana Purchase and Mexico's independence from Spain, President Polk's annexing of Texas as a U.S. possession led to the severance of political ties between the United States and Mexico. The rift between the United States and Mexico was an indication of the "troubles" that would be a part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape in the Western Hemisphere. The Texas issue resulted in a military conflict in which the United States would defeat Mexico and use that international demonstration of power to gain hemispheric hegemony that extended into the Caribbean and Central America. The idea of Manifest Destiny would take hold in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and to many Latin Americans, the United States would become an imperialist power that could not be trusted as a neighbor.

Manifest Destiny would become the major stumbling block in future U.S.-Latin American relations. From the U.S. perspective it was more than a catch phrase. It would be the explanation and rationalization for territorial expansion. The fact that the United States would seize land was evidence of its destiny.<sup>v</sup> In the eyes of the United States, no further evidence of its destiny was required. The trend would continue until the United States had annexed not only Texas, but all of today's Southwestern United States. Events in the

Imperialist era such Pancho Villa being chased across Mexico by U.S. Marines set the tone of strained relations that would be very difficult to repair. U.S. interventions in places like Nicaragua, Cuba, and Panama sent the message that U.S. interests would be protected with military force.

Following the Imperialistic era, the United States attempted to implement the Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America. President Roosevelt sought to extend a series of economic and political carrots to Latin America in an attempt to repair the damages of past U.S. policies. The United States made trade agreements as well as creating organizations such as the Export-Import Bank to finance development projects. While relationships were improved during this period, a major effect was to create and isolate the Western Hemisphere. While the Good Neighbor Policy brought about little change with respect to the notion that the United States dominated the Western Hemisphere, significant economic improvements were made in Latin America.

During the Cold War, the United States experienced a period of West vs. the Rest with our southern neighbors. Preventing the spread of communism into the Western Hemisphere was the major focus of U.S. foreign policy. The United States struggled with the dilemma of supporting some authoritarian regimes or allowing communism to spread. The choice to defeat communism meant that there would be support for some leaders that had disturbing human rights records. The human rights issues would spill over to the Post-Cold War era, and the United States would be faced with seeking to repair damage in order to achieve hemispheric security.

The Post-Cold War era began on a positive note and the prospects for economic growth and democratic governance were promising. Specifically in Mexico, the election of

Vicente Fox gave hope that the long history of one party rule was over and that the military and police force agencies could begin a process of reform. The Mexican military and police forces have been haunted by human rights violations, and the prospects for partnerships to some may seem grim. However, one aspect of the Post Cold War era has been the implementation of Confidence and Security Building Measures within the Organization of American States. These measures are designed to foster “transparency, trust and stability.”<sup>vi</sup> The measures provide an opportunity for the United States to partner with its southern neighbors. Programs such as international training conducted by the FBI and the School of the Americas have provided an opportunity for Mexican military and police forces to become organizations that can legitimately partner in hemispheric security efforts.

#### **CURRENT HEMISPHERIC PARTNERSHIPS**

The successful history of NORAD makes it an organization that the United States appears to desire. Following the 9-11 terrorist attacks the United States implemented a new Unified Command Plan, which created NORTHCOM and designated that its commander will normally be tasked as CINCNORAD. When a Canadian is filling the role as CINC, the commander of NORTHCOM will be Deputy CINCNORAD. Unless a potential integration of Mexican or other military forces produces a successor, NORAD will most likely continue to be the primary agency for continental defense.

From a U.S. perspective, continental security rests within the realm of the Department of Homeland security. The department is evolving a number of legacy border and inspection agencies into a single executive department. Under the current structure, 180,000 people fall under the purview of the Secretary Tom Ridge. One advantage that the United States gains from this organization is that it provides a “single face” at the border.<sup>vii</sup> Additionally, the

Department of Homeland Security seeks to consolidate pertinent security information through the Terrorist Threat Integration Center (TTIC). This can provide all entities working homeland security with an integrated picture of potential threats.

While NORAD provides an excellent example of partnership, neither NORTHCOM nor the Department of Homeland Security appears to desire a Canadian or Mexican partnership. The problem for the United States is that border agencies must become an integral part of continental defense as well as security strategy.

### **PROSPECTS FOR MILITARY PARTNERSHIPS**

The NORAD agreement between the United States and Canada has set a foundation for future direct military partnerships. Technologically, Canada is able to procure systems that would be interoperable with U.S. capabilities. The only hindrance to future partnerships might be the will of Canadian policy-makers to partner with the United States in an area such as missile defense. Canada is in the process of reviewing their defense expenditures, but the trend has been downward. Over the last decade, Canadian defense expenditures have been cut by \$29 billion dollars and the number of troops has been cut in half.<sup>viii</sup> However, by making a commitment to a program such as missile defense, Canada would affirm their commitment to continental security. In addition to missile defense, a naval and air component of Canadian defense forces would make a significant resource impact for NORTHCOM. Canadian ships have deployed with U.S. carrier battle groups, but barring a significant increase in Canadian defense spending, future naval support for operations such as Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom look bleak. The low number of Canadian ships requires that their employment be mostly close to home or have a regular gap in multi-national global deployments.

Military partnerships with Mexico are potentially more problematic. The history of U.S. military intervention in Mexico has left a scar that may never heal. Additionally, Mexican military forces are equipped with old hardware that does not lend itself to interoperability with U.S. equipment. Given Mexico's low technology achievement index and small per capita GDP<sup>ix</sup>, the United States would most likely have to significantly increase military assistance to Mexico in order to maintain an interoperable force.

However, a U.S.–Mexico partnership is not completely out of the question. Mexico's naval forces have a significant number of Corvettes and Patrol Craft that could be an integral part of NORTHCOM's maritime domain awareness plan. The United States currently lacks sufficient coastal patrol craft. An invitation to Mexico that can partner their patrol craft with the U.S. Coast Guard could provide a way for Mexico to significantly contribute to hemispheric security. This path would most like require a commitment by the United States to provide some upgrades and repairs to Mexican naval forces but would be cheaper than having to build a new fleet of patrol craft.

A coalition task force comprised of Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. Navy/Coast Guard assets provides NORTHCOM an opportunity for hemispheric security cooperation. To achieve true cooperation, the task force commander should be rotated to each country. Each country should dedicate forces to the task force in order to ensure quick reaction times in the event of a crisis. The current Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF East and West), would be superceded by this new multi-national task force. The role of drug interdiction should be a part of the new task force, but it would also be expanded to include all aspects of Maritime Domain Awareness such as coastal maritime patrol and port security operations. The creation of this task force would meet Canada's desire operate with U.S. forces without

having to significantly increase the size of their navy, and it would provide an opportunity for Mexico to join in the War on Terror with more than just words.

### **CIVILIAN LAW ENFORCEMENT COOPERATION**

The partnership proposed above has not addressed the possibility of ground force cooperation. While the U.S.-Canadian relationship may allow for the integration of military ground forces, the past experiences of U.S. military intervention in Mexico make ground force cooperation more difficult. However, the United States has been successfully conducting law enforcement training with civilian Mexican police forces over the past decade. While this relationship may be an anathema to some, the best prospect for cooperation between “ground forces” will be in the civilian sector.

Following 9-11, the United States has made a 30 point border agreement with Canada and a 22 point agreement with Mexico.<sup>x</sup> While the majority of these agreements complement each other, one point that is missing from the U.S.-Mexico agreement is the integrated border enforcement team (IBET) concept that is found in the U.S.-Canadian agreement. The IBETs operate in all 14 geographic regions of the U.S.-Canadian border and are they are trained to defend against criminal and terrorist tactics employed at border crossings. The agreement allows for joint training of these officers and the training addresses the laws of each country. Expansion of the IBET framework provides an opportunity for the United States and Mexico to explore law enforcement cooperation.

By adopting an IBET framework, the United States and Mexico can not only address the terrorist aspect of continental security, but also other important factors. As Abraham Lowenthal has argued, “security” also includes drug smuggling, labor rights, kidnapping, water management and various health issues.<sup>xi</sup> These aspects of security are all present along

the U.S. Mexican border. Some have argued that the use of military forces in border security opens the door to human rights and civil liberties issues.<sup>xii</sup> By using civilian agencies rather than military ground forces, both countries would be able to meet a number of challenges that diminish security and still maintain a high standard of civil liberties.

The problems for U.S. and Mexican officials in implementing multi-national law enforcement agencies will be trust. In early 2001, just months before the September 11 attack, Mexico sought closer ties with U.S. law enforcement agencies. Although Presidents Bush and Fox met and agreed to the idea, U.S. officials remained wary.<sup>xiii</sup> Many have argued that the problems along the U.S.-Mexico border are largely economic and that as long as the Mexican economy is in a slump, border enforcement personnel may be sympathetic to people who appear to be crossing the border for work. However, President Bush's new proposal for documenting legitimate migrant workers may contribute to building trust between the United States and Mexico. The proposal would allow U.S. and Mexican agents to separate the economic aspect from border security. By removing that aspect, there is little else that hinders a strong cooperative effort between law enforcement agencies. Integrated border enforcement teams that train together and understand the mutual benefits of border security will be a key element in the prevention of future terrorist attacks.

## **NORTHCOM LEADERSHIP**

The successful history of the U.S. military makes it a tool of choice for U.S. policy-makers. However, the history with our neighbors may require a different approach to achieve true partnership. While the recent Summit of the Americas reaffirms Mexican President Vicente Fox's dedication to partnerships with the United States, politically military partnerships will be a tough sell to a wary Mexican public. The above proposals seek to

achieve a military and civilian solution to an integrated hemispheric security organization. In order to meet the challenges associated with a multinational, interagency organization, the United States must carefully review the leadership and organization requirements for NORTHCOM. With the possible exception of a ballistic missile attack, the near term threats to North America do not fall into the strictly military category. Issues that will be faced by the proposed naval task force as well as by the civilian law and border enforcement organizations may cross the lines between homeland defense and homeland security. The U.S. public has largely come to accept that military forces can support civilian agencies and maintain an element of separation that is required under the Posse Comitatus Act. As stated earlier, Mexican domestic politics may preclude the use of military forces within Mexican borders. For legal and political reasons, NORTHCOM leadership should be a combination of civilian and military skills. The U.S. Coast Guard provides just the right combination of talents. Civilian by statute, but highly capable in military situations, a Coast Guard flag officer would be the ideal commander for NORTHCOM. The unique civil military qualities that Coast Guard officers offer could lessen our neighbor's arguments about giving up some of their sovereign forces to U.S. military leaders. If the Bush administration is serious about the desire to create a tri-national security agency, NORTHCOM leadership should not appear to our neighbors as a strictly U.S. military organization.

### **INFORMATION SHARING FOR SUCCESS**

Along with a structural change to NORTHCOM leadership that will support civilian and military operations, another key to making a tri-national security agency work will be in the ability of all partners to share information. As previously mentioned, the Terrorist Threat Information Center (TTIC) is being implemented as the "clearing house" for homeland



security information. However, one problem with much of the information that is gathered on suspected terrorists is that it falls into the classified information realm. Under the tri-national security agency, this information would need to be able to be shared with Canadian and Mexican personnel. The question that the United States must answer is can the information be quickly de-classified and distributed to our neighbors or does it even need to be classified in the first place. Obviously, for protection of sources, some information will not be able to be revealed to all levels of government agencies, even U.S. agencies.

However, one might argue that wide dissemination of information such as the recent cancellation of international flights is just what is required to keep Al Qaeda from conducting large operations. By exposing the fact that intelligence organizations are capable of monitoring and disseminating information, terrorist organizations might conclude that large scale operations are no longer possible. This outcome is exactly one desired end-state. However, another outcome that is possible from an extensive information sharing network is that Al Qaeda or other organizations might flood the system with “false reports” in hopes that a real operation may be able to be conducted while government agencies are diverted.

Regardless of the position taken with respect to the strengths or weaknesses of a shared intelligence system, some evidence suggests that a large amount of legitimate traffic across the borders can be streamlined.<sup>xiv</sup> Computerized visas that use fingerprints, photos and biometrics such as eye scans allow a single border agent to validate the identity of a traveler. Additionally, a recent pilot program was able to capture 250 people trying to cheat the system.<sup>xv</sup> However, information can only be as reliable as those who input it into the system. This again supports the rationality of making Mexico and Canada decision-making partners in the tri-national security agency. By structuring NORTHCOM in a manner that

allows Mexican and Canadian partners to be leaders within the organization, the United States may gain partners that can validate the need for their own countries to aggressively monitor consular offices that would be responsible for inputting information into a common database. Whereas, if the United States simply seeks to utilize Mexican and Canadian forces under “our command”, they will find it difficult to achieve a reliable and accurate information sharing network.

The technology for an information sharing network is currently available. The United States must be willing to declassify information, even if it’s only to the “official use” category so that its neighbors can not only have access, but also participate in making the system work.

## **CONCLUSION**

The United States, Canada and Mexico have significant mutual interests with respect to hemispheric defense and security. Integrated organizations that provide all partners with reliable and accurate security information will significantly enhance efforts to protect the civilian populations. However, these organizations must be structured in a manner that respects each nation’s sovereignty. While the United States clearly has the most resources and arguably the most to lose, it cannot simply expect to dominate all aspects of a true partnership. Canadian and Mexican leaders bring a different perspective to security operations and allowing the NORTHCOM organization to be influenced by these leaders will benefit the United States by showing that it will not always go it alone when considering operations against potential terrorists. The ability to leverage military and civilian agencies that already exist within Canada and Mexico is fiscally prudent for the United States. Moreover, the participation of Mexican forces in particular opens the possibility for more

Latin American nations to join a security organization in the future. The Organization of American States has provided a political structure in the Western Hemisphere, NORTHCOM can possibly provide for a significant security organization.

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<sup>i</sup> Paul McHale, "Statement," U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on Readiness House Armed Services Committee, 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 13 March 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> James Eayrs, In Defence of Canada vol 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), 177-183.

<sup>iii</sup> Ann Denholm Crosby, Delemmas in Defence Decision-Making: Constructing Canada's Role in NORAD, 1958-96 (New York: St. Martin's Press INC. 1998) 19-37.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>v</sup> Peter H. Smith, Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S. Latin American Relations (New York: Oxford University Press 1996) 43.

<sup>vi</sup> "U.S. Department of State Fact Sheet" at U.S. Department of State page. <http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/26001pf.htm> [01 Dec 2003]

<sup>vii</sup> Tom Ridge, "Border Reorganization Remarks by Secretary Ridge", U.S. Department of Homeland Security Press Office, 30 January 2003 at U.S. Department of Homeland Security page.

<http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/display?content=419> [30 January 2004]

<sup>viii</sup> Jeremy Feiler, "Canadian Defense Minister John McCallum Mulls Future Role of Forces," 7 August 2003. at Canada National Defence page. [http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/focus/canada-us/pentagon1\\_e.asp](http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/focus/canada-us/pentagon1_e.asp) [30 Jan 2004]

<sup>ix</sup> Country Watch lists Mexico's Technology Achievement index as 0.389 compared to the United States at 0.733. Per capita GDP is listed as \$6,147 for Mexico compared to over 36,000 for the United States.

<http://www.countrywatch.com> [30 Jan 2004]

<sup>x</sup> The border agreements can be found at the White House page <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

<sup>xi</sup> Abraham F. Lowenthal. "Borders: Security for All of North America," Los Angeles Times, 31 August 2003, Part M p.2.

<sup>xii</sup> See for example Timothy Dunn The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home (Austin: CMAS Books, University of Texas at Austin. 1996)

<sup>xiii</sup> Tim Weiner and Ginger Thompson. "Mexico Seeks Closer Law Enforcement Ties with Wary U.S.," New York Times, 11 April 2001, Section A p. 10.

<sup>xiv</sup> Benjamin Riley, "Information Sharing in Homeland Security and Homeland Defense: How the Department of Defense is Helping," Journal of Homeland Security, September 2003 at <http://www.homelandsecurity.org/journals/Riley.html>.

<sup>xv</sup> Asa Hutchison, Remarks to CSIS, 19 May 2003

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