

North American Integration Back on the Front Burner: Washington's North American "Security Perimeter"

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In the last year, the bilateral process has been the primary means used to advance North American integration, which has drawn little attention. With the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) seemingly stalled after being exposed and discredited, the U.S. channelled trilateral negotiations to parallel bilateral discussions with both Canada and Mexico. Recent reports of a tentative Canada-U.S. security and trade agreement has once again highlighted the whole process of deep continental integration. The U.S. is formulating a strategy with the aim of implementing a North American security perimeter.

NAFTA has allowed the U.S. to further extend its political and economic influence over the continent. Through the SPP, it has evolved to include more security issues. Based on the war on drugs and the war on terrorism, the U.S. is developing a North American security strategy with the goal being to push out its security perimeter. The [Merida Initiative](#) conceived in 2007 and launched the following year by the Bush administration, signalled a new era of U.S.-Mexico security collaboration. The plan has provided Mexico with millions in funding for law enforcement, military equipment and surveillance technology. Under the pretext of combating illegal drug-trafficking and fighting transnational organized crime, the U.S. has been able to exert more authority over Mexican security policies.

President Obama has continued and expanded the Merida Initiative. The U.S. and Mexico have further broadened and deepened their cooperation. A U.S. State Department fact sheet entitled [United States-Mexico Security Partnership: Progress and Impact](#) proclaimed how both, "governments have built on the foundations of the Merida Initiative to establish four strategic areas to guide our cooperation and institutionalize our partnership: disrupt organized criminal groups; strengthen institutions; create a 21 st century border; and build strong and resilient communities." A [New Border Vision](#) for the 21st century is, "based on the principles of joint border management, co-responsibility for cross-border crime, and shared commitment to the efficient flow of legal commerce and travel." A U.S.-Mexico [declaration](#) issued in May, further highlights key goals in strengthening border security. In order to better coordinate the implementation of joint initiatives, the Twenty-First Century Border Bilateral Executive Steering Committee (ESC) was also established.

On December 15, the ESC's inaugural meeting was held where a [Bilateral Action Plan](#) was adopted. This included initiatives in areas of bi-national infrastructure coordination, risk management, pre-clearance, pre-screening and pre-inspection, along with greater law enforcement cooperation. The ESC also announced other cross-border and pilot projects.

They agreed to expand trusted traveler and shipper programs in order to facilitate the flow of people and goods between the two countries. The specific goals that were laid out set in motion a bilateral agenda for the next year. They represent a move towards a common perimeter approach to border management and security, which could later require harmonization of immigration and customs standards.

It is unclear whether the Obama administration will attempt to overhaul immigration laws in the coming year. The [Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2010 S. 3982](#) was introduced in September, but never came to a vote in the last Congress. In SEC 121. Annual Report on Improving North American Security Information Exchange, it refers to, “developing and implementing an immigration security strategy for North America that utilizes a common security perimeter by enhancing technical assistance for programs and systems to support advance automated reporting and risk targeting of international passengers.” Previous failed security and immigration bills have also contained similar language pertaining to a shared security perimeter around the continent.

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There are fears that a leaked draft declaration between Canada and the U.S. entitled [Beyond the Border: A Shared Vision for Perimeter Security and Competitiveness](#) could concede more control to American interests. According to the draft proposal, the agreement would work towards establishing a perimeter approach to security. This includes closer cooperation between law enforcement agencies, an integrated cargo strategy, as well as joint programs for port and border security and screening. The aim is to further facilitate travel and trade across the northern border. The draft document also reveals that both countries intend to establish the Beyond the Border Working Group which will, “report to their respective Leaders within one hundred and twenty days of the signing of this Declaration with, a joint Plan Of Action to realize the goals.” Many of the key objectives of the tentative Canada-U.S. deal mirror those found in the U.S.-Mexico vision for a 21st century border. This includes the whole process of implementing the various bilateral initiatives. Both border plans represent a continuation of the SPP agenda.

The Canada-U.S. security perimeter agreement also appears to contain elements of the [US-VISIT](#) program which involves, “the collection of biometrics—digital fingerprints and a photograph—from international travelers at U.S. visa-issuing posts and ports of entry.” The leaked draft declaration states, “We intend to work towards common standards for the use of biometrics, the sharing of information on travelers in real time, more precisely tailored screening, and improved methods of threat notification.” It goes on to say, “In order to promote mobility between our two countries, we expect to work towards an integrated United States-Canada entry-exit system by identifying and screening at the earliest opportunity - including through use of biometrics.” A common security perimeter would demand an even greater level of collaboration and would ultimately be defined by U.S. priorities. It also represents an important step in the creation of a North American Union.

After being tight-lipped on the subject, Prime Minister Stephen Harper in a recent [interview](#), “confirmed Canada is holding ‘discussions’ with the United States on a deal that would tighten security against external terrorist threats and improve two-way trade between the countries.” He acknowledged that negotiations continue, but an agreement has yet to be reached. There have been reports that a deal could be announced early in new year. Some believe that a common security perimeter would constitute erasing the borders between the two countries. Toronto Star columnist [Thomas Walkom](#) suggests that, “The U.S. would be happy to control Canada’s borders to the outside world. But no U.S. politician who wants to

get re-elected would ever agree to weakening America's northern border with Canada." He goes on to say, "So the upshot of any perimeter deal will be to give the U.S two borders — an outer one around North America and an inner one at the 49th parallel." The same concept could also be applied to the southern border. A North American security perimeter goes well beyond keeping the U.S. safe from any perceived threats. It is a means to secure trade, resources and corporate interests.

After a one year hiatus, Canada is set to host the next edition of the North American Leaders Summit in 2011. The recent North American Foreign Ministers Meeting was used to build on the progress made since the last leaders summit which was held in Guadalajara, Mexico in 2009. It helped shape the agenda for the upcoming summit, where the whole trilateral process in regards to continental integration could be recast. As 2010 comes to a close, it appears as if North American integration is back on the front burner.

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