

The Militarization of the US-Canada Border

The proposed Canada-U.S. trade and security perimeter agreement

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With the release of a U.S. Congressional report that found only a small fraction of the border with Canada was being adequately monitored, there is now more focus being placed on the northern border. As a result of increased scrutiny, there are efforts to militarize and expand surveillance on the Canada-U.S. border. The new found attention is also attributed to a proposed trade and security perimeter agreement between the two countries which promotes a shared approach to border management.

A [report](#) released by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in February of this year, found that a substantial portion of the northern border lacked any effective monitoring and surveillance. It concluded that only 32 of the 4,000-mile border was under operational control. The findings were largely based on failures to better coordinate border cooperation and information sharing among the various agencies. A [Press Release](#) by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security stated that according to the study, “the risk of terrorist activity across the northern border is higher than across the southern border because there are active Islamist extremist groups in Canada that are not in Mexico, it is easier to cross the northern border because it is twice as long as the southern border, and DHS has a fraction of the law enforcement officers and surveillance assets on the northern border than it has in the south.” It went on to say, “The border with Canada is also dotted with large population centers and criss-crossed by numerous highways and roads, making it harder to detect illegal activities amid the large volume of legitimate trade and travel between Canada and the U.S. that is so important to both countries.”

There are many who would argue that not enough is being done to secure the southern border and with drug violence in Mexico showing no signs of letting up, somehow we are to believe that the northern border is now more dangerous. This appears to be another attempt to portray Canada as a terrorist haven. Despite what one might think really happened on 9/11, some have perpetuated the myth that the terrorists entered the U.S. from Canada reinforcing the belief that the northern border is not secure enough. It is interesting to note that the GAO report was made public just days before U.S. President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued the declaration, [Beyond the Border: A Shared Vision for Perimeter Security and Economic Competitiveness](#). The agreement will work towards establishing a North American security perimeter and will focus on easing travel and trade, increasing information sharing, as well as further integrating cross-border law enforcement operations.

Following the GAO report which identified security vulnerabilities along the northern border, a group of U.S. Senators from states that border Canada issued a [letter](#) to U.S. Defense

Secretary Robert Gates and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Janet Napolitano. The Senators were urging the two federal agencies, “to further cooperate in combating the increased rate of drug smuggling across our northern border by deploying any and all available military radar technology to uncover and combat the smuggling of drugs by low-flying aircraft.” They pointed to Operation Outlook, a bi-national, multi-agency pilot project employed in the [Spokane Sector](#) from 2005 to 2008, which used military radar equipment. The initiative, “identified air-related smuggling trends and patterns and organizations active in cross border criminal activities.” Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) who signed the letter, later [announced](#) that Secretary Napolitano had agreed to deploy radar technology across the northern border as quickly as possible.

During [testimony](#) on March 9, 2011, before a Senate Committee, DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano addressed security improvements made along the Canada-U.S. border. This included more border patrol agents and infrastructure enhancements. In addition, she explained, “we have continued to deploy technology along the Northern border, including thermal camera systems, Mobile Surveillance Systems, and Remote Video Surveillance Systems. We also successfully completed the first long-range CBP Predator-B unmanned aircraft patrol.” In February of 2009, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) began using [unmanned aerial vehicles](#) (UAVs) on the northern border and [expanded](#) the program in January of this year. The drones are equipped with infrared sensors and cameras that gather information. They are being used on surveillance missions to support counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism and border security operations. While U.S. drones have also been deployed on the southern border, it recently came to light that in some cases they have been [flying over Mexico](#) as part of deepening security cooperation between the two countries.

The [Operational Integration Center](#) (OIC) on Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Michigan, officially opened on March 24, 2011. The facility, “will provide a centralized location for CBP, along with federal, state, local and international partners, to gather, analyze and disseminate operational and strategic data in the Great Lakes region of the Northern border.” The intelligence gathering center features a high-tech control room where video from cameras and surveillance stations can be monitored, as well as live feeds from helicopters and UAVs. Among the various U.S. agencies, it will also include the [participation](#) of the RCMP who will pass on any pertinent information to Canada Border Services and the Ontario Provincial Police. The new center is intended to, “bring about an increased unity of effort among participating agencies and help maximize resource utilization. The OIC will also draw support from field assets, intelligence resources, and a variety of technologies.” This could be the first of many such facilities which will expand surveillance capabilities and further militarize the northern border.

While there are many questions surrounding the proposed Canada-U.S. trade and security perimeter agreement, the overall objectives are to secure the external and internal borders of both countries. The plan is a continuation and expansion of the Security and Prosperity Partnership agenda. In a Fortress North America, the U.S. seeks to push out its security perimeter whereby the northern border would act as another layer of security. It would be open to trade, as well as trusted travellers and labour mobility. The move towards a North American security perimeter is nothing more than a pretext for U.S. control over the continent.

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