

The North American Security Framework. Expanded Trilateral Defense Cooperation

Trilateral Defense Ministers Meeting

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As an extension of the North American Leaders Summit which was held in February, the defense ministers from the U.S., Canada and Mexico quietly met last month to discuss continental security issues. During the conference, they addressed shared defense and security challenges. This includes threats posed by cyber attacks and transnational criminal organizations. The North American security relationship has evolved with Mexico being increasingly viewed as a valued part of the continental defense team. The U.S., Canada and Mexico are building the framework for greater cooperation on common security issues. They are expanding security arrangements and are further establishing new institutions at a continental level. The trilateral defense ministers meeting, which received very little media attention is part of the process of integrating military planning and coordination into a North American security perimeter.

On April 24, Mexico's Secretary of National Defense General Salvador Zepeda Cienfuegos and Naval Secretary Admiral Vidal Francisco Soberon Sanz hosted the [Second Trilateral Meeting of North American Defense Ministers](#) with their counterparts, U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Canadian Defense Minister Robert Nicholson. A [joint statement](#) explained that,

"Threats to North America and the hemisphere are increasingly complex and require coordinated responses. Building upon the trilateral collaboration under the North American Leaders Summit process, we remain committed to enhancing our common understanding of those threats and developing effective and efficient approaches needed to address them."

It went on to say, "With this foundation, our countries continue to work together to address the security and defense challenges that our continent faces. We acknowledge that transnational threats require transnational responses and are committed to furthering our collaboration." The [Inaugural Meeting of North American Defense Ministers](#) was held in March 2012.

The ministers joint statement also identified specific areas where they seek to expand trilateral defense cooperation. This includes working together to strengthen hemispheric defense forums, developing an updated continental threat assessment, identifying opportunities to synchronize security on the southern border, as well as sharing information regarding cyber defense challenges. In his [speech at the trilateral meeting](#), Secretary of

Defense Chuck Hagel acknowledged that, “Cyber security is another threat, like transnational crime, that knows no borders.” With that in mind, he proposed that all three countries, “establish a cyber-working group to identify potential opportunities to work together to share best practices and lessons learned.” During their meetings, Secretary Hagel also noted that the defense ministers agreed that,

“combatting transnational crime at the strategic level is best addressed by the security group under the North American Leaders Summit.” Nevertheless, he emphasized that, “we need to ensure that coordination at the tactical and operational level continues.”

In his speech which focused on security issues facing North America, Secretary Hagel further elaborated on how the trilateral defense meeting is, “moving beyond the concept stage and is becoming a venue to develop new opportunities for deeper collaboration and new approaches to more effectively address shared threats and challenges. We have identified important areas where we can work together as equal partners. As we move forward, the discussions today will further strengthen the foundation for continued cooperation in meeting defense and security requirements for our three nations.” In order to continue their important trilateral dialogue, Secretary Hagel has offered to host the next defense ministerial in 2016.

Back in February, Canada and Mexico also [announced plans to further strengthen defense relations](#). As part of the trilateral defense meeting, they officially signed the [Declaration of Intent on Defense Cooperation](#). The agreement, “further solidifies defense relations between Canada and Mexico, and demonstrates commitment by both countries to continue cooperation in areas such as military training, support to civilian authorities, defense research, defense materiel cooperation, defense industry matters, as well as other areas of importance to defense and security.” Canadian Defense Minister Robert Nicholson described how,

“The Trilateral Meeting of North American Defense Ministers has given us a valuable opportunity to further deepen our cooperation and collaboration towards our common goals of ensuring the security of our citizens, and our continent. Signing the Declaration of Intent on Defense Cooperation with Mexico is a demonstration of this cooperation and collaboration, and shows Canada’s commitment to deepening the defense component of Canada’s longstanding, friendly relations with Mexico.”

Increased U.S. interest in continental defense continues to have an impact on Canadian and Mexican security policy. Both countries are further adopting American security priorities, which raises concerns regarding sovereignty. Under the guise of stopping drug and illicit arms trafficking, the U.S. seeks to further extend its military and security apparatus into other regions. The trilateral defense ministers meeting is part of the ongoing efforts to establish a fully integrated continental security perimeter and represents another important step towards a North American Union.

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