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PARTNERS IN NORTH AMERICAN DEFENSE: PERSPECTIVES OF THREE PREVIOUS COMMANDERS

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Partners in North American Defense: Perspectives of Three Previous Commanders¹

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Economics undoubtedly has been the principal driver and leading indicator of North American integration. With ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993 and its successful renegotiation and updating as the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020, the continuation of dense trade and investment flows among the three countries seems assured. In recent decades, law enforcement agencies have embarked on ever closer coordination in response to the rise of criminal cartels and the threat of global terrorism. And although cooperation among the three countries' military establishments has progressed (especially between the United States and Canada) and important developments can be noted, much still remains to be done if they are to reach their full potential militarily to secure an integrated continental defense for North America. This chapter examines the background and prospects for that development in the sphere of military security.

Different Histories, Different Perspectives

In judging the history and prospects for defense cooperation, one must remember the important similarities and dissimilarities that shape the three states' strategic outlooks. All occupy extensive portions of North America, geographically speaking, with Canada the largest at 3.85 million square miles, followed by the United States at 3.79 million square miles and Mexico at 761,000 square miles. The United States, situated in the central portion of the continent, has the largest population by far at 331 million. Mexico's population is roughly one-third the size of its northern neighbor, 128 million people, and Canada's population is 38 million, a fraction of its neighbors' populations. The United States and Canada are wealthy countries, with highly advanced economies at per capita gross domestic products (GDPs) of US\$63,051 and US\$42,080 respectively, while Mexico, an advanced developing country, has a per capita GDP of US\$8,069.

Canada's and Mexico's histories include significant military conflict with the United States during the 19th century. Canada, then a British colony, was both a base for military operations against the United States and the target of U.S. offensives during the American War of Independence and the War of 1812. For much of that century, Canadians were fearful of what they suspected was a U.S. interest in annexation; it was not until the turn of the century and the First and Second World Wars that the shift to an extraordinarily close Canada-U.S. strategic relationship took place. This bond of alliance strengthened during the Cold War, has persisted through the Global War on Terrorism, and remains strong today.

Mexico's historic memory includes the secession of Texas in 1835, followed by the loss of the northern half of its territories in the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848, as well as U.S. intervention in the Mexican Revolution, including the potential complicity of then Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson in the coup that overthrew the Mexican government in 1913 and the U.S. occupation of the port city of Veracruz in 1914. But it is also noteworthy that Mexico was an Allied belligerent in World War II, deploying a small air unit, the Aztec Eagles, to participate under U.S. command in the liberation of the Philippines. It also undertook maritime patrols of its Atlantic and Pacific coasts against the threat of German and Japanese submarine warfare. Most

importantly, Mexico provided the United States with critically needed agricultural labor through the wartime *bracero* program and supplied its northern neighbor with crucial strategic commodities such as oil and copper.

The three countries inevitably have had different though readily compatible strategic visions. The United States, as a global superpower since the conclusion of World War II, has adhered to a concept of “forward defense” against adversaries, from the Cold War through to the struggles against terrorism and narcotics trafficking. It maintains forces in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East and has fought full-scale wars from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. For 75 years, it has maintained extensive military support programs with defense forces in developing countries, including in the Western Hemisphere.

Canada’s world view since the Second World War in many ways has paralleled that of its southern neighbor, leading it to make important overseas commitments as a participant in larger coalitions usually led by the United States. During the Cold War, Canada maintained forces in Germany as part of its commitment to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). More recently, after a long absence, it has returned to Europe on a small scale as part of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states. Where Canada has been unconvinced of the wisdom of American military action, as in Vietnam and Iraq, it has declined to participate except in a humanitarian capacity. It was willing, however, to join the coalition fighting in Afghanistan, where it made a major effort. Canada also has had an important history of participating in United Nations peacekeeping activities, although more recently it has drifted away from this role, only making a tentative effort to reenergize it under the current government of Justin Trudeau.

Mexico traditionally has eschewed any military role outside of its borders, citing principles of respect for sovereignty as its justification. Until relatively recently, it sought to keep its military confined strictly to a territorial defense mission, in part to avoid the military involvement in politics that has plagued other Latin American countries. With its historic sensitivity to any U.S. intervention, Mexico for the most part has kept bilateral military-to-military relations limited. However, the rise of a major internal security threat from well-armed and well-resourced drug trafficking organizations, coupled with the significant weakness of its law enforcement agencies, has led both to Mexican armed forces being deployed to the anticartel mission and to closer ties with the U.S. military. In addition, Mexico recently has agreed to participate in international peacekeeping, albeit on a very small scale.

The United States and Mexico have had overlapping but not identical visions on defense issues. The United States seeks security on its southern border. Its major concern in recent decades has been preventing the entry of illegal narcotics and thwarting the broader threat to Mexico’s stability and national security posed by organized crime. The threats of terrorism and illegal immigration are viewed through a similar lens. Mexican leaders also have been concerned with the drug cartels, but have been wary of pressing too hard given the cartels’ capacity for retaliatory violence. Their goal has been not to eliminate drug trafficking organizations so much as to contain and reduce their impact to the point where they constitute a law enforcement problem rather than a national security threat. At the same time, the United States has used its law enforcement capabilities in aggressive ways that can be highly irritating to Mexico and thoroughly disruptive of the bilateral

relationship. In some instances, U.S. actions have led to criminal cases lodged against senior Mexican officials. For instance, in late 2020, the United States arrested Mexico's former Secretary of National Defense General Salvador Cienfuegos on drug-trafficking and money laundering charges. However, when Mexico protested his arrest and threatened to curtail security cooperation, the United States was forced to drop the charges against Cienfuegos and release him to return to Mexico.

There are, accordingly, fundamental differences in the nature of defense relationships among the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The U.S.-Canada relationship has been strongly institutionalized through the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), sustained participation in NATO, the formal consultative mechanism of the Permanent Joint Board of Defense, and a host of exchanges and joint training opportunities at all levels. The U.S.-Mexico defense relationship lacks this structure. It reflects a more ad hoc quality, often dependent on funding decisions—as was the case, for example, in the creation of the bilateral Mérida Initiative to combat drug trafficking, which marked the first sustained large-scale provision of U.S. security assistance to Mexico. The Canada-Mexico defense relationship remains embryonic, though the creation of the U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) has created a structure into which both the Canadian and Mexican militaries can “plug in.” The intermittent North American defense ministerial meetings involving the three countries likewise provide a vehicle for high-level trilateral defense discussions which may bear repeating.

NORTHCOM: A Key Point of Entry for Canada and Mexico

A vital element in any emerging security architecture for the continent is NORTHCOM, which was established in 2002 by the United States in the wake of the September 11th attacks to coordinate its own efforts in the region. Its combatant command mission is to protect the territory and the national interests of the United States within the continental United States, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Bahamas, along with the air, land, and sea approaches to these areas. It includes component commands from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps as well as from U.S. Special Operations Command. It also includes a special task force to provide support to law enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Drug Enforcement Agency; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms at the Department of Justice; and U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement at the Department of Homeland Security. NORTHCOM also has a task force to channel support to state and local authorities in disasters and other civil emergencies. The same senior military leader serves as commander of NORTHCOM and NORAD, and both entities are headquartered in Colorado Springs.

NORTHCOM furnishes a vehicle for direct U.S. military-to-military relations with Canada and Mexico. It provides a unique mechanism for these two countries to coordinate with and capitalize on U.S. capabilities. In 2006, Canada established a parallel joint command structure for protecting its homeland termed Canada Command, which subsequently evolved into the Canadian Joint Operations Command. The situation with regard to Mexico is different, as it does not employ the joint military command concept. Instead, the chain of command runs from the president (as commander in chief) to the secretary of defense (SEDENA, in charge of the Army and Air Force)

and the secretary of the navy (SEMAR, in charge of the Navy, Naval Infantry, and Coast Guard), with no joint staff to oversee combined military and law enforcement operations. With this structure in place, it was not until the first decade of the 21st century that the first operationally effective working relationship among U.S., Canadian, and Mexican defense agencies emerged, as Mexico stepped up substantial efforts in counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions. In 2008, Mexico added a three-person liaison unit to NORTHCOM staff, facilitating expanded formal institutional interaction among the three nations for the first time.

NORAD—A Mature Partnership

NORAD is a uniquely successful example of transborder defense cooperation. Canadian and American defense cooperation began even before the United States entered World War II with the establishment of the Permanent Joint Board of Defense by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Mackenzie King in 1940. The board's semiannual policy consultations continue to this day. During the Second World War, the relationship was sealed in blood, most dramatically when Canadian and American troops landed simultaneously (together with their British partners) in France on D-Day in 1994. Shared postwar perceptions regarding the Soviet Union led both nations to join NATO as founding members and for them to address the threat to the continent from Soviet attack with development of the Canada-U.S. Emergency Defense Plan in 1951. Out of this basic framework, the two countries established NORAD itself in 1958. It has had a unique structure, with an American commander and a Canadian deputy and with the commander reporting to both the U.S. president and Canadian prime minister. With its many cooperative conventions and procedures, NORAD virtually has eliminated issues related to airspace sovereignty between Canada and the United States. This seamlessness reflects a level of trust, confidence, and cooperation not seen between any two other nations in history.

Over time, the issue of continental airspace defense appeared less salient as the United States and the Soviet Union settled into nuclear postures of Mutually Assured Destruction while negotiating arms control treaties. In this context, the focus of U.S. and Canadian defense cooperation was centered in NATO. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, highlighted the need to refurbish continental defense leadership, infrastructure, and equipment and to renovate the binational agreements underlying them. A 24/7 safety net of fighter aircraft and weaponry was placed under NORAD command to look inward across the continent in addition to maintaining the traditional gaze on external threats. The 2006 renewal of the NORAD agreement maintained the aerospace warning and control objectives while adding the mission of maritime control, which has become critical to efforts to counter drug and human trafficking by sea. Although Mexico does not participate formally in NORAD, it unquestionably benefits from the command's response capabilities, which provide significant aerospace and maritime security regarding traffic entering Mexico from U.S. and Canadian airports and vessels approaching from seas adjacent to Mexican waters.

Will Canada Mobilize the Resources Required to Remain a Pivotal Player?

NORAD and NORTHCOM provide appropriate and available structures to facilitate and channel continent-wide coordination on defense. However, much depends on the level of resources brought

to bear on the mission. The United States implemented a substantial increase in its defense budget during the Trump administration, with appropriations for fiscal year 2020 set at US\$721.5 billion, up from US\$693.0 billion for fiscal year 2019. By comparison, the defense budget for fiscal year 2017 signed by President Barack Obama amounted to US\$618.7 billion (increased by a supplemental appropriation after President Donald Trump took office). The Biden administration's potential approach to defense spending and the impact, if any, on continental defense remains to be seen as the United States responds to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting severe recession.

Canada's commitment to defense from the aftermath of the World War II through the height of the Cold War was substantial. As noted, it included the deployment and stationing of forces in Europe as part of NATO's deterrence of threatened Soviet aggression. Through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, however, Canada showed diminished interest in defense and significantly retrenched. With the September 11th terrorist attacks, however, Canada's posture changed. In the immediate aftermath it was among the first nations to commit support to Operation Enduring Freedom—the U.S. military response to the terrorist threat of al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies in Afghanistan—and was one of the first to deploy ground forces to coalition operations there. Canada also renewed its commitment to reinforce security cooperation with the United States in the areas of intelligence and information sharing, enhanced border and infrastructure security, improved passport security and integrity, counternarcotics and anti-human-trafficking efforts, and adapting the NORAD Agreement to encompass these enhanced security functions. Canada, for example, implemented a costly commitment to the continental counternarcotics mission through the contribution of naval vessels to Joint Task Force South operating in the Caribbean Sea.

Canada substantially expanded its budget outlays during the period 2007–2010. These expenditures resulted in a defense investment that transitioned the Canadian Armed Forces to a level of capability not seen since World War II. This boost in funding in turn enabled a major overseas presence of Canadian ground, air, and naval forces, as well as of Canada's highly trained special forces. All of these forces played important roles in coalition operations in Afghanistan. Following the final departure of Canadian troops from that conflict in March 2014, attention to and spending on defense and national security waned.

In 2018, however, Canada published a new defense policy statement entitled “Strong, Secure, Engaged,” which identified three underlying global dynamics. First, the policy recognized the evolving balance of power from the unipolar days of the post–Cold War 1990s to a multipolar world with, notably, an emergent China. Next, it highlighted the changing nature of conflict and the likelihood that state-on-state conflicts have given way to a confusing array of proxy conflicts, often involving nonstate actors or unidentifiable troops. Finally, it emphasized the rapid evolution of technology in offensive weaponry and the threat that such technological capabilities could pose to Canada and its allies.

The need to keep pace with technological change underlines the necessity for major capital investments in military equipment. These requirements include a multiyear program to rebuild Canada's aging navy, in which many vessels have been retired as unfit for service, as well as its air force, which in particular has needed replacements for its 1980s vintage CF–18 Hornet fighter

aircraft. An ambitious program has been launched to build new frigates and lightly armed patrol vessels which can operate in the Arctic for at least part of the year. Nonetheless, there are already reports of delays and cost overruns in the naval construction program, and at least some work has been shifted to a shipyard not originally considered for it.

Different Canadian governments have mulled over the combat fighter modernization program, and final aircraft purchasing decisions have yet to be made. In 2010, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper indicated its support for the F-35 Lightning II, with Canada participating in an international partnership of countries planning to purchase it. During the 2015 campaign, Justin Trudeau expressed opposition to the F-35, but after his election, as prime minister, he proposed opening the fighter modernization program up for an international competition, in which the F-35 could compete as an option. In the interim, the Trudeau government bought used Australian F-18s to augment Canada's existing fleet of fighters. The competition for the new aircraft remains in process. Yet the slow process of renewing Canada's fighter aircraft has added significance given that, integrated into NORAD, Canada deploys fighters on 24/7 alert status ready to launch against any threat to the United States or Canada. Given Canada's geographic proximity to the northern attack routes most available to hostile actors, Canadian fighters often are slated as the first to arrive on the threatened scene, and as such their modernization has particular urgency as a critical component of NORAD as a whole.

How will Canada address its future role in continental defense? Can its politics transcend the "on-again off-again" approach to military security that has characterized its posture over the past two decades? During the Cold War, it did so with the development (in concert with the United States) of comprehensive early warning radar chains and strategic air bases. The nature of the contemporary threat to North America, however, has changed dramatically, and both Canada and the United States must now adapt to it. Long-range missile technology is spreading beyond Russia and China to adversary nations such as North Korea and Iran, fundamentally altering the strategic calculus. Such adversaries, in support of an attack or coordinated attacks, may be able to employ surface and subsurface technology to approach North American shores in order to disrupt defensive measures, shorten reaction times, and blunt offensive countermeasures. Particularly concerning is the ongoing development by Russia and China of long-range cruise missiles and hypersonic weaponry. As a result, the central assumptions of yesteryear with regard to the relative security provided by the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans and a protected airspace no longer govern continental defense and must be revisited.

In the past, Canadian geography provided North America with a critical defense asset: separation from the threat. At one time, the 4,000-kilometer distance from the nearest adversary provided by the Canadian Arctic and archipelago translated into seven hours or more of decision and reaction time. However, as new technologies have largely neutralized this asset, the United States has sought to invest in counter-technologies such as directed energy weapons, which upon deployment could significantly diminish the need for Canadian territory, airspace, or even Canadian assistance as a matter of U.S. national security strategy. Although much more needs to be done to make these technological investments a feasible component of national defense, the U.S. reaction to these dramatically shifting strategic dynamics has been vigorous, with progress on homeland defense both in implementation and forward planning. These advances highlight the question of whether

Canada will undertake a parallel and proportionate commitment, accompanied by adequate budget support, to expand and modernize materially its national security profile and capacity. Absent action along these lines, Canada will be unable to maintain a genuine military partnership with the United States, including at NORAD, and the United States will continue to proceed principally on its own to address evolving threats.

There are ways in which Canada could signal a renewed dedication to continental defense, with an intent to bolster the alliance and strengthen efforts already underway in the United States. Were Canada to commit itself to the refurbishment of the existing outdated system of Canadian-based threat sensors and replace it with a layered, multisystem network applying advanced technology, the NORAD alliance would be reenergized. Similarly, if Canada signaled a real appetite to invest in a joint all-domain command, control, and response network, and share in the development of the systems (based on more than just manned aircraft) necessary to accomplish this outcome, it could help preserve and enhance the values and spirit of shared continental defense.

The Arctic Dimension

More broadly, beyond addressing the threat of nuclear and advanced tactical weapons, Canada needs to generate a renewed, concerted, and sustained approach to the Arctic. Russia has increased its presence markedly in the region, including significantly modernizing a large icebreaking fleet, increasing a standing military presence in its own far northern territories, and systematically mapping the Arctic Sea. It is clear that Russia intends for its Northern Sea Route to become a commercial maritime route as global warming progresses. China as well is showing new interest in the Arctic, declaring itself to be a “near Arctic” state and looking for scientific and other ways to display commitment to the region.

Canada, while retaining its commitment to protect the Arctic region from geopolitical conflict, needs to seriously reassess its posture there for the future, especially as the Northwest Passage also becomes a potential global commercial artery. Greater icebreaking capacity (including the ability to operate during the Arctic winter) should be given greater priority, and routine patrol regimes should be established as new naval vessels come on line. Canadian ground forces could increase their exercises in Canada’s far northern areas, and regular air patrols could be scheduled as new aircraft come into service. Canada could also develop high-speed data transmission services—including the capacity to communicate efficiently—despite the demanding conditions of its northernmost environment.

Mexico’s Drug Cartels Remain a Threat Both to Internal and Continental Security

Mexico’s role in North American security arises in a far different context from that of Canada. Even as the “over the horizon” threat of nuclear attack provided Canada’s public and policy makers with a shared sense of the need for close coordination with the United States on defense, the major threats to Mexico have a closer nexus to questions of internal security. These threats by their nature generate considerable domestic political sensitivity. Nor have suspicions regarding the United States—embodied in the oft-quoted observation of President Porfirio Díaz, “Poor Mexico: So far from God and so close to the United States”—entirely disappeared.

That said, Mexico is a vastly different country from the impoverished rural society of Porfirio Díaz's time at the turn of the 20th century. Industrialization and modernization have jump-started a powerful impetus for change in the 25 years since NAFTA came into force. Major U.S. firms, most notably in the automobile sector, have made existential bets on Mexico, installing manufacturing capacity and integrating Mexico with the vast U.S. market (and the smaller though equally advanced Canadian market). A substantial middle class has emerged, and education and health levels generally have risen. The de facto one-party state of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was replaced with vibrant electoral competition. At the same time, Mexico's progress toward developed-country status has been incomplete and uneven, with considerable poverty and social exclusion remaining, particularly in its southern states.

Mexico has suffered from the rise of powerful drug-trafficking organizations to serve U.S. and (increasingly) global narcotics markets. These cartels engage not only in drug production and smuggling but also in related money-laundering and arms-smuggling activities. As organized crime syndicates, they alternatively collaborate and compete among themselves, and exercise genuine power over the territorial areas in which they operate. During the administration of President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), the effects of organized crime in Mexico became alarmingly evident, bringing greater violence and mounting an open challenge to Mexico's national security. Corruption and the weakening of government discipline were both causes and effects of this development. Although Mexico's electoral democracy remains in place, its rule of law has been weak and is consistently under attack.

Mexico's decision to engage the military in areas traditionally reserved for law enforcement, which continues to this day, has presented challenges both for Mexico and for its continental partners. It marked a break from the previous commitment of Mexico's political elite to keep the military "in its barracks" and far away from the reins of power—which its counterparts in Latin America have assumed on so many occasions. If corruption of law enforcement by organized crime led to the military's involvement, this involvement in turn has led to infiltration and increased corruption of the military by drug-trafficking organizations. This was dramatically exhibited in 1997, when three-star Army General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, serving as head of Mexico's interagency counternarcotics authority, was convicted of taking bribes from the Juárez drug cartel.

The United States—whose massive market for drug consumption accounts in significant part for the problem—increasingly has seen the rise of narcotics cartels in Mexico as a threat to its own security. Across different political administrations, both countries have sought to neutralize the transnational criminal threat together, and agree that a "military-only" strategy is not appropriate. Accordingly, they have adopted a hybrid strategy that relies principally but not exclusively on the military in Mexico to contain and counter cartel power, with tailored assistance furnished by NORTHCOM and U.S. law enforcement agencies to SEDENA, SEMAR, and civilian police forces. As the new strategy evolved, significant opportunities for military cooperation emerged and were implemented through NORTHCOM. Notwithstanding asymmetry between the two countries' capabilities, coordination and materiel assistance became the primary channels for cooperative action. The paramount need was to create a functional binational relationship where law enforcement and the armed forces from both countries could operate within the constraints of their respective national legal frameworks. Both countries recognized that the severe threat of

deeply transnational organized crime could only be addressed within their respective judicial systems. The cartels, their kingpins, and thousands of members alike would be treated as lawbreakers to be apprehended and prosecuted, rather than as combatants against which to wage war. This approach was embodied in the 2007 U.S.-Mexico security cooperation agreement known as the Mérida Initiative.

The Mérida Initiative: A Major Step Forward in Cooperation

The Mérida Initiative has been a truly groundbreaking undertaking in both its objectives and methods. It is aimed at enhancing Mexico's capabilities, focusing on combating international organized crime and illicit traffic in narcotics and weapons as well as on reform and reshaping of the Mexican criminal justice system. The initiative also involves cooperation with Central American countries, though the U.S.-Mexico relationship remains central to its efforts.

Mérida Initiative assistance initially included the provision of helicopters to the Mexican police, army, and air force, as well as transport and reconnaissance aircraft, drug detection scanners, and telecommunications equipment. The United States provided assistance in training the Mexican military's special operations forces, particularly those of SEMAR, whose marines have played a leading role in counternarcotics operations. At the same time, much U.S. assistance has been directed to improving law enforcement and judicial structures, protecting human rights, and (under the Trump administration) engaging in border interdiction and port security, as well as combating money laundering.

Despite Mérida Initiative assistance, efforts to apprehend and prosecute narcotics traffickers continue to face significant challenges. Additionally, Mexican security policy and the prospects for continental defense cooperation have been impacted by the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president in 2018. López Obrador's platform signaled a shift in approach both to transnational criminal organizations and to U.S.-Mexican relations. He campaigned on withdrawing the military from any policing role and urged that Mérida Initiative assistance be refocused on social development. He also has expressed skepticism regarding proposed joint military-law enforcement approaches to combating the cartels, and most notably ordered the release of the son of Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán in October 2019 after his arrest led to extensive retaliatory violence in Culiacán, Sinaloa's capital.

Drug trafficking and related violence and broader criminality nonetheless have remained major problems for López Obrador's administration. In the face of the evident inability of civilian police services to control escalating violence, the Mexican government has created a new "National Guard"—a gendarmerie-type force, drawn largely from military and naval police units, which reports to the secretary of national defense at SEDENA. SEMAR has been given responsibility for maritime customs and port security. In short, despite López Obrador's initial reticence, the military has remained, albeit under a different structure, deeply engaged in internal security and countercartel activities.

López Obrador generally sought to avoid confrontation with the Trump administration. His government cooperated in the renegotiation of NAFTA/USMCA and took action to contain

convoys of Central Americans seeking to transit Mexico on their way to the United States. Nevertheless, he voiced opposition to the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border: a central talking point within the Trump administration. However, the arrest of General Cienfuegos in Los Angeles on drug-related corruption charges—namely, allegedly taking bribes from a drug cartel in Nayarit—sorely strained the bilateral relationship. Only Mexican threats to end bilateral law enforcement cooperation managed to secure Cienfuegos’s release. López Obrador subsequently introduced legislation, approved by the Congress, to restrict Mexican officials from meeting with “foreign” agents (principally from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) without high-level permission and require them to report such discussions back to the foreign and public security ministries. In the meantime, Mexico’s attorney general exonerated General Cienfuegos of all charges and López Obrador denounced the original American charges as “fabricated.” What impact (if any) this matter will have on military-to-military relations, and on bilateral affairs generally with the Biden administration, remains unclear.

Future Challenges and Opportunities in North American Defense

Important structures now exist to advance security on the North American continent. NORAD is a fully elaborated bilateral alliance that addresses the traditional nuclear threat as well as newer ones such as transnational criminal organizations involving both terrorism and narcotics trafficking. NORTHCOM provides an important mechanism for coordination and collaboration, giving Canada and Mexico a vital point of entry into the U.S. military establishment’s vehicle for continental defense. The Mérida Initiative offers a roadmap for the United States and Mexico to combat the national security threat posed by transnational criminal activity.

Likewise, there is precedent for taking up trilateral military coordination at the senior policy level. The United States, Mexico, and Canada formally have convened the North American Defense Ministerial meetings three times, most recently in 2017. All three countries likewise have participated in the biennial Defense Ministerial of the Americas meetings. Bilaterally, the United States and Canada continue to benefit from the meetings of the Permanent Joint Board of Defense. However, such structures ultimately depend on the political will to follow up on decisions made and the resources put into them. Canada, as noted, has the challenge of modernizing its fleet of fighter aircraft and more broadly deciding if it is prepared to make the full range of defense investments needed to allow it to remain a meaningful partner within NORAD. Mexico, which faces enormous internal security challenges, must decide whether the Mérida Initiative’s mix of assistance to its military forces, as well as to police and judicial authorities, does indeed point the way forward. And all three countries face enormous short- to mid-term pressures defense budgets as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its human and economic costs.

At the same time, the mix of threats confronting the continent has been evolving rapidly. International relations are undergoing a fundamental transformation featuring a return to traditional great power rivalry, while rogue states such as Iran and North Korea as well as a variety of nonstate actors remain active. North America faces unprecedented defense challenges, whether from the deployment of hypersonic weapons, aggressive air patrolling, the increased presence of surface and submarine vessels off both coasts, or Russian and increasingly Chinese assertiveness in the Arctic. Adding to this complicated situation, the threat of cybernetic warfare has been

underscored by recent major breaches of both U.S. and Canadian computer systems in the public and private sectors. Cyber threats may include not only defense establishments but also industrial plants and cross-border infrastructure such as dams and power grids. The role of military cooperation across the three countries in cybersecurity and defense—and the place, if any, of NORAD in these efforts—has been largely unexplored to date at senior leadership levels. Inevitably, this role must be a priority agenda item for consideration regardless of the decision’s ultimate outcome.

Climate change likewise significantly will affect U.S., Canadian, and Mexican defense. In the face of more adverse and unpredictable weather, the continent’s armies, navies and air forces will need to find cost-effective ways to protect their equipment and facilities. This may be a further fruitful area for cooperation. Given the higher probability of ever more devastating floods and hurricanes, cross-border cooperation among defense forces in their traditional role of providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief similarly could be ramped up. Mexico took an important step, imbued with symbolic meaning, in 2005, when it sent an army field kitchen and naval vessels to the U.S. Gulf Coast to assist in relief operations during Hurricane Katrina. The need to institutionalize this type of precedent appears evident.

The role of the military in dealing with immigration and refugee flows is one with which Mexico is now familiar, given the experience of confronting Central American migrant flows since 2015. The United States also periodically has placed regular Army and National Guard units along its southern border to support civilian law enforcement. The degree to which the armed forces will continue to be engaged in this mission—and, if so, how they should be trained, equipped, deployed, and coordinated—remain open questions awaiting careful consideration, including whether military forces engaged in immigration enforcement will be trained and monitored to avoid violations of human rights.

In an unstable world, peacekeeping may be a further area for defense cooperation among North American partners, particularly Mexico and Canada. Canada, long a leader in this field, had withdrawn from it in recent decades but resumed efforts in 2019, participating in the United Nations’ stabilization mission in Mali. Mexico, traditionally reticent about participating in peacekeeping, recently has begun to engage in this mission. It established a Joint Training Center for Peacekeeping Operations and currently has 12 service members stationed abroad in six countries. Were Mexico and Canada to commit seriously to peacekeeping, opportunities for joint training and even joint participation in operations should be explored.

In summary, the threats to the defense of North America are real, varied, and changing as are the opportunities for cooperation among the military forces of Canada, Mexico and the United States. Increasingly, continental security—viewed from perimeter and cross-border perspectives—will require this trilateral cooperation and could provide a stronger foundation for the national security of each of the three countries.

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